CASES FROM THE FIELD

Bringing in the Class: Campus Partnerships Make It Happen

By Mateo Remsburg and Teri Clawson

With the arrival of March, admissions and enrollment leaders reach an interesting time of year as work and thoughts are focused both on yield activities to enroll the next class and also on plans for the upcoming recruitment cycle. Typical questions include: Are our enrollment numbers where we need them to be? What do we need to do to decrease summer melt? What were our wins this past year? What were our missed opportunities? And, perhaps most important, what are we going to do next year?

"Bringing in the class" is becoming an increasingly challenging task as admissions and enrollment leaders grapple with how to meet institutional and departmental enrollment goals while attending to external and internal factors that often are beyond their control. Perhaps one of the biggest external factors with which institutions have to contend is the change in the population of high school graduates. Nationally, the overall number of high school graduates is decreasing, and the demographics of those graduating are becoming more diverse as the numbers of students of color and first-generation college students increase (Bransberger and Michelau 2016). As a result, competition for students is increasing, and some institutions may have to adapt their strategies and tactics. Internal institutional factors, such as lack of open communication and siloed structures, add to the complexity of the enrollment puzzle. The current case study explores the journey that the University of Utah's Office of Admissions embarked upon over the past several years in order to strengthen campus partnerships as a means of meeting institutional enrollment goals. The study describes different approaches the Office of Admissions took to enhance its support of campus partners and their recruitment and yield efforts as well as to increase the transparency and sharing of enrollment-related information.

The Campus Context

There was a time when institutional factors included a fairly decentralized campus, vague enrollment goals of "more, better, and diverse," and flat budgets. Conversations about enrollment seemed to focus mostly on recruitment and what the Office of Admissions was doing. Not surprisingly, conversations with colleagues at other institutions revealed that many could relate to institutional factors that influence enrollment efforts. Yet over the past several years, the Office of Admissions at the University of Utah has witnessed increased interest across campus in how to positively influence enrollment, in terms of both recruitment and retention.

This new interest is a result of several changes that occurred at the institution at about the same time, including changes in leadership at the executive level; joining the PAC 12 conference (a collegiate athletic conference competing at the Division I level); and a move to performance-based budgeting. Leadership changes and joining the PAC 12 renewed the focus on certain key enrollment measures, including new student and overall enrollment as well as retention and graduation rates. An example of how this renewed focus affected the colleges and departments was the addition of performance measures in the budgeting process: College and department budgets were no longer based solely on overall enrollment, but a portion was based on the success (as measured by retention and graduation) of the students enrolled. Thus, interest increased across campus not only in identifying and enrolling more students, but also in retaining and graduating more students. Institutional processes changed—including admissions' move to a holistic approach and scholarship awards with different types and numbers available. The Office of Admissions also implemented a customer relationship management (CRM) system and a document imaging system. These two systems increased the office's ability to communicate with and share information about the students being recruited to the institution. The campus also sought to increase retention and graduation rates through the creation of new programs such as Student Success Advocates, which helps students explore and clarify their college journey, overcome academic challenges, and utilize campus resources. Slowly, parts of campus were beginning to embrace a strategic enrollment management (SEM) approach to help students access and progress through the university (and thereby increase their success) while also meeting institutional enrollment goals.

College- and department-level interest in program-specific recruitment increased, as did the Office of Admissions' efforts. As DeHaemers and Sandlin (2015) suggest, it is important for the admissions office to lead by example and share information as well as receive feedback in the partnership with key campus stakeholders. This was an opportunity for the Office of Admissions to continue sharing SEM principles of collaboration, the use of data to make strategic and tactical decisions, and its focus on student success as well as to further embed these principles into overall enrollment efforts. At the University of Utah, this was and continues to be a work in progress as entities across campus navigate a changing landscape in leadership, goals, and outcomes.

The University of Utah enrolls approximately 32,000 students, 24,000 of them undergraduates. The university comprises 18 individual colleges and many more enrichment programs, such as learning communities and scholar programs, many of which would like to enroll more students. The campus is fairly decentralized—a fact that contributed to many of the challenges the Office of Admissions encountered as it began to work more closely with campus partners. Among the key aspects of a decentralized campus that needed to be addressed were the silos that existed around campus. These hindered the sharing of data, information, resources, and ideas. It is important to note that as collaboration with campus partners increased, it became apparent that the Office of Admissions also acted as a silo and needed to change.

Not surprisingly, there was wide variation both in the extent to which silos existed across campus and in recruitment efforts within each silo. This variation typically was tied to the amount of resources campus partners had to dedicate to their own recruitment efforts. Some partners had the financial resources to hire staff to focus on recruitment and initiated some combination of their own marketing and communications, recruitment and yield programs, and travel activities targeting prospective students. Other partners did not have the resources to hire new staff or to pursue new recruitment activities. Yet they still felt a need for someone to oversee new student recruitment and added these responsibilities to existing staff members' portfolios. Conversations with campus partners made it apparent that understanding of or training in recruitment practices varied among silos. This sometimes resulted in duplication of efforts—as, for example, in sending staff to the same college fair or visiting the same high schools as admissions staff were without communicating about dates and times in order to avoid overlap. This was not an effective or efficient use of institutional resources and often was confusing to prospective students.

Another inconsistency was in the variety of different admissions processes for programs at the academic college level that were not in sync with central admissions processes. For example, some programs asked students to apply well before university admissions deadlines or sent offers of admission to the program before students had been admitted to the university. Often, programs asked students to send transcripts or other documentation they had already sent to the Office of Admissions. This, too, created confusion as some students missed institutional admission deadlines because they believed they had already sent their documentation, not realizing that they had been sent to an academic college rather than the Office of Admissions. When admissions processes were not in sync, there were instances of students being admitted to a particular college program but not to the university. These types of experiences do not endear the university to prospective students. Fortunately, there was a fairly consistent and growing desire across campus to improve or at least alleviate these types of issues as part of an effort to better serve prospective students through the application and enrollment processes.

Becoming a Better Campus Partner

The Office of Admissions took a hard look at what was being done that either helped or hindered campus partners in their recruitment efforts. As a result of this examination as well as feedback from campus partners, it was determined that a more active approach to collaboration and greater transparency were needed. The office engaged in more proactive conversations with campus partners in order to better understand their knowledge of recruitment and yield best practices, fiscal and personnel resources, and enrollment goals. Informed by this understanding, work with campus partners focused on three areas: training, consulting, and partnering.

For campus partners who wanted to start doing more with regard to recruitment but didn't really know where to begin, training was provided on topics such as recruitment and yield processes; best practices at the institutional, college, and department levels; and what was being done by the Office of Admission. The office would work closely with these partners to develop key activities and events that would enhance recruitment. Often, campus partners were already holding events but weren't focusing their outreach on prospective students. A subtle shift in focus helped these partners understand the events' potential impact on recruitment and enrollment and, with support from the Office of Admissions, helped them achieve their desired results. Some campus partners already had a foundational understanding of recruitment but needed support to develop recruitment plans for their areas. With these partners, the office took on a consulting role. More in-depth conversations focused on what the campus partner wanted to achieve in terms of new student enrollment and what resources they had available. Together, a plan focused primarily on marketing and communications efforts and recruitment or yield events was developed. Finally, for partners with established recruitment efforts in place, the office would collaborate in support of their efforts. Often this took the form of providing recruitment materials, presenting and/or tabling at events, and loading their event data into the Office of Admissions' CRM system and then providing follow-up reports on campus partners' interactions with prospective students.

Information Is Key

The sharing of information and data in a timely manner was also identified as an area for improvement. Campus partners indicated that they wanted to be informed sooner what admissions would be doing throughout the year with regard to recruitment and yield activities, markets, and targeted student populations. They also wanted information about application and enrollment numbers, particularly as it pertained to their respective programs.

Sharing information is sometimes more easily said than done. It was not that the Office of Admissions was unwilling to share information but rather that structures were not in place for doing so. For example, planning in the Office of Admissions did not happen early in the cycle, and by the time the dates of recruitment programs were shared, campus partners had little lead time to secure staffing and prepare for their roles. Providing application data was also a challenge as the Office of Admissions struggled to get data that everyone could trust and easily understand. Data from different sources that supposedly reported the same information featured different numbers. Based on feedback and challenges related to information and data sharing, the

Office of Admissions decided to focus on three aspects of information sharing: *what*, *when*, and *how* information was shared.

The first area of focus was data collection and reporting. Efforts were made to better understand why application and enrollment reports provided different numbers. In addition, attention was given to making the information easier to access and understand. Kilgore and Gage (2015) recommend that data be available in formats that can be interpreted easily, accurately, and in a timely manner:

> *Data stewards must be actively engaged in identifying data integrity issues, creating and updating data dictionaries, and developing/modifying SEM-related analytic and strategic reports. Due to the interrelatedness of the data in relational databases, none of these activities can be successful if undertaken in silos. Silos often lead to different units across the institution reporting different values for what should be the same data, because each unit is using a slightly different definition and often a different field in the database from which data is drawn.* (442)

Upon closer examination of data collection and reporting processes, it was found that the different reports were being developed within silos, and slightly different definitions were being utilized in the reports. For example, when reporting freshman application numbers, one report might include any applications that had been submitted regardless of whether an application fee had been paid whereas another might only report those for which the fee had been paid or waived. In response, attention was given to clearly defining the types of data and reports that were desired as well as identifying a single source from which data and reports could be pulled. This process initially involved enrollment management, the Office of Admissions, financial aid and scholarships, and university information technology, with other areas assisting as needed. A data warehouse was created to become the single source of data; the data became more clearly defined; and self-service reports were developed. Focus then shifted to increasing self-serve access to customizable reports that could meet the needs of a range of end users.

The next areas of focus were when and how to share data and information not only from the Office of Admissions but also among campus partners. The Office of Admissions created the Campus Recruitment Committee (CRC) to assist with information sharing. Staff and faculty who had a role or an interest in the recruitment of new students to the university met monthly during the fall and spring semesters. The CRC included representatives from admissions, financial aid and scholarships, orientation, housing, the academic colleges and departments, athletics, academic advising, and several other student affairs offices. At CRC meetings, the Office of Admissions provided updates, such as the results of recent processing milestones and recruitment events, what efforts were currently in progress, and what was planned for the future. Campus partners could also share what they were doing, provide updates, and answer questions during the CRC meeting. These meetings were also used to provide periodic training (for example, on what the enrollment funnel is, best practices for assisting students through the enrollment funnel, and best practices for marketing and communication). The CRC meetings were also used to solicit feedback from campus partners. In fact, it was at CRC meetings that members shared that they needed to know what was being done. This prompted the Office of Admissions to make a concerted effort to confirm plans much sooner than it had in the past. This not only helped campus partners in their own planning, but it also helped the Office of Admissions in getting buy-in for its own goals.

CRC meetings also provided an opportunity to better understand what types of application and enrollment data campus partners desired. Work began on developing application and enrollment dashboards that campus partners could access and from which they could pull reports for their respective programs. This provided the more timely access to information they wanted and eased the burden on the Office of Admissions to generate and share data.

The CRC also created an annual Admissions Summit held in late spring, soon after graduation. Open to campus partners, this day-long event increases the transparency of Office of Admissions operations. The schedule features multiple breakout sessions so attendees can learn about the areas that interest them most. Topics include how application files were reviewed, what marketing materials were sent to prospective students, and what admissions counselors did. This glimpse into how the office works throughout the recruitment cycle was eye-opening for partners and demystified much of the work of the Office of Admissions. For example, many departments and offices felt that the university's use of holistic review was a nebulous practice. During the summit, admissions staff shared the information collected on admission applications and the process used for evaluating applications. This transparency proved extremely beneficial as it helped campus partners understand that the office was using an intentional process to meet the university's enrollment goals. The summit also featured hands-on workshops to help campus partners learn how to improve their own recruitment and yield efforts. Finally, the summit helped partners understand their role in bringing in the class each year.

The Results

Working more in concert with campus partners is an ongoing process that strengthens and grows every year. Effort put forth by the Office of Admissions and partners has demonstrated results. Since the Office of Admissions began focusing on strengthening relationships several years ago, the number of participating campus partners, the quality of collaboration, and new student enrollment have all increased. For example, during the 2011–12 academic year, the Office of Admissions worked with seven campus partners and focused on helping them send prospective students event invitations and deadline notifications and on supporting some of their events through materials, tabling, and presentations. During the 2017–18 academic year, the office worked with 25 campus partners and helped them develop specialized communication and recruitment plans, involved them in the planning of some of the programs it hosted, and even granted access to certain functions within its CRM system. These enhanced partnerships have aided growth in several different measures of new first-year student enrollment. For example, from fall 2012 to fall 2018, the university experienced a 30 percent increase in new first-year student enrollment (3,268 to 4,256) and a 64 percent increase in the number of new first-year students of color (760 to 1,244). New students' average high school GPA increased from 3.53 to 3.63, and the average composite ACT score increased from 24.3 to 25.7 during this same time period. This would not have occurred without the collaboration of the Office of Admissions and campus partners.

Lessons Learned

Several key lessons have been learned as a result of the efforts over the past few years to enhance relationships and build partnerships across campus. The first is that strong relationships are vital and begin with constant communication with key players. Keeping individuals, departments, and offices informed of strategies, data, and expectations helped build relationships and increased the collaboration requisite to meeting common enrollment goals and achieving the institution's mission. Second, understanding campus partners' goals and mission is key to building a strategic enrollment partnership. Asking campus partners the questions identified at the beginning of this article provided a way to learn their perspectives and share those of the Office of Admissions. Do not be afraid to ask for clarification in order to gain a true understanding of what is motivating the efforts of campus partners. Understanding partners' goals helped guide the conversation about how to meet their expectations and needs. Third, be open to campus partners' ideas and suggestions, and be flexible in response to them. They know their students and have innovative suggestions that could be implemented relatively easily. Just because the Office of Admissions didn't think of them doesn't mean they lack merit. Some of our campus partners' suggestions yielded the most effective recruitment results.

Final Thoughts

Developing strong campus partnerships is a continual work in progress. Each year the Office of Admissions examines what was accomplished with existing partners and identifies new initiatives and opportunities for the next cycle. While there are many factors that impact enrollment, collaboration with campus partners can play a significant role in successfully bringing in the class each fall. Alignment of recruitment strategies and goals and data sharing are paramount to successful partnership. Direct and continuous communication about the needs of departments and the institution as a whole is needed to build plans, collaborate on best practices, and implement effective strategies for successful enrollment. Working together early and often brings the most satisfying results with the understanding that all ideas and suggestions will be considered and vetted. Ultimately, building strong campus partnerships takes time and effort; the benefits are well worth it.

References

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