

 LEADING STRATEGIES

Graduate Online Recruitment and Retention

By Melissa Cruz

History, tradition, academic rigor, and personal attention: these words are found throughout the marketing materials and online descriptions of traditional, in-person graduate programs. But for universities seeking to expand their revenue base, online graduate programs are one option that can be readily implemented. Research shows that by fall 2012, one in four higher education students was enrolled in an online course (Ginder 2014). Finding the marketplace more saturated given an increase in competition that was, in turn, the result of expanded online options (Smith 2016), one university wanted to differentiate itself by creating online programs that were as similar as possible to the in-person programs it already offered. One impetus behind this strategy was to combat the negative perception of online learning, specifically at the graduate level (Ballard 2018). Students, employers, and academic leaders often perceive online learning as inferior to traditional face-to-face instruction. As recently as 2012, 25 percent of academic leaders considered online instruction to be inferior to in-person instruction (Allen and Seaman 2014). In addition to creating an online graduate program, the college implemented a mandatory three-part training—training that is not common at most universities (Freitas and Gold 2015). The training introduces faculty to the online learning platform the college uses to interact with students; teaches strategies for virtual synchronous learning; and disseminates best practices for hy-

brid and online instruction. This training is mandatory for all faculty who teach online courses and is touted in the institution's marketing of its graduate programs.

Adaptation and change are critical to the success of any enrollment management team (Ingersoll and Ingersoll 2012). Student success undergirds the health of a university, which is also related to the ability of the enrollment management team to adapt to new challenges. According to Ingersoll and Ingersoll (2012), three characteristics describe the success of a university: creativity, innovation, and collaboration. The creative environment of the online graduate program delivery and the innovative way in which students interact with instructors are byproducts of the collaboration of the enrollment management team.

Background

Upon the completion of one full year of recruitment and enrollment of students to two online graduate programs, one new to the college and the other having transitioned from fully in person to fully online, a significant decrease was noted in the retention of the students in the program that had recently transitioned from in person to online. In its review of annual retention and recruitment strategies, enrollment management identified the lack of in-person contact with the online students as limiting the effectiveness of previously utilized instructional methods.

Referrals are an effective way to build the top of the graduate recruitment funnel (Hanover Research 2014). Online instruction is a gateway for new contact and instructional delivery methods (Rogers-Shaw, Carr-Chellman, and Choi 2018), but traditional recruitment methods such as classroom visits and personalized on-campus events are not available to online students. (These opportunities were utilized previously to aid the retention of and to elicit referrals from enrolled students.) Welcome Back Week, a series of events at each of the university's locations, was designed to facilitate direct interactions with enrolled students. Students were asked specifically for referrals. These events also fostered a sense of community among the graduate students, thereby aiding retention. Classroom visits also fostered interaction with enrolled students and the solicitation of referrals. Once the degree programs were online, this direct interaction was no longer possible. During the initial launch of all online programs, enrollment management was instructed to carefully monitor the programs' activities, especially in light of their physical presence policies.

The graduate enrollment management director decided to list the challenges related to recruitment and retention of online students and to work to address those challenges in the upcoming strategic plan. Several enrolled students were surveyed regarding their satisfaction with the admission and enrollment process as compared to their expectations of an online graduate program. Readings on students' needs for cognitive and emotional support (Moallem 2015) and for active participation (Marks 2016) were reviewed as the director worked to identify short- and long-term actionable items to increase retention and inquiry development. Sanga (2017) noted the need for the meticulous development of online programs; this should extend to the recruitment and retention of online graduate students.

Defining "Online"

Careful consideration was given to *physical presence*. Requirements were reviewed using the National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements' (NC-SARA) description. The program was committed to

upholding the physical presence vs. distance learning uniform standard and to maintaining the institution's SARA designation.

Consideration was given to the following areas, as noted by SARA:

- Requiring students to meet physically in one location for instructional purposes as a requirement of the program; and
- Requiring students to be physically present for student services (NCSARA 2018).

Initiatives were extremely attentive to the notification, expectations, and involvement of current students and applicants. Given the comparative detachment of online students, communication must be clear and not confusing (Smith 2016). This is especially important in regard to mandatory participation. For example, if an in-person event were advertised as either mandatory or an element of the online program, it would disqualify the program from online classification. Faculty carefully considered each of the programs to determine if specific accreditation bodies advised online, hybrid, or in-person delivery format as essential to the learning process of the program or flexible so as to be offered in an online format.

Challenges Identified

Three of the main challenges identified when reviewing the prior year's recruitment and retention efforts included:

- Multi-matrixed recruitment strategies:
 - ★ Balancing in-person and online program recruitment strategies
 - ★ Understanding online students' interaction preferences
- Ensuring the explanation and expectation of instruction delivery method as
 - ★ Synchronous; or
 - ★ Asynchronous
- Lack of sense of community among online students
 - ★ within a program
 - ★ with students in other programs

Challenges Detailed and Actions Taken

Multi-Matrixed Recruitment Strategies

The director of one college within the university was given responsibility for recruitment and retention to the following graduate programs (programs are delivered in the traditional in-person class format unless noted):

- Doctor of philosophy: counselor education and supervision
- Master of science:
 - ★ Clinical mental health
 - ★ Rehabilitation counseling
 - ★ School counseling
 - ★ Human services
 - ★ Organizational leadership (hybrid)
 - ★ Criminal justice and public safety leadership (online)
 - ★ Health informatics (online)
- Graduate certificate: health Informatics (online)

In addition to the simultaneous recruitment of in-person and online students for graduate programs, the diversity of these programs is notable for the multitude of sources of recruitment. As Ingersoll and Ingersoll (2012) note, flexibility is key. This particular college heavily involves enrollment management when new programs are being considered (*e.g.*, health informatics) and when in-person programs are converted to online programs (*e.g.*, criminal justice and public safety). Enrollment management's involvement does lead to collaboration, but lessons can still be learned when transitioning from recruitment for all in-person programs to that for a mix of in-person, hybrid, and online programs.

Initial recruitment plans for online students were conducted in parallel to the in-person programs. As Smith (2016) highlighted, campus visits and facilities offerings were highlighted for the in-person programs, whereas convenience and technology were highlighted for the online programs. Expectations of enrolled students from across the globe and from every SARA-approved state dominated the planning conversations for the recruitment of online students. Plans included:

- *Increase digital advertising spend:* This proved fruitful in the long run. However, the saturated online advertising market far outpriced the digital advertising funding allotted for the programs at this small university. Visions of wide virtual nets were not attainable. Advertising was limited to the greater metro area in which faculty were physically located. The most efficient use of resources was anticipated to be the same metro area where the most employment opportunities would exist.
- *Launch of new texting platform:* This platform was successful in enhancing the recruitment and retention of non-traditional students; it was anticipated that success would also result at the graduate level. This launch resulted in increased communication with online compared to in-person graduate students. (However, the majority still preferred to converse via phone.) Texting did increase the response rate of enrolled students in the retention communication campaigns.
- *Online information sessions:* WebEx was the platform used to conduct information sessions for the online programs. PowerPoint presentations designed by the marketing and communications department were used to guide the discussion, and one enrollment management director and one faculty member were logged in to the session to facilitate the discussion and answer questions. The format was identical to that of the in-person session. Advertising directed potential students to the date; communication plans included invitations to inquirers and applicants who had not attended a session, and phone-call follow-ups from the RSVP were also conducted.

Initially Eventbrite and Constant Contact were used to facilitate the communication reminders for the event. ([Eventbrite](#) is an online event management platform that includes communication plans; [Constant Contact](#) is e-mail marketing software.) However, in the final months of the first year of recruitment, the events module was activated for the Customer Relationship Management (CRM) System; Hobson's Radius increased RSVP and show rates for the webinars. New rules had to

be established, including muting all participants except the enrollment management director and faculty member and disabling participants' ability to share video.

Two important lessons were learned while tracking attendance in these virtual information sessions:

- Not all online students want to interact in a virtual setting.
- The in-person information session cannot be fully replicated online.

Just because certain students are about to enroll in an online program does not mean that they want to start the admissions process virtually as well. To increase interaction with webinar participants, notes from previous sessions were utilized and slides were edited to include prompts based on common questions. The chat feature was also enabled so webinar participants could submit questions to the group or privately to the enrollment management director. This increased the number of questions as students felt more comfortable typing rather than asking them. It was clear that many students were viewing the webinar from their workspaces and were unwilling to ask questions and disturb their co-workers.

Even though the webinars were facilitated by a seasoned enrollment management director, it quickly became apparent that practice was necessary. The changes in pace, natural interactions, and visual cues that were useful in person were absent online. This inspired the addition of questions to the RSVP form to learn more about participants. After several practice sessions, the faculty released the enrollment management team (one director and one enrollment associate) to conduct the virtual sessions without their participation. (Though it was ideal to have them participate, that ceased to be the norm.)

There was a dissimilarity between the two online programs and applicants' preference as it pertained to method of communication, interaction with enrollment management, and time of day: One online information session had consistently poor "show" rates (less than 25 percent) and low overall RSVP numbers compared to the other program, which had greater than a 60 percent

show rate and high numbers of RSVPs. Sessions were offered in the morning, midday, and after normal business hours. The one with normally high show rates was consistent across the midday and after hours; the one with poor show rates was consistent across all times.

In an effort to interact, one-on-one meetings with the director of admissions were offered to inquirers and applicants who submitted their RSVPs but did not participate in the online sessions. Once they were marked "no show," the CRM would prompt different communication plans:

- in-person meeting for 45 minutes;
- 30-minute phone call;
- 30-minute individual webinar session; and
- invitation to the next webinar.

Twenty percent of the high-show-rate program no shows signed up for one of these sessions compared to 60 percent of the low-show-rate program no shows signing up for an individual session. This clearly indicates the type of interaction the students preferred.

In an effort to be mindful of staff and faculty's time, the number of online sessions for the program with a consistent poor show rate was reduced, and in-person information sessions were added. These have a higher percentage show rate (50 percent).

Expectations of Content Delivery

To deter confusion and discontent among applicants and enrolled online students, synchronous and asynchronous expectations should be stated clearly. The majority of students in the programs work full time and thus have many conflicting priorities. As a result, they seek clarity so they can plan their time commitment to the online program and understand the course delivery format and timeframe.

All online programs combine synchronous and asynchronous delivery. Research shows that this combination, especially at the graduate level, given its more complex concepts and tasks, results in an engaged learning environment (Moallem 2015.)

Asynchronous: Often referred to as the more advantageous method for online learning (McGuire 2017),

asynchronous instruction is delivered at a non-specific time. That is, instruction is facilitated through various online communication methods that do not require participation at a specific time. Rather, students must complete the assignment or quiz or view a pre-recorded lecture, etc. within a specific timeframe (three days or one week, for example) but at their discretion.

Synchronous: Synchronous instruction brings students and professor together in a virtual, interactive setting. Studies have shown that students rate this learning method higher in terms of group cohesion, social presence of a community, and affective method of expression of opinions and emotion (Moallem 2015). Enrollment management professionals clearly communicate the parameters of synchronous instruction, specifying the day(s), time, and duration. Lack of clarity can adversely affect recruitment if expectations regarding the instructional method and timeframe are not met.

Community Among Online Students

Community building was inherent in the traditional face-to-face graduate courses. Once the program was converted to fully online, faculty and staff noted the challenge of creating community given the lack of students' physical presence in class. Previously, recruitment and retention efforts had included personalized invitations to on-campus events or casual networking in the buildings where graduate students had class (they would always talk in exchange for a t-shirt or coffee mug). E-mail and text messages invited current students to campus for activities, to join campus organizations, to access advising, to program-specific events (like Informatics Day), and to engage with student support offices prior to the next term. Yet lack of physical access to the online graduate student population was precluding traditional methods of gaining referrals as well as developing a sense of community not only within their programs, but also within the college and university.

Specific communication plans were designed for online students at all stages of the admissions and enrollment process. No reference was made to any on-campus event or feature (for example, "come take a picture with the new bear statue that was just in-

stalled!") that might be prominent in the communication plan for a traditional in-person program. Upwards of 30 percent of new inquiries in certain programs had been identified by accessing graduate students for referrals; online programs reduced that to essentially 0 percent. Moallem (2007) notes that the level of interaction between students and a university as well as the level of the students' overall engagement will result in a positive learning environment. Students' perception of the "quality of human interaction" (238) has an impact in their effort and engagement. A positive living and learning environment increases the likelihood of persistence through graduation.

Nevertheless, the physical presence designation resulted in some real constraints. The department did not want to promote any type of in-person event that might be perceived as mandatory. Some questioned whether online students would attend an in-person event; the answer proved to be yes! A quick review of the addresses of all the students enrolled in the online programs indicated that 90 percent of them lived within 25 miles of campus. A clearly worded invitation to a dinner on campus was sent to all the online students at the college. The dinner was intended to provide an opportunity for them to meet one another (students within their program, newly admitted and currently enrolled students, and students in other online programs), their professors, enrollment management personnel, and the dean of the college. Student feedback surveys indicated a high level of satisfaction—in fact, the highest satisfaction with any events from the academic year. The event will be replicated each fall and spring semester and will be expanded to also include alumni.

Given that online students did not have access to the school spirit items distributed on campus (*e.g.*, t-shirts), they were sent a packet that included a t-shirt and other branded items for them to display at work or at home. Tickets to any home game of any sport on campus were also included in online students' accept packets. (Detailed instructions on the technological expectations of online graduate students were also mailed.)

Many campus activities, guest lectures, and events are livestreamed, and many outside partners conduct

conferences and meetings on campus and grant permission to post recordings online for students to view. All of these help build community among online students.

Additional Lessons Learned

In-Person Recruitment of Online Students

As the online programs have matured, there has been an increase in the number of traditional undergraduates wanting to matriculate directly from undergraduate into online graduate programs. These students are millennials and are quick to adapt to new technology; many have taken online courses and are not hesitant to transition to a fully online program. With this trend comes the opportunity to recruit students from traditional graduate fairs. There has also been an increase in students transitioning from fully online undergraduate programs to fully online graduate programs.

Some populations—specifically, the mid-career changers in criminal justice—want the convenience of online program delivery but want the majority of their interaction with enrollment management to be in person. Given their poor show rate for online information sessions, in-person sessions were added to in-

crease inquiry and applicant development. This method has proved successful: enrollment in this program increased 100 percent from the previous fall semester.

Conclusion and Next Steps

Unique, personalized approaches and adapting to online students' desired processes can contribute to the overall success of an enrollment management team. The adage "This is the way we have always done it" does not apply in this scenario. As Ingersoll and Ingersoll (2012) note, the future of enrollment management and its sustainability rely on the ability to quickly adapt to the current environment. Clear communication is important, as are commitment to building a foundation for the success of online students and delineation of detailed expectations of students' participation.

Next steps for promoting a sense of community among online graduate students include promotion of online student organizations, online student representation in student government, and presence at alumni networking events. These will provide opportunities for online students to access and benefit from leadership positions, increase their satisfaction, and interact with graduate students in other programs.

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