



VOL. 8, ISSUE 1, 2024

ACTIONABLE INSIGHT
REMARKABLE TOPICS

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Navigating the Impending
Enrollment Cliff with Innovation

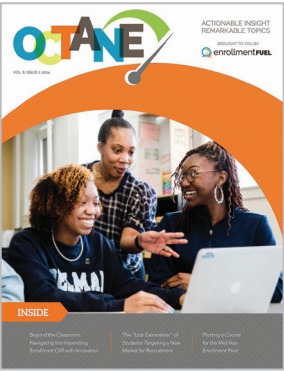
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A LETTER FROM THE
VICE PRESIDENT OF UNIVERSITY PARTNERSHIPS



The decisions we make and the students we welcome will shape the narrative of our institutions for years to come.



enrollmentFUEL would like to thank Spelman College in Atlanta, Georgia, for allowing us to feature this photo on the cover of our magazine.

Dear Colleagues,

A new year is starting, bringing new opportunities and challenges, and we are committed to helping you find the most effective ways to rise to the occasion. The months leading up to the end of May are not just a period of recruitment but a time of profound impact. The decisions we make and the students we welcome will shape the narrative of our institutions for years to come.

There's no doubt that Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) is changing in many ways. Some change is demographic, while others stem from societal movement: shifts in the attitudes, preferences, expectations, and needs of the people we recruit. There are many paths forward to adjust to these new realities, and the articles in this issue of *Octane* hand you a strategic compass to navigate toward your desired destination with confidence and clarity.

enrollmentFUEL's CEO, Mike Wesner, MEd, writes about recruiting an overlooked segment of new adult learners in "The 'Lost Generation' of Students: Targeting a New Market for Recruitment." Laralee F. Harkleroad, EdD, continues the theme of addressing non-traditional students' needs with innovative strategies. Meanwhile, Jacquelyn D. Elliott, EdD, shares her observations about changing enrollment demographics and inventive new approaches in "Beyond the Classroom: Navigating the Impending Enrollment Cliff with Innovation."

Addressing today's enrollment challenges also requires a robust and creative marketing approach, and our experts are sharing their insights to give you a new perspective. For those looking to expand enrollment beyond undergraduates, Lisa Branson, MSED, shares practical strategies for showcasing the strength of your graduate programs. In "Plotting the Course for the Mid-Year Enrollment Pivot," I offer ideas on evaluating your recruitment efforts and optimizing the remaining time in the cycle. Finally, you'll learn how to accelerate your digital strategy with Tori Simon, MS, in her article "Maximizing Yield with Smarter Online Ad Strategies."

Thank you for being part of the *Octane* community. I can be reached at Jay.Fedje@enrollmentFUEL.com if there is anything I can do to help you.

Yours in partnership,

Jay Fedje, MA
Vice President of University Partnerships

Octane the Magazine: A publication of enrollmentFUEL
A collection of innovative thoughts and ideas from leadership in all areas dedicated to improving your Strategic Enrollment Management and Student Search strategies. Our goal is to fuel creativity and release positive energy among enrollment professionals.

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By working together, we make the world a brighter place for all.

Thanks for Helping Us Pay It Forward

Thanks to everyone who participated in enrollmentFUEL's annual "Pay It Forward" holiday giving campaign. Members of the enrollmentFUEL team selected five charities. This year, they were:

- Covenant House
- Heifer International
- Isaiah 117 House
- National Down Syndrome Society
- USO

When a participant chose a charity, we donated \$20 to that charity in their honor.

Thanks to your generous spirit, this year's Pay It Forward holiday giving campaign resulted in more than \$2,000 being donated to this year's selected charitable organizations.

QUICK TAKES

FAST reads and
INNOVATIVE ideas to
BOOST positive results

Tuning Into the Future: Leveraging Connected TV in Student Search

Connected TV (CTV) advertising refers to commercials delivered through streaming services and apps and displayed on televisions connected to the internet, typically through smart TVs, streaming devices like Roku or Apple TV, or gaming consoles like Xbox or PlayStation. Unlike traditional TV advertising, which broadcasts the same ad to everyone watching a particular channel at a specific time, Connected TV advertising allows you to insert ads into streaming content and target distinct groups of people or specific household addresses. Because the ads are delivered online, they can be more dynamic and interactive than traditional TV ads. For instance, some Connected TV ads allow viewers to click on the ad or scan a QR code for more information.

Cord-cutting has been a trend for several years, and more people have shifted to streaming services and Connected TV alternatives. One study found that:

- 98% of brands believe CTV advertising will be bigger than mobile advertising
- 86% of consumers are willing to see ads on CTV, especially if they are relevant to them
- The top reasons to advertise on CTV are to engage with new audiences (73%), and to obtain higher engagement (73%)¹

People are often more engaged when streaming content, making them more likely to pay attention to your ad. Plus, ad formats can be more interactive, offering a richer experience. Because of the interactive (and often un-skippable) nature of Connected TV ads, studies have found that these ads improve recall and engagement rates over alternative ad delivery methods.² Simply being more present on platforms where prospective students and their families are spending their leisure time can significantly boost your institution's visibility and brand awareness, especially when it works hand in hand with other strategies like social media and email marketing, offering multiple touchpoints for prospective students to engage with your institution.

If you're curious about how you could use Connected TV advertising in your Student Search strategy, contact the enrollmentFUEL team.

¹ "Connected TV Trends 2022 – 23: Advertiser and Viewer Perceptions," AppsFlyer.com, USA, AppsFlyer, 2022. https://www.appsflyer.com/gatedpdfs/AppsFlyer_CTV_Trends_Report_2022-23.pdf, 30 Nov. 2023.
² Goldman, Jeremy. "Connected TV (CTV) ad revenue growth: What's behind the surge?" *Insider Intelligence*. <https://www.insiderintelligence.com/content/connected-tv-ctv-ad-revenue-growth-what-s-behind-surge>. 13 June 2023.

98% of brands believe CTV advertising will be bigger than mobile advertising.



The Benefits of Education: Recent Research

Gallup and the Lumina Foundation recently released a report detailing the overall benefits of education.¹ Survey participants answered more than 50 questions, grouped under a few different areas, to determine the connection between a higher level of education and desired outcomes in their personal, professional, and community lives. The study focuses on the link between education and positive outcomes in six core areas of life: work and income; health and wellbeing; civic participation; social attitudes, pro-social behavior, and character; cognitive ability; and perceptions of higher education benefits. Among the study's conclusions:

- Higher education correlates with higher-paying jobs that better fit individuals' strengths and interests.
- Higher education is linked to a more satisfying, healthier life.
- Higher education leads to people who are more involved in their communities and civics.
- Higher education corresponds with more interpersonal trust.
- Higher education is connected with greater mental aptitude.
- Increased education leads to more innovation, higher income levels, and a more informed society.

¹ State of Higher Education, Gallup and Lumina Foundation. <https://www.gallup.com/analytics/468986/state-of-higher-education.aspx>. 11 Nov. 2023.



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the full report.

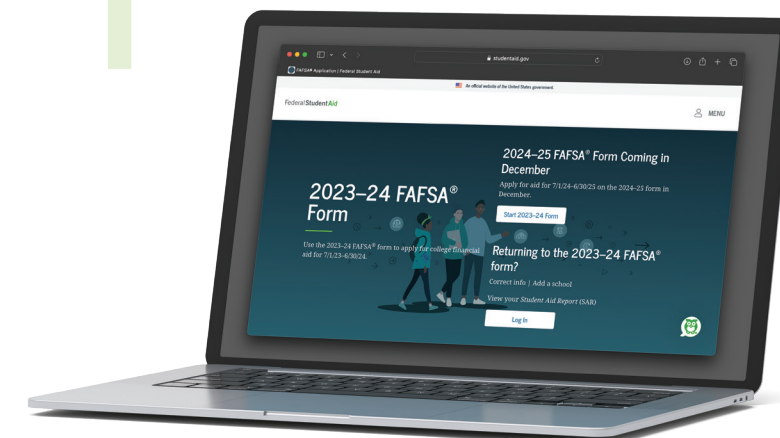
Changes in Financial Aid

New changes to the FAFSA have been announced, effective for the 2024-2025 FAFSA, and are sure to impact financial aid and enrollment offices. Among the most notable changes are:¹

- **Reduced number of questions.** The number of questions on the FAFSA has been reduced from 108 to a planned 36. The new application automates the transfer of IRS data to the FAFSA, changes certain reportable income, and more closely aligns questions with federal tax returns.
- **Increased aid for single parents.** Children of single parents and students who are single parents will both see more aid eligibility under new guidelines.
- **Greater eligibility for the maximum Federal Pell Grant.** Eligibility now is AGI less than or equal to 225% of the poverty line for single parents or AGI less than or equal to 175% for non-single parents.
- **Less aid for multiple children.** Having multiple children in college simultaneously will no longer affect several eligibility and calculation factors. This is likeliest to impact middle- and high-income families with multiple children.

Talk to the financial aid experts at enrollmentFUEL if your team would like to discuss the impact of these changes on enrollment.

¹ Summary of Changes to the 2024-2025 FAFSA, California Student Aid Commission. www.csac.ca.gov/sites/main/files/file-attachments/summary_of_changes_for_the_2024-25_fafsa.pdf. 28 Sept. 2023.



Beyond the Classroom:

Navigating the Impending Enrollment Cliff with Innovation

Jacquelyn D. Elliott, EdD

In 2018, Nathan Grawe's book *Demographics and the Demand for Higher Education* became a centerpiece of the conversation about the future landscape of higher education. Scott Bierman of Beloit College said, "Anyone who cares about the future of higher education in America will need to carefully study Nathan Grawe's *Demographics and the Demand for Higher Education*. By disaggregating poorly understood demographic shifts on the near horizon, Grawe fundamentally changes the narrative of what colleges can do to thrive.¹" What I particularly like in this quote is the focus on the word **thrive**. In this article, I set out to highlight exactly that—how institutions of higher education can thrive moving forward despite the cliff. How can leaders attack this problem with a sense of innovation and weather the upheaval?

Most of us in higher education recognize that a storm has been brewing. The phrase "enrollment cliff" has been whispered among academics, administrators, and even students with a sense of foreboding for over six years. But fear not—for those who are possibilists (a person who has a worldview that is constructive and useful...not living in fear without reason or hope), the storm may not be as dire as we feared.

Leaders face a particular challenge, but by adopting a possibilist attitude and deploying a little innovation, leaders can surmount the impending enrollment cliff and emerge stronger on the other side.

¹ Bierman, Scott. Review excerpt on book cover. *Demographics and the Demand for Higher Education*, by Nathan Grawe, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018.

The Looming Enrollment Cliff

First, let's get one thing straight: the enrollment cliff is real, but it does not have to be a devastating free fall. The term refers to a decline in the number of high school graduates, particularly in certain regions, that will inevitably affect traditional college and university enrollment. Birth rates have been declining in some parts of the world (although most of the focus has been on domestic numbers), leading to a smaller global pool of potential students. This demographic shift poses a significant challenge for higher education institutions that have relied on a steady influx of high school graduates to fill their classrooms.

Let's look at some statistics from Grawe's 2017 book:

- In the latter half of the 2020s, enrollment rates will decrease by almost 15% from where they are now.²
- The four-year college environment will lose almost 280,000 students.³
- Overall, by 2029, there will be a 10% decline in 4-year college enrollment, accounting for a slight increase in 2023 (many of our schools felt this small win in their enrollment numbers).⁴
- There will be fewer students in eight of the nine census areas across the US, with the Pacific showing an increase in the 1,000s, the South showing a decrease in the 1,000s, and all other areas a reduction in the tens of thousands.⁵
- Lost enrollments among traditional-age students are expected to be greater at regional institutions (two-year colleges and four-year schools ranked outside the top 100 colleges and universities by *U.S. News & World Report*). Nationally, such two- and four-year schools are projected to lose 12% and 11% of traditional-age enrollments, respectively.⁶

However, as with any challenge, opportunities lurk beneath the surface. Higher education institutions are realizing that they need to cast a wider net and explore new avenues for student recruitment. Here's where possibilism, innovation, and creativity come into play.

² Grawe, Nathan D. *Demographics and the Demand for Higher Education*. United States, Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 50, 2018.

³ Grawe, p. 69

⁴ Grawe, p. 69

⁵ Grawe, p. 75

⁶ Grawe, p. 73

The Digital Age Advantage

In our increasingly interconnected world, higher education institutions can no longer limit recruitment efforts to the local high school scene. The internet has opened up a vast array of opportunities to reach prospective students, regardless of their geographic location. Virtual college fairs, online information sessions, pay-per-click (PPC), SEO, and social media outreach are just a few ways universities leverage the digital age to connect with future scholars.

Moreover, the pandemic has accelerated the adoption of online education, making distance learning a more acceptable (and even preferable) option for many students. Institutions offering flexible online programs can tap into a global market of learners, transcending the constraints of geography, often with a higher profit margin.

Engage the Adult Market Differently

Another goldmine for enrollment growth lies in the realm of adult learners. Now, work with me on this one. Many younger adult students have taken a “gap year” that extended into multiple years because they saw participating in the labor market as a more favorable opportunity than higher education. Over the long run, however, these will be the very students who return to college in the newly defined and more effervescent adult market.

And, while traditional college-age students may be declining in number, a whole segment of the population is hungry for education and career advancement. This includes working professionals seeking to upskill, mid-career changers, and even retirees looking for intellectual stimulation. A quick look at some numbers puts this into perspective:

- To offset a 10% reduction in traditional first-time enrollment, schools would need to increase the enrollment of adult students by 15% or more since they are mainly part-time students.
- The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates there are approximately 100 million workers between the ages of 25 and 54.⁷ If even 1% of these returned for retraining or first-time enrollment, it could help balance the under-enrolling traditional market.

Higher education institutions should cater their programs and outreach efforts to this diverse group of adult learners. Flexible scheduling, part-time options, and courses tailored to their specific needs can attract a wealth of new students.

⁷ Tossi, Mitra. “Labor Force Projections to 2024: The Labor Force Is Growing, but Slowly : Monthly Labor Review.” U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2015/article/labor-force-projections-to-2024.htm. 29 Sept. 2023.

Redefining Access and Affordability

The enrollment cliff also highlights the need to make higher education more accessible and affordable. Rising tuition costs and student loan debt have deterred many potential students from pursuing a degree. To counter this, colleges and universities can explore creative solutions like income-share agreements and business partnerships to offer direct professional development training and upscaling. Other ideas include tuition resets, redefining scholarship opportunities and matrices, and reviving employee tuition benefits. In some cases, merging programmatic offerings with other colleges to create more streamlined, effective operating budgets can create stronger net tuition revenue.

Ultimately, there are two simple questions to ask. The first is, “How might my institution increase demand for the education we offer?” And the second question is: “How might we deliver an even better experience at a lower cost?” Remember, going after new markets when you aren’t well-known in your own is tough. It takes years to break through and requires significant marketing dollars. For one institution to recruit a “new student,” another must lose that student. As a mathematical truism, it isn’t possible for all institutions to out-compete everyone else.

Institutions should continue diversifying their academic offerings and delivery systems to be the most effective in the game. Short-term certificates, micro-credentials, and stackable programs are gaining popularity among students seeking more cost-effective and job-relevant education.

Conclusion: Embracing the Challenge

As we stand at the precipice of the enrollment cliff, higher education institutions must recognize that change is not just necessary but *inevitable*. I leave you with three reminders I picked up from Grawe and others over the past five years.

To begin, **know the difference between tactics and strategies**. There are two ways to miss a goal. First, your market practices need improvement. By this, I mean you did something good, but it was not *good enough*. In that case, the institution has the right strategy but needs to execute *tactics* more effectively. Second (and more seriously), the market is just not buying what you are selling anymore, and you need to change your *strategy*.

Next is **the opportunity to do well by doing good**. The number one area for hope (I’m talking to all you possibilists out there) in a world with declining student numbers is recognizing that the cheapest student to recruit is already on your campus. In 2021, only 67% of students returned to the campus where they started.⁸ Statistics like this are a reminder that **enrollment efforts cannot end on May 1**; retention is an ongoing campus process to maintain re-enrollment. If you need help creating a continuing program to address this, enrollmentFUEL has extensive first-hand experience with retention strategies.

⁸ National Student Clearinghouse. “Nearly 76% of Fall 2021 Freshman Class Returned to College by Fall 2022.” National Student Clearinghouse. www.studentclearinghouse.org/nearly-76-of-fall-2021-freshman-class-returned-to-college-by-fall-2022/. 27 July 2023.

Finally, **it is rarely clear that current practice is best practice**. What does this mean? Instead of careful, rational design, history and dependency often cloud decisions on how programs are structured. When adopting and designing a new curriculum, many focus on how distinctive a program is, but it also must meet students’ *needs*. Avoid creating “commodity programs”—those indistinguishable from any other program at any other school.

The impending enrollment cliff does not have to be the catastrophe it’s been portrayed as. Instead, it’s a call to action for colleges and universities to evolve, adapt, and open their doors wider than ever. With creativity, determination, and a willingness to think beyond the traditional, higher education institutions can navigate this storm and discover a brighter future on the horizon. By embracing innovation and expanding recruitment efforts beyond the high school classroom, institutions can survive and thrive in the face of demographic shifts.

Dr. Jacquelyn D. Elliott is President Emerita of enrollmentFUEL. Her Strategic Enrollment Management expertise has led multiple colleges and universities to reach record enrollments. She consults with various institutions on a wide variety of C-Suite topics with a focus on developing strategies to achieve financial objectives. Her driving passion is creating educational foundations to support the diverse dreams and goals of student populations. She can be reached at Jacqui.Elliott@enrollmentFUEL.com.

THE “Lost Generation” OF STUDENTS

TARGETING A NEW MARKET FOR RECRUITMENT

By Mike Wesner, MEd



The COVID-19 pandemic and its ripple effects have impacted higher education significantly. One of the most remarkable shake-ups has happened in enrollment, with 2023 levels still lower than pre-pandemic. Even more notable is the development of a “lost generation” of students who graduated high school in the early days of the pandemic but did not enroll in college—then or now.

According to research from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (NSCRC), only 53.5% of graduates from the class of 2020 immediately enrolled in college for fall 2020—6.8 percentage points lower than their predecessors in 2019. Among those who did not enroll right away, very few enrolled at a later date: an additional 0.7% of the Class of 2020 enrolled in fall 2021 and 0.2% in fall 2022.¹

This “lost” class represents a significant challenge and an opportunity for recruiters. Students who graduated during the uncertainty of the pandemic are now young adults who will have different priorities than the traditional first-time undergraduate. They have lived through the chaos of a pandemic and all that has come with it, and they’ve waded into the working world and need different incentives to enroll in a degree program now.

Finding the Motivating Factors

Although this “lost generation” of students won’t respond to the same marketing as older, “returning”—or otherwise nontraditional students—the are also likely to have more work experience or interest than a typical 18-year-old new high school grad. They will focus more on practical reasons to get a degree than going to college because it’s the “expected” thing to do.

A strong recruiting strategy for these students might emphasize the tangible benefits of enrolling in a degree program. Focus on topics like the following:

- How a degree can improve the odds of getting hired and promoted
- How your institution can provide the necessary training and credentials for fields with certification requirements
- How a degree program can enhance their networks and provide relevant knowledge to build their careers further
- How enrolling in one of your programs can increase their earning potential

¹ “High School Benchmarks.” National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. <https://nscresearchcenter.org/high-school-benchmarks/>. 19 Sept. 2023.

This category of potential students will do more assessing to compare “now” dollars spent (their cost) versus future dollars earned (a benefit). They also demand more immediate payoffs, which can mean they seek micro-credentials to level up skills in shorter time frames, even when they are ultimately interested in obtaining a degree.

Another deciding factor is the time to degree completion and the more weight placed on “mechanics.” Are classes offered online? Do students learn in a traditional classroom setting, or do you provide a hybrid model? Is attendance taken and counted? Is there flexibility when it comes to taking exams? Keep in mind the more rigid the requirements, the more challenging it will be to recruit students who have fully stepped into adult roles.

When it comes to motivating factors, it helps to recognize you are competing with other institutions—and a host of companies who advertise they pay an excellent hourly wage and offer free training. Therefore, it is more important than ever to identify the critical differentiators for your institution.

Developing Your Marketing Strategy

As with targeting any demographic or group, targeting “lost generation” first-time college students requires a robust marketing strategy. Consider the following as you build out your plan.

1. Multi-Channels are Required

The enrollmentFUEL team is well-versed in building marketing strategies for non-traditional and online students. To achieve success, we recommend a multi-channel digital approach, including pay-per-click (PPC) ads, retargeting ads, LinkedIn ads, enrollmentFUEL’s inquiryDETECTOR technology, and Search Engine Optimization (SEO) for your website. SEO combined with PPC helps you get found by prospective students while providing an easy next step forward. LinkedIn ads are also effective for reaching working adults, while inquiryDETECTOR enables you to identify leads at a household level, and retargeting ads maintain engagement and momentum.

2. Bringing a Local Touch

One obvious consideration is having a “boots-on-the-ground” plan in your geographic area of interest. It helps to have a representative living in the area, but many schools won’t have this luxury. Instead, we suggest what a number of lean recruiting machines have put in place—hiring 3-month



temporary travel counselors, usually recent graduates. Deployed into your new markets with your digital and Student Search campaigns, they can raise institutional awareness for your brand.

Engaged alums can also serve as local ambassadors. For example, they could host an appetizer party at the hottest new restaurant in town. Social media can help you publicize the event, incentivize attendance, and amplify your brand.

3. Building Team Support

As you develop new markets, involve your staff members in the conversation. Engage them in the debate and invite them to be part of the process. Schools with the most success developing new markets always have internal champions and advocates. Strategic discussion builds buy-in by bringing people together and solidifying support for a common cause.

Susan Klopman, retired Vice President of Admissions and Financial Planning at Elon University, often reminds people that developing new markets is not a quick fix. Given a clear strategy and time, it can be a transformational one. “The key is to stay positive and cheer your small, early victories,” says Klopman.

“Pipelines take time to develop, but then they gain momentum and eventually change the institution’s landscape. This change can generate a brand that speaks for itself, lands graduates in high-performing jobs, and attracts the highest caliber faculty. These are the elements that eventually change lives.”

The past few years have created a unique challenge for enrollment professionals: recent high school graduates who fail to enroll in college in the “usual” way. To entice this unusual market to consider your institution, you must adapt your recruiting strategy and focus on the “reasons why” young adults might be interested in enrolling even years later. It may take some creativity and patience, but capturing the attention of these new prospects will be worth it.

Mike Wesner, MEd, is the CEO and Founder of enrollmentFUEL and a passionate student of recruiting strategies. In his role as CEO, he works with the team to develop new products to help enrollment leaders bring in their classes and set enrollment records. Reach out to Mike at Mike.Wesner@enrollmentFUEL.com to share ideas on where strategic enrollment management is headed in the year ahead.

To Degree or Not to Degree—That is the Question!

Today’s students have more options than a traditional, on-campus, four-year degree, and they’re increasingly willing to take advantage of them. In fall 2019, just 36% of students enrolled in online/remote courses, while in fall 2020, that number spiked to 75%, according to the National Center for Education Statistics; while the number has dropped somewhat (down to about 60% in 2021), it’s still significantly higher than pre-pandemic.¹

Students are also looking at alternatives to traditional degrees altogether. Working students may look for micro-credentials, certificates, or employer-sponsored credentials so they can avoid the financial burden and focused demands of a full-time degree. These alternate paths suggest that the “lost generation” of undergraduate students isn’t completely disconnected from desiring or valuing higher education but their priorities have shifted. Many are focused on the flexibility of remote and hybrid learning, while others now prefer education that focuses on a clear professional path. When marketing to this demographic, think outside the box and focus on these priorities to more clearly define the value your institution brings to prospective students’ lives.

¹ “Number and percentage of students enrolled in degree-granting postsecondary institutions, by distance education participation, location of student, level of enrollment, and control and level of institution: Fall 2020 and fall 2021.” National Center for Education Statistics. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22_311.15.asp.

PLOTTING THE COURSE

for the Mid-Year

ENROLLMENT PIVOT

Jay Fedje, MA

Enrollment managers, it's time to take stock. Did Student Search deliver the quality prospects you expected at the top of your enrollment funnel? Did your travel plans align with your recruitment goals? Is your communication flow hitting the right notes with prospective students and their parents? Are your financial aid packages enticing enough? Are you attracting enough visitors to your campus?

By this time of year, you've already pulled many of the available enrollment "levers," and the finish line for your fall class is approaching. You might be off-track—but before you contemplate throwing in the towel, consider these three options to steer your enrollment efforts back on course.

1. DISCOUNT RATE EVALUATION

At the mid-year point, it's prudent to scrutinize your discounting plan for the recruiting pool. Examine those students who've received financial aid packages (thanks to prior-prior) and determine who has accepted and who hasn't.

Take a deep dive into your plan's effectiveness. Identify student profiles (cells) that are under- or over-awarded. Engage your financial aid team in reviewing students who haven't been awarded yet. Make any necessary adjustments to your awarding strategies going forward. Remember, every dollar spent on financial aid has a bottom-line impact, and your CFO will surely appreciate the fiscal prudence.

2. APPLICATIONS: QUALITY OVER QUANTITY

Are you receiving an adequate number of applications? How do they compare to previous years? Are you witnessing shifts in your applicant profile regarding academics, geography, gender, or athlete/non-athlete status? It's vital to recognize that different market segments convert and yield differently.

If your application numbers are lagging, consider launching an application generation campaign. You can often find untapped pockets of interest within your inquiry pools. Identifying them through a targeted campaign enables you to generate additional applications. Remember, each enrolled student is pivotal to achieving your institution's objectives.

3. THE POWER OF CAMPUS VISITS

A campus visit is a potent indicator of a student's interest in your institution. Assessing whether visits are on the rise or in decline can provide valuable insights into the health of your enrollment funnel. Your top priority should be converting campus visitors into applicants or enrolled students.





If you find that visits are dwindling or your visitors aren't transitioning into applicants, consider employing these strategies to incentivize potential students:

- **Campus Store Discounts:** Offer a "20% off on your first campus store spirit-wear" deal, allowing them to redeem it online.
- **Travel Reimbursements:** If your campus isn't a mainstream destination, consider providing travel reimbursements to attract more prospects. Surprisingly, many students want to explore options that alleviate their travel expenses.
- **Application Fee Waiver:** Waive the application fee for students who visit your campus. Although it may seem minor, application fees can add up for students, and this offer could tip the scales in your favor.
- **Faculty Outreach:** If your college boasts engaged faculty members (or even a few key professors), use them in your recruitment efforts. Ask selected faculty members to contact prospective students, respecting each faculty member's comfort levels with the process. Some prefer sending letters or emails, while others are comfortable making phone calls. Consider using tools like Bomb Bomb, a cost-effective subscription-based email solution that allows senders to record short videos for more personalized and trackable outreach.

Best Practices to Accelerate Success

Your team may take any number of approaches to manage your enrollment strategy successfully. In general, you can adapt a few essential practices to any situation to boost your chances of success.

1. SPEND YOUR MONEY WHERE IT CAN MAKE THE MOST IMPACT.

Focus on engaged inquiries and drawing them through the funnel—they're already interested and may just need a little more nudging to take action.

2. UNDERSTAND YOUR TARGET AUDIENCE.

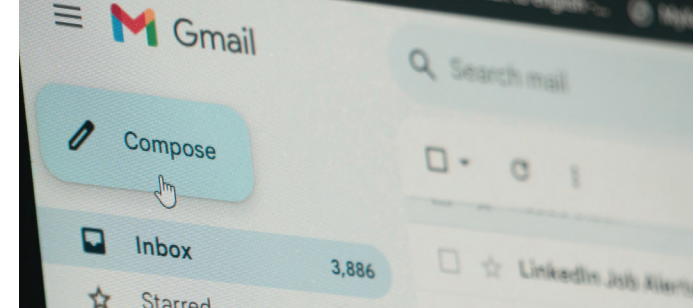
You've been collecting and analyzing data all along—now it's time to put it to use. Leverage the data and information within your CRM to understand prospects and tailor your strategy to what's most likely to interest them.

3. BUILD A COMPELLING VALUE PROPOSITION.

What would make a person decide to take action and apply? Look beyond obvious things like the number of degrees. Get specific, especially when paired with your audience data. Clearly communicate your institution's unique value and strengths (e.g., faculty credentials, research opportunities, placement rates, and career outcomes).

4. OPTIMIZE DIGITAL CHANNELS.

Make the web work for you. Ensure your website has a clear, customized, and targeted landing page centered on persuading people to apply. The page should be easy to navigate and contain all necessary information about the application process. Use platforms popular among your target demographics like Instagram, TikTok, or X (formerly known as Twitter) to showcase campus life, student testimonials, and more, and tie them directly to the campaign.



5. ENGAGE WITH EMAIL MARKETING.

Outside of social and web channels, use email to your advantage. Engage potential applicants with relevant content, reminders about application deadlines, and personalized messaging. Pay attention to behavioral cues like opens and clicks, and have the Admission team follow up with engaged leads.

6. TAKE YOUR CONTENT TO THE NEXT LEVEL.

Develop relatable, relevant, story-filled content that gets audiences interested. Enlist your student ambassadors—think of them as a team of micro-influencers.

7. LEVERAGE RETARGETING.

Use retargeting ads to re-engage users who've visited your application page but didn't complete the application. Invest in direct mail for a data-driven strategy focused on the leads that are likely to convert.

8. THINK ABOUT USING HOUSEHOLD-DIRECTED DIGITAL ADS.

Target specific audience segments by aiming tailored ads via their streaming devices.

9. PUT OUT A CALL TO YOUR ALUMS.

Engage them in the recruiting effort in their hometown. Talk to them about providing testimonials to show prospective students the real-world value of a degree from your institution or hosting a coffee event for nearby students.

10. OFFER FINANCIAL TRANSPARENCY.

Prospective students and their families are often concerned about tuition and financial aid. Ensure that information about scholarships, grants, and other financial aid opportunities is readily accessible and transparent.

In this season of challenges and opportunities, remember that there are no magical solutions. However, there are always options. Approach your situation objectively, stay positive, explore your choices, and take decisive action.

Navigating the mid-year pivot requires careful analysis, adaptability, and a commitment to meeting your enrollment goals. With these strategies in your arsenal, you can steer your institution towards a successful enrollment season, no matter what the challenges.

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Adapting Higher Education for Today's NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS

Laralee F. Harkleroad, EdD

INTRODUCTION

In the ever-evolving landscape of higher education, one thing has become increasingly clear: non-traditional students are quickly emerging as a significant segment of the student population. We can no longer solely focus on the traditional image of a fresh-faced 18-year-old heading off to a four-year institution right after high school as our singular audience. Instead, students of all ages and backgrounds are pursuing higher education in diverse ways. Let's explore the rise of non-traditional students and delve into how higher education institutions can adapt to meet their unique needs.

NON-TRADITIONAL IS NORMAL

Gone are the days when the college experience was synonymous with dorm life, frat parties, and classes held in cavernous lecture halls.

Today's higher education landscape is a mosaic of various educational paths, and non-traditional students are the driving force behind this transformation. But who exactly are these non-traditional students?

Non-traditional students encompass a wide range of individuals, including:

- 1. Adult Learners:** These individuals have chosen to return to college later in life, often juggling work, family, and other responsibilities.
- 2. Online Learners:** The digital age has ushered in a new era of learning, allowing students to earn degrees and certificates from the comfort of their own homes or on the go. The COVID-19 pandemic kicked this new era into high gear.
- 3. Part-Time Students:** Many non-traditional students attend college part-time while working or fulfilling other commitments.
- 4. Transfer Students:** These students often transition from community colleges or other institutions, bringing diverse experiences and educational backgrounds.

MEETING THE NEEDS OF
NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS

To remain relevant and inclusive, higher education institutions must adapt to the needs and expectations of non-traditional students. Here are some key strategies to consider:

1. Flexible Learning Options:

Rigid schedules no longer align with non-traditional students’ realities. Institutions should offer flexible learning options, including evening and weekend classes, online courses, and hybrid formats. This flexibility allows students to balance their education with work and family commitments.

Many non-traditional students find a lack of flexibility—especially in a curriculum designed for traditional students—one of the greatest obstacles to their success.¹ As the past few years have forced higher education to provide more hybrid and flexible offerings, it’s worth emphasizing these capabilities when marketing to non-traditional students. As an added advantage, a reputation for flexible offerings can enhance an institution’s profile among traditional students, too: 45% of students think deadlines should be more flexible in general, and nearly a third think attendance shouldn’t be tracked as part of a course grade.²

2. Prior Learning Assessment:

Recognizing and giving credit for prior learning experiences, such as work experience or military service, can accelerate the path to degree completion for non-traditional students. Many institutions are implementing robust prior learning assessment programs to evaluate and award credits for these experiences.

In today’s market, more “typical” institutions compete with for-pay options advertising fast-tracked, career-specific programs. Prior learning assessments can help traditional colleges deliver a more personalized experience, emphasizing their affordability and the accelerated path that draws people to for-pay competitors while maintaining appropriate academic rigor.

1 “Nontraditional Students: Supporting Changing Student Populations.” National Association of Student Personnel Administrators. https://naspa.org/images/uploads/main/Hittepole_NASPA_Memo.pdf.
2 Flaherty, Colleen. “Students Define Flexibility in the Classroom.” *Inside Higher Ed*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2023/04/07/survey-what-flexibility-means-college-students>. 7 Apr. 2023.

3. Support Services:

Non-traditional students may require additional support to succeed academically and personally. Offering dedicated advising, counseling, and mentorship programs tailored to their unique needs and accessible during their hours of availability can make a significant difference.

Students who return or enter college later have noticeably lower completion rates than traditional students: 54.4% for students who begin their programs at 21-24 years of age and 51.1% for those 24 and older, compared to 64% for those who enter their programs at age 20 or younger.³ Appropriate student support and mentorship can make a big difference in completion rates. Mentors who can help adult students balance the needs of their personal and professional lives with the demands of their studies are especially important.

4. Financial Assistance:

The cost of higher education can be a significant barrier for non-traditional students. Be transparent when presenting the cost to attend for these non-traditional populations and explore ways to provide financial aid, scholarships, and flexible payment options to make education more accessible.

For many institutions, the answer lies in partnering with corporate America. Companies—including Target, Disney, Bank of America, Starbucks, Apple, and many others—offer tuition support or reimbursement to employees. Support can range from limited reimbursement to full-scale scholarships, and organizations often require employees to choose from a list of partner colleges and universities. Becoming one of those partners can open up a broad avenue for enrolling more non-traditional students.

3 “Completing College: National and State Reports” National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. <https://nscresearchcenter.org/completing-college/>. 29 Nov. 2022.

5. Career-Relevant Curriculum:

Non-traditional students often seek education with clear career goals in mind. Higher education institutions should collaborate with industry partners to ensure their curriculum is aligned with current job market demands, preparing students for meaningful employment.

Along with these types of corporate partnerships and career-oriented marketing, leaning on your alumni network can help. Consider reaching out to graduates for testimonials or video interviews discussing how their studies led to their current career success. Hearing directly from people “like them” can help make your options feel more real and relevant to students—and it provides clear evidence that your programs are worth their investment.

6. Technology Integration:

As online and hybrid learning become more prevalent, institutions must invest in technology infrastructure and training for faculty and students to ensure a seamless learning experience. According to research from McKinsey, the tools that have seen the most uptick in the past few years “enable connectivity and community building,” with a 49% increase in use. Classroom interaction technologies (live chat, polls, breakout group “rooms,” etc.) remain the most popular overall, with 67% of respondents currently using them.⁴

The key is to adopt these technologies in ways that are most relevant to students. In any case, expanding these solutions allows for the simultaneous development of robust hybrid and remote learning, providing more support for the kind of flexible learning that appeals to non-traditional students.

4 “How technology is shaping learning in higher education.” McKinsey & Company. <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/education/our-insights/how-technology-is-shaping-learning-in-higher-education>. 15 June 2022.

TIME TO RETHINK INSTITUTIONAL
TERRAIN

Non-traditional students are reshaping the higher education landscape. To remain relevant and responsive to the diverse needs of this growing population, institutions must adapt by providing flexible learning options, tailored support services, financial assistance, and career-relevant curricula. Embracing these changes enables higher education institutions to empower individuals of all backgrounds and ages to pursue their dreams and contribute to a dynamic, inclusive society. Ultimately, it’s not about the traditional or non-traditional label; it’s about fostering an educational environment that caters to the lifelong learner in all of us.

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Maximizing Yield with Smarter Online Ad Strategies

College admissions traditionally relied on campus tours, accepted student events, and off-campus receptions to attract students. But with the rise of TikTok and the digital generation, institutions have had to throw their old playbook out the window and adopt new digital strategies to yield students.

Digital marketing has always had a prominent place in top-of-funnel recruitment strategies. However, the pandemic accelerated the realization that a robust digital strategy is imperative at every level of the funnel, especially the bottom. Institutions must adopt creative Yield strategies to reach a generation that prefers texting over face-to-face interactions and phone calls.

SIX RECOMMENDATIONS FOR YOUR DIGITAL YIELD CAMPAIGN

Building a strong digital Yield campaign requires carefully planning and evaluating key elements. Keep these six suggestions in mind to develop an effective campaign:

1. Timing Is Everything

In the digital realm, you can increase ad volume during crucial moments in the campaign. Prioritize ad distribution in the weeks leading up to on-campus or virtual accepted student events and again leading up to the deposit deadline.

2. Use Display and Social Ads

Keep your school top-of-mind by sharing important messaging via display and social ads and serving them to accepted

student households (capturing the parents is just as important at this level). For example, you could share the deposit deadline or a unique scholarship opportunity for students who commit by a specific date.

3. Leverage Landing Pages

Enhance engagement opportunities by creating landing pages specifically designed for accepted students. Consider soliciting input on what's most important to them as they decide and follow up accordingly.

4. Gamify the Experience

Consider setting up a points system that rewards incoming students for engaging with your institution. Students could earn points for liking accepted student social media pages or pinning their location on an interactive map accessible to all admitted students. Offer prizes like college T-shirts to those who exceed point thresholds.

5. Create Engaging Social Media Content

Get students and parents excited about attending your institution! Show off unique events, campus life, orientation activities, and more. (Did someone say hype reel?)

6. Track Website Activity

Monitor website activity closely, including which pages your accepted students are visiting. This invaluable data can help you gauge interest and guide relevant outreach. Many CRM systems offer this capability, but consider enrollmentFUEL's matchBACK service if yours doesn't.

#ADMISSIONSUCCESS

Craft a compelling digital recruitment program so you can engage potential students where they spend most of their time: **online!**

"A DAY IN THE LIFE" CAMPAIGN

One of the most effective ways of piquing prospective students' interests is by answering their most significant question: what would my life look like if I attended this school? They want to know about the "on paper" factors like majors, internships, student/teacher ratio, tuition, etc. They also know that they're committing years of their lives to an overall campus experience—and they're savvy enough to understand that an introductory brochure or website won't give them a "real" answer.

That's where a "Day in the Life" campaign can make a big difference. These campaigns offer a genuine glimpse into the daily experiences of current students at a particular college or university. With an emphasis on storytelling over listing facts, these campaigns can improve relatability, add emotion and contextual details to your overall pitch, and even increase the amount of time (and the intensity of attention) spent learning about your brand.¹

In some ways, "Day in the Life" campaigns are closer to influencer marketing than traditional educational marketing techniques. The campaigns' informality can create a greater emotional connection between prospective students and the experiences they see unfolding. Plus, 63% of consumers say they trust influencer messaging more than direct brand messaging, and 61% say they trust information from "a person like me," which can help to cut through the noise and competition of student marketing.²

These campaigns act exactly like they say they do. They follow different examples of what a real student's day is like when they attend your institution. Seeing real students go about their day gives prospective students a more authentic, accessible, and relatable understanding of what their lives could be like on campus. This authenticity can build trust, informally answer crucial questions, and

make a school more attractive to prospective students.

"Day in the Life" campaigns also offer a more interactive, personalized, and engaging way of reaching prospective students. Viewers can ask questions and get real-time or personalized responses, which enhances their engagement and their sense that your institution truly cares about them. Institutions can tailor their "Day in the Life" campaigns to reach specific demographics, like prospective students with particular academic interests or from specific geographical regions. There's also the simple fact that "Day in the Life" campaigns are visually engaging and a lot of fun; they allow you to show off the campus and community in a vibrant, inviting way.

In terms of maximizing yield, these campaigns allow for rapid feedback and adjustment. You can easily measure the impact of social media campaigns through engagement rates, reach, clicks, and conversions. This data can help institutions understand the campaigns' effectiveness and produce more optimized content that evolves with prospective students' preferences.

Putting current students and their experiences front and center is a powerful way to connect prospective students with your institution and build interest in becoming part of that community. With an emotional, informal bond and a relatable approach to answering key questions, these digital campaigns can provide significant support to colleges' and universities' overall recruitment efforts.

Tori Simon, MS, serves as the Associate Vice President for Digital Marketing Strategies at enrollmentFUEL. Prior to joining the team in February 2021, Tori began her digital marketing career in 2014 when she started her first blog, which she built with the sole purpose of inspiring students to reach their higher education goals. After achieving success in content creation, digital marketing, paid advertising, and SEO, she joined a marketing agency where she executed campaigns for some of the world's largest brands, including Georgia-Pacific and Unilever. Tori lives in North Carolina with her husband and rescue dog, is an avid TCU fan, and would live off of ice cream if she could. Reach out to Tori at Tori.Simon@enrollmentFUEL.com.

¹ Goobich, Joel. "Make Your Product Feel Real by Creating 'Day in The Life' Content." *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/forbescommunicationscouncil/2021/09/22/make-your-product-feel-real-by-creating-day-in-the-life-content/?sh=6f55018341a5>. 22 Sept. 2021.

² Baer, Jay. "7 New Influencer Marketing Statistics That Prove Why It Works." *Convince & Convert*. <https://www.convinceandconvert.com/influencer-marketing-influencer-marketing-statistics/>. 2023.





Elevating GRADUATE PROGRAM MARKETING FOR SUSTAINABLE GROWTH

Lisa Branson, MSED

In the dynamic world of higher education, universities continually seek innovative ways to thrive. One essential element in this quest is the ability to market graduate programs effectively. But here's the catch—to ensure authentic growth, you must forge a strong connection between your graduate program marketing efforts and your institutional strategy.

THE FOUR FOUNDATIONAL ELEMENTS

When developing a strategy for graduate program marketing, start with the broader aspects, then get more granular. Consider how these four common marketing tactics can apply to promoting your graduate programs:

1

Define Your Unique Value Proposition

Prospective graduate students put enormous thought and effort into deciding where they're interested in applying. This can lead to them browsing through countless program options online, overwhelmed by the sea of choices. How do you ensure your program stands out in this crowd? The answer lies in a well-crafted and distinctive value proposition.

To begin, identify what makes your graduate program stand out from the competition, whether it's cutting-edge research opportunities, renowned faculty, or unique resources. Then, weave these elements into your marketing materials. Showcase real success stories from your graduates and emphasize the skills and experiences they gained that set them apart in the job market.

2

Tailor Your Outreach to Your Target Audience

Effective marketing is all about understanding your audience—in this case, students interested in pursuing advanced degrees in fields where your institution excels. Start by creating detailed personas of your ideal graduate student candidates, considering factors like age, career goals, academic interests, and geographic location.

Once you've defined your target audience, craft marketing content that speaks directly to them. Use language, imagery, and examples that are relatable and meaningful to your audience. For instance, if your program caters to working professionals, highlight the flexibility of your course schedule and the potential for career advancement. When targeting recent college graduates, emphasize the academic rigor and research opportunities. Remember, it's not just about reaching more people; it's about getting the *right* people.

3

Leverage Data-Driven Insights

In the digital age, data is your most potent ally in graduate program marketing. Analyzing key metrics allows you to gain valuable insights into what's working and what needs improvement. Use data to inform your decisions and refine your strategies over time.

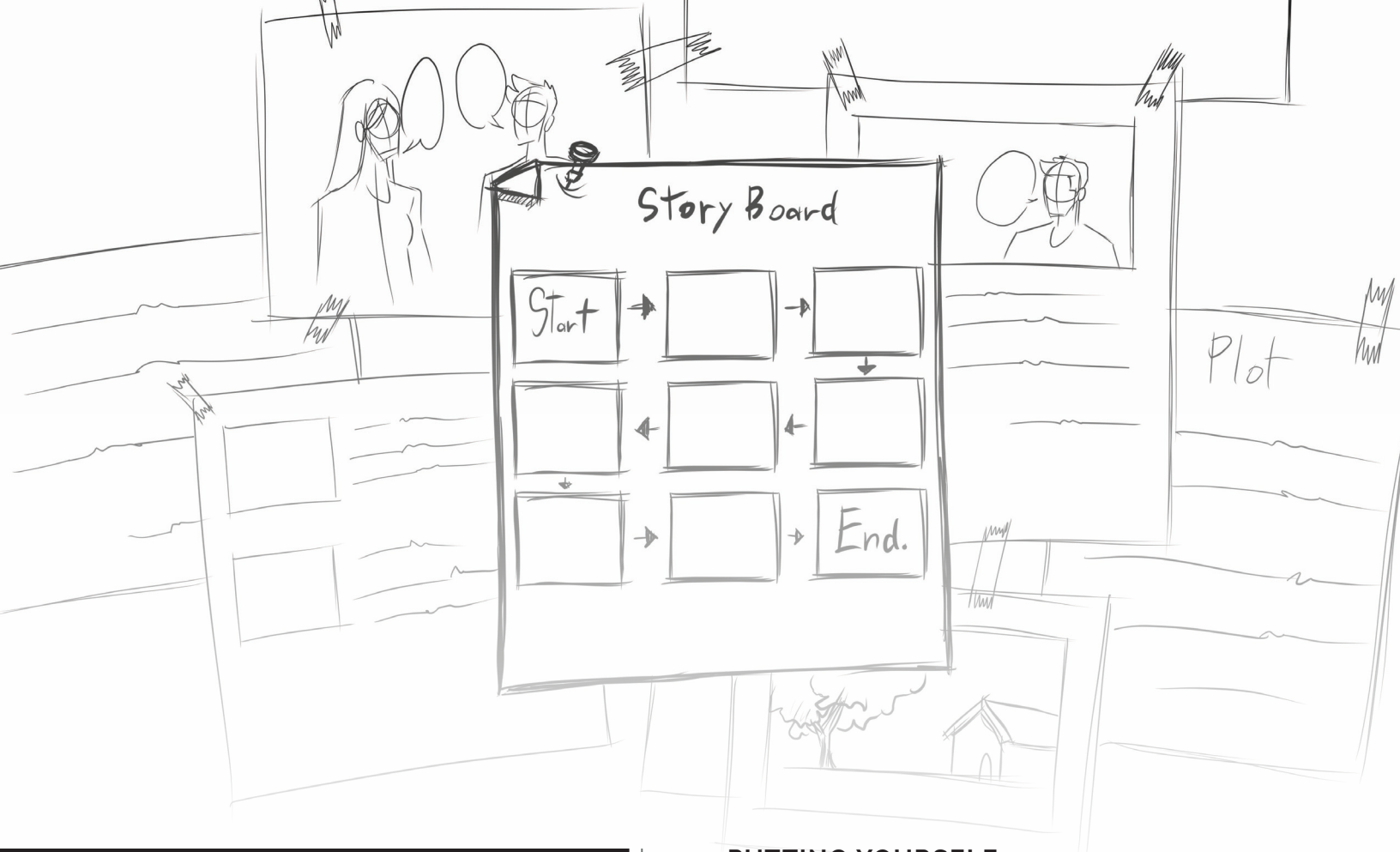
Start by setting clear and measurable goals for your marketing efforts and using the appropriate tools to monitor them. Whether it's increasing website traffic, boosting application submissions, or raising brand awareness, having specific objectives allows you to track your progress and adjust your tactics accordingly. This data can reveal which marketing channels are most effective, helping you allocate resources where they'll have the most impact.

4

Foster Collaboration Across Departments

Building a connection between graduate program marketing and your institutional strategy requires collaboration and communication across departments, from marketing to faculty to admissions. Each department has a unique perspective and valuable insights to inform your marketing strategies.

Faculty can provide input on program strengths and academic opportunities, while admissions staff can offer feedback on the application process and student inquiries. Career services can contribute valuable data on alumni success stories and employment outcomes. By working together, you'll ensure that your graduate marketing efforts align with the broader goals of your institution, ultimately leading to authentic growth in enrollment and reputation.



STRATEGY FOR SUCCESS: LOOK-ALIKE MARKETING

It can be a challenge to find the right leads, and you need a thoughtful, in-depth strategy to identify and market to the right potential students. One technique where we have seen considerable success is **look-alike marketing**.

This approach uses data on current students to find future ones. By analyzing past data to find demographic patterns, it then allows you to pinpoint “look-alike” prospects with a higher likelihood of response.

enrollmentFUEL founder Mike Wesner talks more about this technique in a previous *Octane* article. Scan the QR code to read more.

SCAN HERE



If you’re ready to incorporate look-alike marketing into your search strategy, we’re here to help. Contact us for a brainstorming session on finding leads.

PUTTING YOURSELF IN STUDENTS' SHOES

Developing a framework that allows your team to see things from your prospective students’ perspectives can be helpful. We “know” that certain techniques and priorities influence their decision-making, but we must also understand why these things matter to them.

A “storyboard” or “day in the life” exercise can help pinpoint the critical decision-making factors while also giving you a better understanding of your prospective student’s emotional and psychological mindset.

Start by giving your “hero” a basic character profile, similar to what corporations do when developing a persona for an ideal buyer. Give your person a name, age, location, areas of interest, hobbies, etc. Then, break down their day. Where does their time go, and how do they feel about the events in their life? What and who do they encounter? Think about context and its role in motivation and decision-making.

Lisa Branson, MEd, is enrollmentFUEL’s Vice President for Client Relations and is currently enrolled in a doctoral program. She is an expert in recruiting, financial aid, and all aspects of Student Search, including adult and online learners. Lisa has worked with many schools to develop comprehensive strategies to grow in their market, and she is happy to share her experience with you. Feel free to contact Lisa at Lisa.Branson@enrollmentFUEL.com and start a conversation.

Along the way, note potential “triggers”: things or events that might get the ball rolling and raise the possibility of considering what you’re selling—in this case, a graduate degree from your institution. From those triggers, you can build out the rest of the decision-making process by determining:

- When and how might a prospective graduate student become aware of a need or want? Or what experiences might make them want to pursue graduate education?
- When and how do they research or consider options?
- When and how do they make the final application and enrollment decision?
- What obstacles do they face throughout their day that you might address? For instance, where might they realize that a graduate degree you offer would be beneficial, and why?
- When and how might they be most receptive to marketing messages or advertising?
- Who might influence their buying decision, and where might they seek information or recommendations? For instance, could alumni marketing and testimonials—on social media, perhaps—demonstrate the real-world value of a graduate degree for their field?

Look for opportunities during a “normal day” where your marketing efforts would align with a potential student’s circumstances. Consider also how you can address their “pain points” or cater to their emotions.

Authentic growth in graduate program marketing is not just about increasing numbers; it’s about fostering a meaningful connection between your marketing efforts and your institutional strategy. Your marketing should reflect the unique value of your institution and the specific needs and priorities your program addresses. It’s about deeply understanding what your prospective students want, and then guiding them to the evidence that your institution is the right fit to meet those wants and needs. With a robust strategy that’s unafraid to get personal, your graduate program can thrive now more than ever.

Motivational Triggers

Non-traditional students may be motivated to return to school for a new degree or certification due to a number of “trigger” events in their lives, which your marketing can play to. These might include:

- Career advancement within a current industry
- Desire to transition to a new industry
- Fulfilling a personal dream, goal, or interest
- Desire or need to improve earning potential
- Need or interest in updating skills
- Incentives/influences from employers, community, and/or family and friends
- Requirements for professional certification



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