



**MADISON  
SQUARE  
GARDEN,  
HERE WE  
COME:**

**RECRUITING  
GRADUATE**

**ADULT  
STUDENTS**

By Lisa Branson, M.Ed.

When it comes to graduate and adult recruitment, there are many moving parts. Unlike the traditional market, success is based less on your brand's perceived value, and more on your marketing budget and advertising spend. This reality can be daunting at smaller schools trying to hold their own in the adult/graduate recruiting space.

**What makes graduate and adult recruitment more difficult and sometimes more expensive?** To succeed, you need a strategy to recruit by program, instead of at an institutional level. The difficulty and added expenses come from the need to market multiple programs when admission offices are already stressed for resources.

## EVALUATING WHERE TO FOCUS EFFORT

When you start down the planning path for graduate and adult recruiting, begin the journey by sorting your institution's programs into three categories:

1.

### SUCCESSFUL AND GROWING ORGANICALLY

Definition: Enough students find and choose the program to justify its existence without additional investment.

2.

### SURVIVING WITH PLENTY OF ROOM FOR GROWTH

Definition: These programs cover a significant percentage of their costs, get good reviews by students, offer degrees sought by adult students or graduate students, and are at parity or better than what is offered by competitors.

3.

### STRUGGLING

Definition: These programs run significant deficits and are below parity or have significant deficiencies compared to other institutions' programs.

When resources are limited, you need to evaluate where to put time and money based on the **program's potential** to yield growth. If you try to support too many programs with too little money, it puts you in the danger zone with the risk of achieving nothing.

Opportunity lurks in the second category, defined as "Surviving with plenty of room for growth." Rate each program using a five-point scale:

POOR 1 BELOW AVERAGE 2 AVERAGE 3 ABOVE AVERAGE 4 EXCELLENT 5

Set up a rubric to evaluate factors such as:

- Market penetration
- Competitive intensity
- Program pricing
- Size of the available market
- Satisfaction of graduates
- The ability of the program to meet the needs of students
- Ease of the application and admittance process
- How well the program is touted and recruited in the marketplace

Add up the ratings to rank the programs. Use this as your starting point for determining resource allocation. Even with a six-figure budget, trying to support every program in this category could be challenging for many institutions, so be prepared to make tough decisions.

## WHAT STUDENTS WANT

Along with a degree, graduates and adult learners are looking for other benefits, such as:

- Flexibility
- Minimal barriers to entry
- Time/cost considerations
- Positive career outcomes

These factors need to be communicated on your website and in other communications along with program-related choice points.

### Flexibility

Students in adult and graduate programs often work full-time and are responsible for a household. With multiple priorities competing for their time and attention, taking classes on *their* terms is essential, and time to degree completion matters. According to *Dean & Provost*, student retention improves through strong advisement, practical learning, and through cohort programs.<sup>1</sup> School location or the availability of online programs matter. These students are not as mobile as traditional-aged college students. They are bound to a home base location through job and family obligations.

**RECRUITING TIP:** Digital advertising is a great way to reach adult and graduate populations of students. Social media, especially traditional methods like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and LinkedIn, work well for these populations. In ads, emphasize flexibility. Images of students with families resonate with this group. Inform students of programs that are offered online and communicate about flexible options for class scheduling. Personal opportunities for advisement should be emphasized.

### Minimize Barriers to Entry

Undergraduate and graduate degree programs have been removing standardized testing requirements, eliminating SAT, ACT, GRE, and GMAT testing. In research conducted by Dr. Jennifer Chicca, she says tests like the GRE must

<sup>1</sup> Retrieved from: <https://www.pace.edu/sites/default/files/files/news/dean-provost.pdf>

# 7

## Smart Tactics to Try

Here are the top seven tactics we have used at enrollmentFUEL to help clients meet adult and graduate recruiting goals.

1. Invest in pay-per-click advertising. It is the fastest way to be found by people looking for programs at an institution like yours.
2. Hire a telecounseling operation. Have them call everyone in your CRM to determine your inquiries' status so you can focus effort where it gets results.
3. Restart communications. Create a list of all past inquiries who are no longer receiving communications. Send an email with current news about programs. Observe who opens the email and does not unsubscribe. Put these leads into a new nurture campaign.
4. Improve program copy on your website. Does it focus on benefits? Is it persuasive? Does it support your organic SEO efforts so your programs can be found by potential students?
5. Collect and publish success stories. Make it a point to follow up with past graduates to gather stories about career and personal success. Publish them on the website and your social channels, like LinkedIn.
6. Identify first-time website visitors, and send them a postcard. With matchBACK™ code from enrollmentFUEL, you can collect stealth visitors' home addresses, send a follow-up postcard, and direct them to take the next step.
7. Remarket with a splash page. Use digital ads to encourage website visitors to make a return visit and take the next step. Direct visitors to a splash page. Consider adopting a "give to get" strategy, where inquiries give you complete contact information to get something of value, like a useful brochure titled, "Affordable Graduate Program Options."

be examined for “appropriate use and necessity.”<sup>2</sup> Standardized tests are time-consuming and represent significant investments for students, both mentally and financially. A growing population of adult and graduate students regard testing as a barrier they are not interested in overcoming. Another factor to consider is application fees.

If you require tests or require fees, it may be time to reconsider if your competitors do not have these obstacles in place. Make it easy for students to apply, such as providing online applications with no log-ins. Fast communications about application status will encourage applications and generally leads to a higher completion level. Providing clear and concise information on your website about the application process is helpful to students and increases the likelihood they will act.

**RECRUITING TIP:** For adult and graduate recruiting, using tools like FUEL’s inquiryDETECTOR™, where new website visitors can be identified and tracked, is the key to your institution’s success. Build program-specific landing pages and communications. Design easy-to-navigate pages. Indicate what you want students to do, and place calls to action above the fold.

## Time/Cost Considerations

Adult and graduate students are very sensitive to issues of price and time to degree completion. To move forward, potential students must understand how much the degree will cost and the types of financial aid available.

**RECRUITING TIP:** Be transparent with prospective students. Inform them about scholarships and financial aid as early as possible, even before they apply. Don’t be afraid to invest money in mailings about scholarships—direct mail has an impact.

## Career Outcomes

Strong outcomes messages and communicating about the available resources for career development and locating jobs will strengthen your competitive position with adult and graduate students.

**RECRUITING TIP:** Consider developing an influencer campaign using your alumni and current students, giving them a platform to share personal stories about career success. Influencer campaigns work well on social platforms. Outcomes messaging also works well in pay-per-click advertising campaigns.

<sup>2</sup> Chicca, Jennifer. “Analyzing Use of the Graduate Record Examinations® General Test in Doctoral Nursing Education: Start, Stop, Continue, or Modify?” *Nursing Education Perspectives*, 1/2 2020 - Volume 41, Issue 1: PP 26-29.

## IT’S NOT OVER UNTIL IT’S OVER!

Unlike traditional undergraduate recruiting, there is no natural starting point or default threshold for pursuing degrees by adults and graduates. Adult and graduate recruiting requires a “punch-to-the-bell” philosophy. Recruiting an adult or graduate student only stops when the prospect asks to be removed from the system – not when their expected term passes without them enrolling. The school’s CRM, communication plan, and recruiters should keep punching out touches until a lead says stop, causing the bell to ring. This differs from traditional recruitment, where clear endpoints dictate when communication with the student should cease.

Another group to nurture is your undergraduate alumni base. With easy-to-find contact information, this group has already built a strong relationship with your institution. Eventually, some will pursue graduate degrees, so don’t ignore the “low-hanging fruit” when recruiting.

enrollmentFUEL often recommends two leading tactics for adult and graduate recruiting. First is program-specific pay-per-click (PPC) ads. When a potential student is searching for a specific program at a school like yours, PPC ads create awareness at the top of the funnel. Second, work with your social marketing team to build a strong presence on LinkedIn for your institution. As consultant and author Bobby Darnell says, “Active participation on LinkedIn is the best way to say, ‘Look at me!’ without saying ‘Look at me!’”<sup>3</sup> And, when you are recruiting adults and graduates, you want to get all the looks you can.

Personally, it took me several years to decide to apply to a doctoral program and then attend. I had many life factors at play that determined the timing and, ultimately, the stamina to balance work and academics simultaneously. Once a term passes without a lead enrolling, place potential students in a non-responder communications flow, and continue to market. Many students will behave as I did when seeking graduate school. Don’t go to your corner too soon. Just like the winners at Madison Gardens, it’s important to keep on swinging until that bell finally rings.

<sup>3</sup> Retrieved from: <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/tag/linkedin>

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