

ENROLLMENT MANAGER

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AQUINAS COLLEGE IN MICHIGAN ENROLLS LARGEST CLASS SINCE 2018

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It's an extremely challenging recruitment market for presidents, administrators and enrollment managers. Demographics are a real obstacle, support for federal and state financial aid has stagnated, and colleges and universities are folding at an alarming pace.

The enrollment team at Aquinas College in Grand Rapids, Michigan experienced a significant decline in enrollment over the previous seven years. **THE DYSART GROUP** partnered with the College this past cycle to implement a new recruitment and financial aid plan.

- The entire admission process was stream-lined for greater efficiency and transparency for prospective students and families.
- We reduced travel for the admission counselors to allow better focus on yield.
- A communication plan was introduced that included systematic outreach via telephone, email, text, AI and in-person meetings.
- The institutional scholarship program was revamped for better targeting and simplification.

- A new financial aid award policy was created to control institutional aid expenditures and more effectively meet financial need.

The immediate outcomes in the first year of implementation are impressive:

- First-year applications for admission increased by 18% and grew to the largest total in history.
- Applications from transfer students increased by 18%.
- Applications from Nursing students grew by 23%.
- First-year deposits increased by 41%.
- Transfer deposits soared by 14%.
- Deposits for Nursing students grew by 23% while overall new student enrollment grew by 34%.
- The number of students living in the residence halls increased.
- The College realized a double-digit increase in the number of international students.
- In line with institutional mission, the number of new students receiving Federal Pell Grants increased by 50%.

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Alarming Trends
At least 83 public or private colleges have closed or merged in the last five years. There are certainly more to come as the higher education market continues to evolve.

THIS NEWSLETTER IS PRINTED ON FSC, ECOLOGO/UL, CFPA & ANCIENT FOREST FRIENDLY CERTIFIED PAPER

- The new scholarship program and financial aid award policy stabilized institutional financial aid expenditures and increased net tuition revenue by more than \$1,500 per newly enrolled student.

If your institution is struggling with stagnant enrollment, a declining enrollment or rising financial aid costs, like Aquinas College, and you want to turn things around, scheduling a review of your enrollment operation by an outside professional is a smart move. **THE DYSART GROUP** can identify process and strategic challenges and offer proven solutions for better outcomes. We can offer effective strategies to increase your customer base, grow your application pool and increase new student enrollments.

THE POWER OF WELCOME: HOW TO MAKE A POSITIVE FIRST IMPRESSION ON OUR IDEAL STUDENT PROSPECTS

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You only get one chance to make a first impression on a prospective student, and you want to make it great. While you can't always control where, when, or how a prospect first hears about your school, you can influence what they discover. From sparking curiosity and pride to fostering belonging and academic challenge, here are ways to create an unforgettable first impression.

Don't Start with a Pitch—Start with a Class

For many prospects, the first contact with admissions feels transactional. But what if instead of telling them about your school, you showed them? Partner with professors to host “lightning learning” events—short, interactive versions of intro-level courses, online or in-person. This allows prospects to sample real instruction, meet professors, and

feel excited about learning before they even start an application.

Make Your Direct Mail Personal

Mailings can feel generic, but handwritten notes can turn them into proof that you're listening. Reference majors of interest, athletic passions, or facilities that matter to the student. A few extra minutes of personalization signals genuine care and helps transform a prospect's perception from “just another lead” to “a valued future student.”

Follow Up Quickly

If your school isn't already their first choice, speed matters. Following up within two business days demonstrates responsiveness and reliability, which can set you apart from competitors who take longer to reply.

Put Social Media in Student Hands

Let current students in various majors take over Instagram or TikTok for a day to showcase authentic campus life. Seeing real schedules, labs, performances, or study sessions helps prospects envision themselves on campus. It also highlights your culture for potential faculty or staff who may be evaluating fit.

Remove the Mystery Around Financial Aid

Cost is a top concern. Instead of burying the numbers, make it easy to access a financial aid calculator that clearly estimates costs. Prominent placement and minimal clicks show transparency and respect for students' time, while turning affordability from an abstract concern into a manageable plan.

Turn Open Houses into Adventures

Move beyond standardized tours by letting curiosity guide the day. Scavenger hunts, student-faculty icebreakers, or “side quests” for school swag make events memorable. For parents balancing childcare, a daycare space ensures inclusivity and accessibility.

Host Webinars from Campus Hotspots

Traditional webinars often feel impersonal. Instead, host them from classrooms, labs, studios, or athletic facilities. These backdrops showcase campus highlights and allow spontaneous appearances from faculty or staff. Personal

touches, like using participants' names when answering questions, help build meaningful connections.

Solve the "Complete Your Degree" Puzzle

Nontraditional students—veterans, professionals, parents, or transfers—may already hold credits. By clearly mapping how prior coursework fits into your programs, you can make the dream of degree completion feel tangible and achievable. Pair this with success stories of alumni in similar circumstances to reinforce confidence.

Partner with HR Departments

Many working professionals don't actively search for degree options, but they do read company newsletters. Collaborating with local HR departments ensures your programs reach employees through internal communications. This approach meets potential students where they are and connects education to workforce advancement.

Spotlight Job Placement and Employer Partnerships

Sometimes the best way to make a first impression is to show what comes after graduation. Highlight employer partnerships, career prep resources, and job placement rates. Prospects gain confidence when they see your commitment to launching them into rewarding careers.

The bottom line is that first impressions are not just about glossy brochures or polished tours—they're about authenticity, speed, relevance, and connection. Whether through a lightning class, a financial aid calculator, or a social media takeover, every interaction should help prospects picture themselves at your school. By making them feel seen, supported, and already part of the community, you set the stage for long-term commitment.

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EVALUATE YOUR ENROLLMENT VENDORS ANNUALLY

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It can be beneficial to make use of vendor partnerships to assist with all aspects of enrollment management. More critical, is to evaluate the success of those relationships annually.

Calculate the cost of companies helping with your search process by determining the cost per lead generated. More importantly, calculate the cost of each new student enrollment based on the expense of the partnership. Discontinue partnerships that do not generate inquiry increases but also reconsider partnerships that generate more inquiries that do not result in an increase in new student enrollments. For example, I worked with a university last year whose vendor had increased inquiries three-fold over three years, but enrollment continued to decline. Generating interest from students unlikely to enroll can be expensive, wasteful and ultimately meaningless.

If you utilize a company assisting with financial aid leveraging, or the creation of merit scholarships and award policies, reconsider the investment if financial aid costs increase and enrollment does not grow.

Be wary of firms offering AI options that do not grow the application counts and do not translate into larger new student enrollments.

Finally, perform some detailed evaluation of investments in publications and direct mail campaigns that do not result in enrollment growth.

Investments with vendor partners can be wise and effective, but so often colleges and universities do not take the time annually to specifically evaluate the relationships based upon desired outcomes.



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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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