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TIPS FOR TROUBLESHOOTING STUDENTS' ENROLLMENT DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

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Let's say you've spoken with a prospective student for your institution. You've sent them materials and answered their questions, pointed out how your institution aligns with their goals and values, and helped them understand what financial aid options they have available. In your mind, you've done all you can to convince them that yours is the college or university that best suits their needs… yet they ultimately inform you that they've decided to enroll somewhere else.

At such moments, you might wonder what went wrong. Did you miss something or make an error?

Remember, choosing a college is a significant decision influenced by factors like geography, family ties, friend networks, and finances—often beyond your control. While there's no need for self-reproach, reviewing your communication can reveal opportunities for improvement.

Here are actionable tips to enhance follow-up communication, avoid common missteps, and better support prospective students during their decision-making process.

See Your School Through the Eyes of a Prospective Student

It's easy to forget that the institution you likely spend hundreds of hours at each year is an entirely new experience for almost every prospect you meet. To them, the people, features, and reputation of your school — which are all things you may take for granted — are essentially alien.

A big part of your job is to view your institution as if you were setting foot on campus for the very first time and recognizing what might seem exciting, interesting, inspiring, or confusing for prospects who are trying to decide if your school could ever feel like home.

Understand Each Prospects Values and Desired Outcomes

Every learner is unique, so what may seem like your school's biggest selling point on paper might not matter at all to a prospect who would be incredibly excited to know about something buried on the 30th slide of your default presentation. While this range of variety may seem daunting, it also means you have the freedom to present your school in infinitely different ways to infinitely different prospects. The key is to make sure you're presenting it in a way that resonates with *their individual needs and interests*, not just those of your stock marketing persona.

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INSIDE THIS ISSUE:

Rough Year for Nonprofits

There are at least sixteen nonprofit colleges and universities who have announced they are closing in 2024. No doubt there will be more closures to come.

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TIPS FOR TROUBLESHOOTING CONTINUED:

Be Aware of — and Honest About — the Good *and* the Bad

Just like a smart shopper checks a product's reviews before buying, smart students are going to seek out as much information about the schools they're interested in as possible. This may include word-of-mouth from current students and alumni, news stories about the school, reviews on websites like on RateMyProfessors or GlassDoor, and even the school's financial standing, political influence or environmental impact.

Make sure you're regularly reviewing these same information sources so you'll know what your prospects know, and so you'll be prepared to address any concerns they may have. Be honest about what the school is doing to mitigate problems while promoting the concept of continual improvement. Again, no one trusts a product with only five-star reviews, but what builds trust is seeing how problems and concerns are taken seriously, proactively addressed, and improved upon.

Don't Overlook Seemingly Small Questions from Prospects — or Parents

Students often aren't making the decision to enroll alone. Their parents and other family members are often major influences, especially if they are helping financially. As such, even a seemingly small concern could turn out to have a big impact on their final decision, especially if it raises an issue that they don't feel you're taking as seriously as they are.

For example, questions about campus security, available parking, the variety of campus life options, the ease and confidentiality of accessing mental health support, and many other seemingly incidental questions could be big indicators of a prospect's underlying worries. Do your best to provide the most accurate and comprehensive information you can, while also taking note of potential issues that could serve as disqualifiers for families with specific needs or concerns.

What Questions Didn't You Have an Answer For?

Good communication is a matter of providing relevant information in a timely manner, and both the relevance and timeliness of that communication counts. For that reason, continually expanding your knowledge of your institution is crucial — because to your prospects, you *are* the school.

Granted, your prospects will undoubtedly have questions you won't always know the answer to, and that's okay. But while it's impossible for you to know all the details about every class, professor, building, and piece of technology in your institution, the key is being able to find those answers quickly while assuring your prospects that finding those answers is your priority.

This is especially true for programs of high interest, in which your inability to provide key details could indicate to a prospect that your institution views that program as a lower priority than it may be at competing schools. It is also true for new programs, which have likely been created to meet a fast-growing market need, and which are likely to attract prospects who are even more knowledgeable about their prospective career field than you are about this new major.

Whenever you encounter a question that you don't immediately have an answer for, do your best to seek it out quickly while also thanking your prospect for giving you the opportunity to dive deeper into that topic. You may also want to track those curveball questions to help you spot trends over time.

Finally, remember the golden rule of communicating with potential students: the longer it takes you to respond to a prospect's question, the more likely they are to find that answer — and maybe the institution of their future — somewhere else.

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TRUST BUT VERIFY

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Most people's natural instinct is to trust that others are doing what they say they are doing. Most employees desire to work for an organization, and a leader, who trusts them to do their job in the best way possible. Employees will often become upset if they feel that their leaders don't trust them to do their job. In higher education, the faculty may also express their concerns about administrative leaders who don't seem to trust their employees.

Unfortunately, we have experienced many examples of Admissions and Financial Aid teams that simply were not doing what they claimed to be doing, and the impact of these failures often cost their institutions many millions of dollars. For colleges and universities that are tuition dependent and operating in a highly competitive environment, this can force the institution into the downward spiral of frozen salaries, reduced benefits, expense reductions, headcount reductions, and worse. If your institution hasn't experienced any of these challenges, then this article might not be helpful for you. But if this situation feels close to home, I encourage you to strongly consider this message.

The first step to verifying is to determine what should be verified for each team and each employee. The key question to ask is what are the things that our teams need to do correctly to accomplish their desired goals.

For the Admissions team, we feel that some of the most important tasks are:

- Consistent telephone contact with prospective students
- Consistent attempted phone contact with prospective students
- Consistent personalized text messaging with prospective students
- Meaningful contacts—the quality of the interaction matters
- Applicant folder completion
- Encouraging applicant campus visits
- Completing the deposit process

Goals for each of these tasks should be established and progress toward the goal should be regularly communicated with each member of the Admissions team. There should be team-level goals that are a compilation of each counselor's individual goals (and both should be measured and reported). Successful institutions also establish a practice of regularly reporting progress toward these goals to the executive team, including the president. Our most successful institutions have presidents and executive teams who support the admissions effort in every way, including helping to ensure accountability by regularly reviewing progress toward these goals and holding the Enrollment Management leadership team accountable for achieving them.

For the Financial Aid team, some of the most important tasks are:

- Developing a data-informed financial aid plan
- Processing accurate and complete financial aid awards in a timely manner
- Supporting prospective students through completion of the financial aid process

While the Financial Aid team is typically smaller than the Admissions team, their work is just as important, and it is often more complicated to measure their results. Verifying often includes double-checking the financial aid awards via spreadsheets or other methods. We have heard many Financial Aid teams retort that the system has been set up by system consultants to automatically calculate the awards, so there is no reason for this check. We sometimes find significant errors in the awards. In these cases, the verification process is used to improve the accuracy of the automated awarding program.

It is important to measure these goals in a data-informed manner. This often requires additional investments such as telephone and texting systems that enable the institution to confirm their efforts and results.

The process of verification can be complicated and emotionally challenging, especially for Enrollment Management personnel who have excelled along their career path because they are great relationship builders. For this reason, it is important for the Enrollment Management leadership team to partner with someone outside of the group to help them review and maintain accountability. This partner can be a consultant or a team of high-level employees from the institution who meets regularly to review the institution's enrollment and financial aid accountability reports. By properly implementing this approach, we have seen institutions set new enrollment records and even double their incoming class sizes. As we officially head into the long-predicted enrollment cliff, it is more important than ever to ensure that the Enrollment Management team is being held accountable.

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THE DYSART GROUP
ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT & HIGHER EDUCATION SERVICES

THE DYSART GROUP is a higher education consulting firm specializing in enrollment management. We have provided consultation services to more than 250 colleges and universities throughout the United States with extraordinary results.

We have worked collaboratively with colleges and universities to significantly grow enrollment. Our institution-specific recommendations have helped increase the number of admission applications as much as three-fold. Improved communication strategies and new tracking metrics have resulted in higher folder completion rates and increased the number of students accepted for admission. New student enrollments have grown by as much as 70% in a single cycle while discount rates have been controlled. Proven strategies have increased retention rates by as much as 7% in one year.

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