THE POWER OF DATA:

The Key to a Student-Centered Enrollment Strategy

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Is your institution missing opportunities to connect with prospective students?

The answer is probably yes. Missed opportunities are understandable. Throughout higher education, admissions and marketing teams have limited budgets and staff but still must hit ambitious enrollment goals. As one enrollment manager has said, "That expectation is there all the time, that pressure to produce without any new resources."[1]

It's especially difficult to produce when higher ed faces so many headwinds. Americans' confidence in higher education has reached a new low.[2] Most people now regard a college education as a "questionable investment."[3] College enrollment fell by 1.2 million between 2019 and 2022.[4] And the population of college-age Americans will soon plunge.[5]

Those problems are real, but they lay beyond your control. By contrast, missed opportunities are something you can address. In fact, most institutions need to address them.

This playbook shows you the most effective actions your institution can take right now to level up your enrollment.

Above all, the evidence points to two keys to maximizing your recruiting:

1 Leveraging data.

2 Centering your marketing efforts on students at every step of their journey.

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Eliminate the guesswork

Burnout and staff shortages have hit admissions and marketing teams hard. The "Chronicle of Higher Education" describes "a maxed-out profession on the edge of a crisis."[6]

Overworked and spread thin, these departments face intense pressure to meet often-unrealistic goals. In 2019 — before the pandemic — six in 10 colleges failed to reach their enrollment targets.[7] Now the stakes have become higher. In the words of the Deloitte Center for Higher Education Excellence, "For colleges and universities on the brink of survival, missing their [enrollment and net tuition revenue] targets, even slightly, could result in permanent closure."[8]

In 2023, the education research firm EAB surveyed higher ed leaders on enrollment. An EAB representative summarized the findings: "Everyone said they felt they were behind and that they didn't have the strategy or resources to get there."[9]

One reason for the lack of strategy: Many recruiting teams don't have access to reliable data in real time.

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Michael Doran has experienced this problem firsthand. He has worked in high-level roles in enrollment and admissions, most recently as director of enrollment operations at Ursuline College in Pepper Pike, Ohio. "When you don't have enough staff or resources," he says, "it's easy to have some data in your CRM, other data in Google Analytics and so on. Not everyone will be able to access and leverage all the data."

Doran now serves as a CRM implementation specialist for Akero Labs, a company that helps schools identify and connect with the right students. He gives another reason why institutions have siloed data: "Enrollment and admissions are focused on applications and deposits, which they typically track through the school's CRM. Meanwhile, marketing has its own set of metrics specific to social media platforms or the institution's website. No one can track how marketing efforts translate down the line to applications and enrollments."

Doran sums up the problem: "If you don't have a plan to bring all your data together into one central location, you can't make informed decisions about strategy or tactics. You have to rely on guesswork."

Eliminating that guesswork should be the top priority for any institution. The key is to create a data-driven strategy centered on the needs of the students the institution targets.

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CRM Implementation Strategist, Akero Labs

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Why data is crucial

Many schools take a scattershot approach to recruiting and enrollment. With their data siloed, they can't dig into which approaches resonate most with students and which don't.

Being able to access good data quickly is essential, says Dr. Joe Sallustio, senior vice president and chief experience officer at Lindenwood University in St. Charles, Missouri. With more than two decades of experience in higher ed marketing, enrollment and student services, Sallustio co-wrote the book "Commencement: The Beginning of a New Era in Higher Education." "If you're lucky," he says, "you'll have integrations linking up data from your CRM and from Google Analytics. But are these real-time integrations? And what happens once data moves into the SIS [student information system]? Can you track in a single report how much you spent on leads all the way through to graduation — how many withdrawals, drops and graduates you had? Typically the answer is no."

An institution that uses data well can avoid setting unrealistic enrollment targets in the first place. As EAB notes, "Establishing clear enrollment goals requires a deep understanding of your institution's internal data, market data and resource requirements and limitations."[10]

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Once your institution has set targets, a data-driven approach allows admissions and enrollment to maximize their time and spending. "There are so many places where a student can engage with your institution online," says Doran. "Data lets you determine which ones get you the most students who are the best fit for your school. Then you can invest in what's working best."

Data allows you to track enrollment efforts on both the micro and macro level. "On the granular level," Doran explains, "you can see exactly how forms or landing pages or email nurture campaigns are performing." Whenever Doran speaks at conferences or with new clients, he asks the following question: "Do you know what your form abandonment rates are?" Most of the time the answer is no, he adds.

At the macro level, data helps institutions answer such questions as: "How many dollars are you spending to bring in one applicant?" Many schools, Doran says, can't answer that question.

5 questions your institution should be able to answer

1 Do you know your form abandonment rates?

2 Do you know where the biggest bottlenecks on your forms are?

3 Do you use tools for conversion rate optimization?

4 Do you measure the success of digital marketing campaigns beyond clicks and impressions?

5 Do you know your cost per acquisition — how many dollars you spend to land one enrollment?

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The power of a student-centered approach

One point can't be emphasized enough: To attract and enroll students, higher ed institutions must focus on the needs of the students they serve.

The current generation of students expects — even demands — to get their information online. Going directly to college websites is, by far, high school students' No. 1 method for researching schools.[11] "If your institution's website isn't optimized to service prospective students, you'll lose them at this crucial touchpoint," Doran says.

You'll also gain a recruiting advantage by personalizing your communications. Only 15% of high school juniors say the information they receive from colleges is personalized and relevant to their interests. But 84% of the students who have received relevant communications say the messaging made them more interested in that institution.[12]

Of course, to personalize your communications, you need to understand the students you're addressing. That requires defining the attributes of your ideal student and understanding how your institution serves that student. Nearly a quarter of high school students say every college looks and sounds the same.[13] By narrowing your focus and serving a particular cohort of students, your institution will stand out.

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Even simple personalizations help. Doran points to an Akero Labs client that tweaked a landing page so the prospect's name appeared within the copy. That one change massively improved the page's conversion rate, he says.

Dr. Sallustio has seen the impacts of personalization firsthand. In fall 2022, Lindenwood increased overall enrollment by 9% and first-time freshmen by 18% over the previous year. A commitment to putting students' needs first played a big part in these gains, he says.

One small shift that contributed to the increase in enrollment was overhauling Lindenwood's single application for both residential students and applicants to online programs. "We were taking our adult students and putting them through a lengthy application that asked them for all this information our university didn't even need," Sallustio explains. "So we created a separate application tailored to online students."
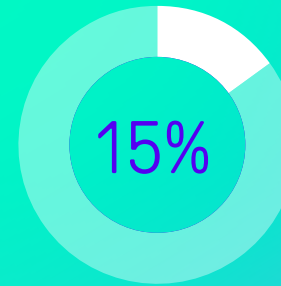
15% of high school juniors receive personalized communications from colleges

BUT
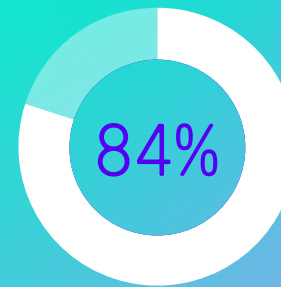
84% of those who receive personalized communications say it makes them more interested in that college

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Quick wins

The idea of overhauling your school's recruiting approach may seem daunting. But in fact, focusing on data and on your ideal student can yield quick wins for your institution.

Doran gives four examples:

1 **Use data to set priorities**

Look at your digital engagement platforms. Which emails do your students engage with most? Which SMS messages? Which pages on your website? Which social media ads? And which landing pages have the highest conversion rates? When you have identified the top performers, determine how to extend their reach and engage more students.

Next, take key elements of those top performers and incorporate them into other content. "Say a particular call-to-action button works well on a landing page," Doran explains. "What if you used it in an Instagram ad? Data lets you maximize your successes."

2 **Identify new markets and underleveraged resources**

Data can help you identify and understand the students your school should be reaching. "Our clients use Google Analytics tools for insights on students," Doran says. "What pages are students going to most? What pages do they spend the most time on? What leads are people coming from? You might notice that you have markets you didn't have before or that programs you've recently added attract a certain type of student."

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3 Find and fix bottlenecks

Do critical pages on your institution's website have high bounce rates? How well are your landing pages and forms converting?

There's a reason Doran constantly asks about form abandonment rates. Even small tweaks to a form can ramp up performance. One Akero Labs client changed the wording and placement of the nationality field in their form. This one change led to a jump in the conversion rate of 6%.

"We do a semiannual study where we take all the inquiry forms across all of Akero Labs' clients and identify the No. 1 bottleneck question," says Doran. "Two of the biggest are mobile number and date of birth. Lots of students abandon forms if these fields are required. Akero Labs' data shows that by getting rid of those two bottlenecks, we can increase inquiries by 300%. That's massive."

Of course schools want that information, but Doran notes that there are better ways to gather it than requiring it on an initial form. For example, Akero Labs' data shows that 89% of students will fill out a second part to a form. That follow-up part gives your school the opportunity to collect more qualifying information about students.

4 Focus on conversion rate optimization

Conversion rate optimization becomes crucial once you have identified poorly performing web pages, forms, ads and emails.

You don't need a big budget to optimize either. "There are free tools that show you where students' eyes are drawn on a webpage," says Doran. "Use those insights to see where there are distractions to get rid of, images to change and so on. We've consistently found that people are drawn to faces. So just swapping in a new image can improve a page's performance."

Then test, test and test again. "A/B testing is your best friend when it comes to quick wins," Doran concludes.

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What success looks like: the power of conversion rate optimization

Fast facts from higher ed institutions that partner with Akero Labs:

66%
How much conversion rates increase when schools use a dedicated landing page instead of a standard web page

240%
How much one institution raised its inquiry volume by switching from stock images to real photos of its students

300%
How much inquiry volume can increase from removing the most common bottlenecks on forms

110%
How much one school increased its conversion-to-application rate through conversion rate optimization

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How starting small leads to big results

Doran and Sallustio know all too well how overwhelming it can be to boost enrollment in a challenging environment. That's why they both stress the importance of starting small. Even little changes can make a big difference for your institution.

"A lot of Akero Labs' clients come to us because they don't know where to start," says Doran. "My colleagues and I all worked as enrollment professionals. We know how stressful it can be. But you don't need to overhaul everything all at once. Start small. Find what's working well and build from there."

When it comes to serving students' needs, Sallustio advises admissions and enrollment leaders to ask themselves some basic questions:

- "How long does it take to fill out your school's application? How long should it take?"

- Similarly: "How long does it take for a student to hear from admissions once they apply to your school?"

- If you find out these processes take longer than they should, the next question is: "How do you get the response times down without interrupting your operations? How can you make the student experience better?"

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Doran emphasizes the student-centered approach as well. "Data is such a powerful tool, but at the end of the day, enrollment is about relationships," he says. "Data gives you insights on the best possible way to meet your ideal students and facilitate those relationships. That's the most important thing."

When you get your data right and focus on students, your institution will thrive, no matter the external forces threatening higher education.

Eliminate Enrollment Guesswork

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The state of higher education enrollment is more complex than we realize

A 15% decline in enrollment is forecast for the mid-2020s, building pressure on institutions to secure prospective students while meeting financial targets. Guesswork and estimations won't cut it anymore, as higher education organizations need access to real-time data insights, technologies and best practices. But time, budget and siloes are preventing this vital information from being unlocked.

Enter Akero Labs. Akero Labs is the student conversion platform built by, and for, higher education marketing and admissions teams:

- We seamlessly connect your digital marketing spend to your enrollment outcomes, helping you focus more of your time and budget in the right places across your recruitment funnel.

- Reduce the cost of acquisition by 50% with Connect by getting complete clarity on your recruitment funnel and bottlenecks.

- Convert can boost inquiry and conversion rates by up to 500% with class-leading landing pages, online forms and email nurture sequences.

- Our CRO manage service provides best practices and guidance to ensure you get the most out of your marketing and enrollment strategies.

- Akero Labs is vendor-agnostic and integrates with any system you're currently using — including Slate, Salesforce and all digital advertising channels — to break down your data silos.

Akero Labs unlocks your data to help you better understand, connect with and convert potential students.

Learn More

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