

 THE RESEARCH AGENDA

Higher Education Lags in Use of Brand Management Techniques to Recruit High School Seniors

By Gary Orosy and Wendy Kilgore

AACRAO partnered with two marketing faculty members to identify how higher education institutions are marketing themselves to high school seniors and to assess whether a brand management approach is being utilized. The research also sought to identify the practices that some institutions use (if any) to achieve enrollment results that are more successful than others.

The research suggests that institutions that tie their recruitment goals to their mission experience a greater yield between admitted and enrolled students. Those that rate themselves high on their use of social media and multichannel communications have similar yield rates. Institutions that can, at a minimum, use these two aspects to manage their brands are likely to meet their recruiting goals. The research also clarifies that higher education, in general, appears to lag behind U.S. corporations (e.g., Nike, Apple, Procter & Gamble) in the use of brand management to market to prospective customers (i.e. students).

It's a tough market for students and for colleges. Prospective college students consider the admissions process stressful (College Board Advocacy and Policy Center 2011), and so do the institutions that seek to enroll not only enough students but the right mix of student characteristics to meet enrollment goals (Jaschik 2018, Kilgore 2017). U.S. government statistics indicate that in the United States in 2016, there were 4,583 Title IV

degree-granting institutions enrolling nearly 20 million college students (Snyder, de Brey, and Dillow 2019, 57). Demographic trends over the past few decades have largely indicated increases in the numbers of prospective college students (18- and 19-year-olds). However, the number of high school graduates is expected to decrease by as much as 15 percent; in all but fifteen states, competition for traditional-college-aged prospects among all



FIGURE 1 ► Brand Management Model for Recruiting High School Seniors

but the most elite institutions will be even more intense through 2032 (Grawe 2018, The Hechinger Report 2018). Further constraining institutions' ability to reach their freshman enrollment targets is the fact that on aggregate, 37.9 percent of first-year students enroll at an institution within 50 miles of home, and 53 percent enroll within 100 miles; for public four-year colleges, these percentages increase to 56.2 and 68.9 percent, respectively (Eagan, Stolzenberg, Zimmerman, Aragon, Whang Sayson and Rios-Aguilar 2017). This limits the effectiveness of seeking new student populations at greater distances. In addition, cost of attendance is an increasingly significant factor in whether applicants choose to enroll at their first-choice institution if admitted.

So how do institutions ensure that they will market themselves successfully and meet their enrollment requirements? To what extent are they implementing best marketing practices?

The current research evaluates these questions through the lens of brand management in the nonprofit sector. Brand management was pioneered by Procter and Gamble in 1931 and is now utilized by virtually all companies that manage brands and services (Figure 1) (Shulz 2012). The three guiding principles of brand management are that (1) the proposition of the benefit to the consumer must be clear; (2) the proposition must be unique; and (3) the proposition must be strong enough to attract new customers. According to Kylander and Stone (2012), "A nonprofit brand is most powerful when the organization's internal identity and external image

are aligned with each other and with its values and mission" (39). This marketing perspective is much like strategic enrollment management, where understanding the mission and culture of the institution is important when identifying and providing information to a prospective student population as a means to enroll those most likely to succeed at the institution. Distinctively in the context of higher education, brand management is a set of disciplined processes by which to identify target students, align marketing strategy with the overall mission and goals of the institution, build brand strategies, and activate plans and tactics. For the purpose of this project, the brand manager is the individual or group of individuals ultimately responsible for meeting enrollment goals. The authors sought to engage with these individuals at the institutions participating in this research.

In examining the recruitment of high school seniors to college through the brand management lens, the authors sought to learn what organizational model, processes, and policies are being utilized by the most successful college recruiting programs. The hypothesis was that institutions that utilize more brand management techniques (*e.g.*, planning, multichannel marketing, strategy linkage to institutional mission, etc.) were more successful in meeting their enrollment goals.

Methodology

Admissions officers were surveyed to determine how their institutions are organized, what methods are in use to market their programs, and to what degree mul-

tichannel and social/mobile tools are used to communicate with high school seniors. These individuals were identified as likely to be strongly associated with the high school senior marketing efforts given their position within the institution. Recipients were encouraged to forward the survey if someone else was better suited to respond. Data were analyzed to measure the extent to which institutions were utilizing marketing strategies and self-reported results.

As the survey results were collected, it became apparent that the research approach needed to be refined to focus on undergraduate and comprehensive institutions so that meaningful comparisons among institutional marketing practices could be made. To enhance the survey data set, data from the 2017 Integrated Post-secondary Education Data System (IPEDS) reporting year were appended and served as an additional proxy for institutional marketing/recruitment success. IPEDS data included total applications, total acceptances, total first-year and transfer student enrollment, and admissions test scores at the 25 and 75 percent levels. Institutions were also examined by region to determine whether any marketing patterns were evident.

The survey comprised three sections: mission and enrollment goals; marketing and recruiting efforts for high school seniors; and high school prospect needs and wants. Within the first section, respondents were asked the same type of questions that brand managers need to address in their planning process—for example, the mission of the organization and the degree to which their brand's purpose is tied to it. Brand teams also conduct environmental analyses to quantify the size of their target market, where it is located, and to what degree the brand continues to be relevant.

Next respondents were asked to describe their organizational structure, how they marketed to high school seniors, and to what degree they “owned” the budget and resources to do so. (In the world of brand management, most if not all of these elements reside with the brand.) Finally, respondents were asked whether there was a point person with overall responsibility for enrollment, as is the case for brand managers who are on point to deliver brand goals.

In the third section, questions focused on the use of modern marketing methods—namely, omnichannel communication and message integration, amount of internal and external resources to do the work, and the ways in which they go to market. The questions in this section were specific regarding the types of messaging vehicles and the extent to which the institution felt they were effective at using them.

Survey questions were refined by mapping potential responses to the business impact each would have on enrolled student numbers. In other words, each survey question had to have outcomes that were actionable on the part of the institution and that would potentially result in increases in the numbers of applications, acceptances, and enrolled students.

In addition to the quantitative survey, five phone interviews were conducted with senior enrollment management officials responsible for recruitment and related marketing activities. These structured interviews added context to the survey responses. The interviews were anonymous to allow frank and critical discussion of the current state of marketing at their institution.

Results

The final survey instrument was distributed to members of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) and the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC). Usable responses were received from 133 U.S. institutions of various sizes, types, and control—from large public institutions that enroll more than 20,000 students to private institutions that enroll fewer than 1,000 students. The data set did not include more than one response from any institution.

Analysis of the survey data was approached in two ways: First, a summary data analysis was completed related to each survey question and segmented by institutional characteristics (*e.g.*, public vs. private, size). Insights from this step were used to guide the phone interviews.

Second, correlations were calculated for key data relationships. For example, how respondents character-

ized the alignment between their institutional mission and recruiting goals was compared to the ratio of applications to admissions. This relationship might serve as a proxy for how effectively the recruiting message was supported by the organization's mission. Another relationship was to compare this same alignment to the ratio of admissions to registering students. An institution that has an appealing mission aligned with recruiting goals would potentially experience a high percentage of admitted students ultimately enrolling.

After testing the relationship between a number of variables collected through the survey and IPEDS, two factors were identified that resulted in statistically significant findings (*see* Table 1): Institutions that strongly connect their mission to their recruiting goals and those that utilize multichannel marketing technology will have an advantage. This second finding is not surprising given the digital penetration within our society; it is the way in which Millennials and Gen Xers communicate daily (Open Market 2016, Zickuhr 2011).

The following nine findings derive from analysis of the data and interviews:

Meeting enrollment goals is a challenge.

Fewer than half (46%) of respondents indicated that recruiting goals were reasonable (*see* Figure 2, on page 7). Another 44 percent said that reach goals could be accomplished with more investment. This group could be viewed as admitting their goals are not being

met by suggesting that perhaps they could meet them with more resources than are currently available. Considering that these responses are in an environment where student applicant numbers are still increasing, this finding portends that more institutions could find it difficult to meet future goals.

The perspective that reach goals might be accomplished with more investment/resources was confirmed in phone interviews: All five respondents indicated a need for additional resources to ensure that they could attain student enrollment goals. The type of investment identified in the phone interviews focused on ways to access data that would enable better student targeting; funding for tuition assistance; and more staff focused on recruiting. Slightly fewer than half (48%) indicated use of an outside resource such as marketing firms that specialized in social, digital, and website management as supplemental to their internal efforts.

Institutions have missions, but recruitment goals are not always tied to them.

Nearly all (98%) of respondents indicated that their institution has a stated mission (*see* Figure 3, on page 7). Yet there appears to be an opportunity to better align these with high school senior enrollment goals. While 48 percent of respondents acknowledged a "great deal" of alignment, the rest were less positive. Of concern is that 25 percent responded that they were aligned to a "moderate amount" or less.

TABLE 1 ► Statistically Significant Correlations

	Admissions Rate	Log of Number Applied
Perceived alignment of enrollment goals with mission	-0.19 ^a	0.27 ^b
Perceived effectiveness of cohesive identity, listens and engages in social conversation, and tracks applicant interactions (composite)	-0.09	0.23 ^b
Existence of multi-channel calendaring and messaging, persona development, integrated messaging, electronic messaging, customer service electronically (composite)	-0.09	0.23 ^a

^a 0.05

^b 0.01

In a best practice setting, as at a high-performing brand management organization, missions set the purpose for the brand, and all brand and organizational

goals support their realization. At many of the institutions surveyed, there is an opportunity to bring mission

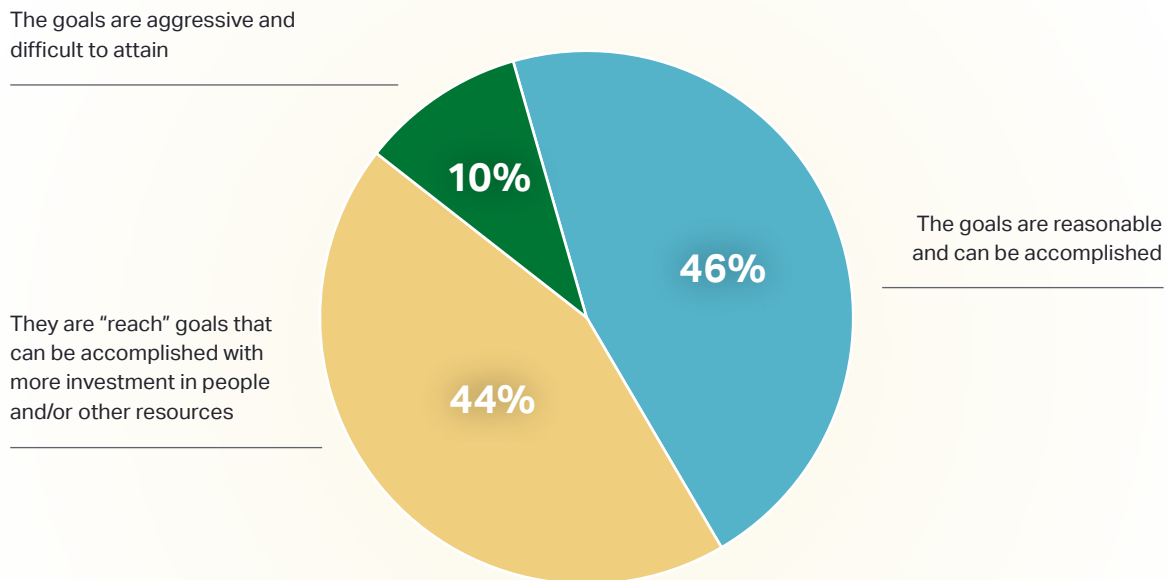


FIGURE 2 ➤ Ratings of Institutions' Enrollment Goals, by Percentage

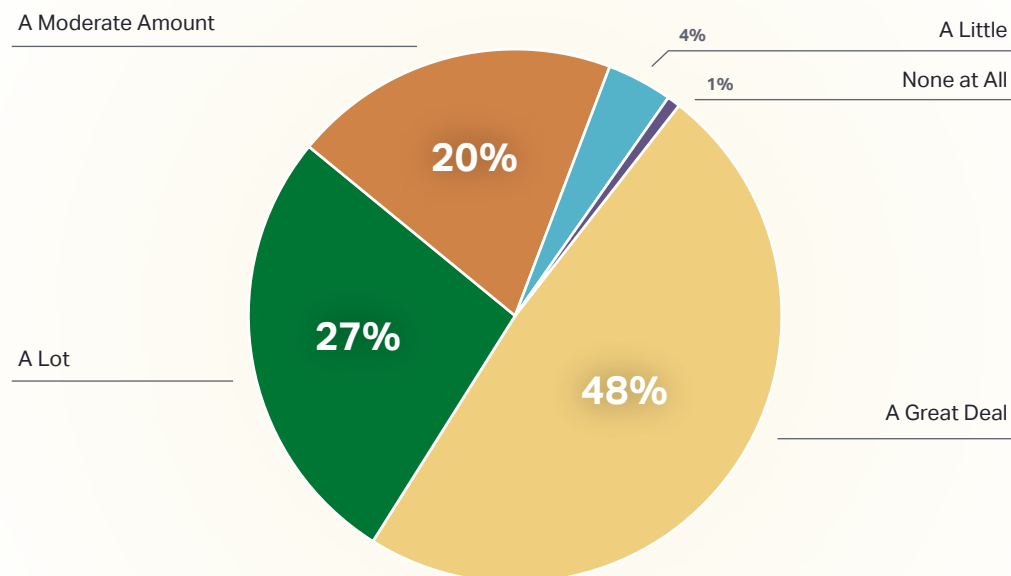


FIGURE 3 ➤ Perceived Degree of Alignment Between Enrollment Goals and Mission

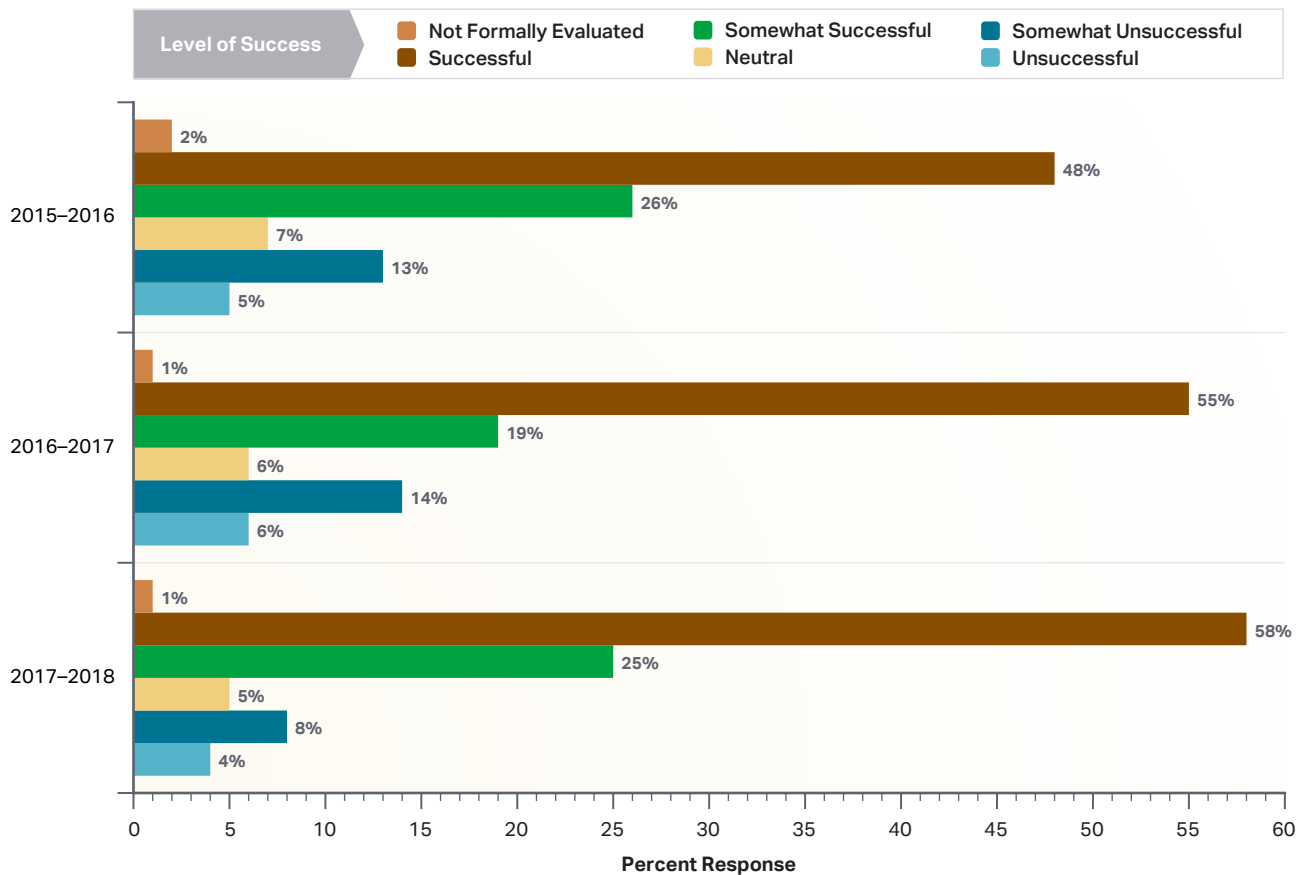


FIGURE 4 ▶ Institution's Level of Success at Meeting Enrollment Goals for the Last Three Academic Years

and recruitment goals together in a way that will better support enrollment.

During interviews, a number of respondents indicated that they were encouraging their institutions to review their mission in an effort to align it with current student needs. In their view, academic leadership has an interest in continuing to offer the same curriculum already in place (one that may have existed for many years without change), making it difficult to attract today's high school seniors. When academic focus is not synchronized with student interest, college recruiting teams find it difficult to "bring in the numbers" (see Figure 4).

Institutions are not analyzing their markets to inform their marketing approaches.

One of the most important starting points in marketing strategy is to evaluate the marketplace. Survey results

indicate that fewer than half of institutions analyze the marketplace to inform their approach to recruitment (see Figure 5, on page 9). Yet such analysis is fundamental to understanding the size, location, and quality of prospective high school seniors relative to a given institution. For example, in some areas of the country, local populations are decreasing, making it necessary to recruit beyond the primary geographic area.

The degree to which recruiting leads marketing to high school seniors is important, but many institutions fail to address this fact.

The brand management model stipulates that the brand team lead all key marketing initiatives that can impact the brand's top and bottom lines (i.e. applications and enrollment). When asked if the recruiting team had involvement at some level, respondents indicated that

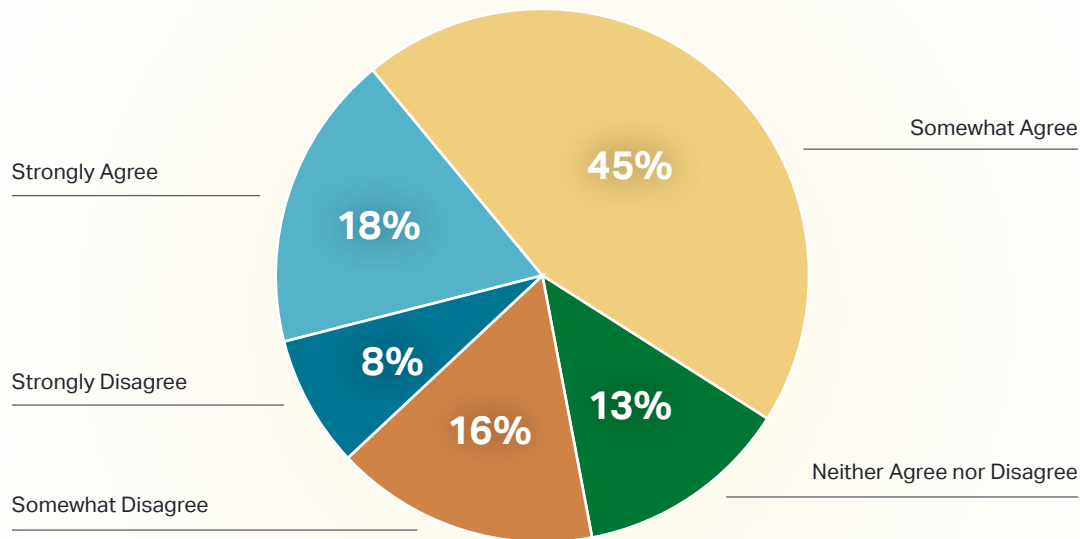


FIGURE 5 ➤ Level of Agreement with “Our institution’s high school senior enrollment goals are based upon analysis of the marketplace”

many areas fall under the recruiting team’s direct responsibility or are ones in which they either participate or inform decisions (see Figure 6, on page 10). On the other hand, there are marketing efforts that are critical to recruiting success where the recruiting team only influences or informs the needs. In such cases, it is possible that institutional and recruitment messages may be inconsistent or that student message targeting may not be effective.

It is important that recruitment have direct responsibility for every aspect of marketing to high school seniors that impacts its ability to reach its enrollment goals, both in terms of number of students and the desired mix of student characteristics. Based upon survey responses, it is clear that there are opportunities for recruitment to take a leadership role in more areas than it currently views as its responsibility. At a minimum, these include target market identification, content creation, and evaluating marketing and recruitment effectiveness. It could be argued that these aspects of recruitment marketing could be centralized within the recruiting team to ensure greater effectiveness.

Sometimes one and sometimes many are responsible for meeting enrollment goals.

Brand management best practices place responsibility for meeting goals in the hands of the brand manager and the brand team. In the corporate world, a brand team comprises a brand manager who is responsible for all aspects of marketing the brand. Also on the team are a number of associate brand managers, each typically having specific responsibilities such as consumer insights, promotional planning and activation, product development and innovation, and package design. Large brand businesses also employ brand assistants (sometimes called brand analysts) who handle budget planning and management, data integration and analytics, trade promotion management, and other assignments. Ultimately, each brand reports to a marketing category director and, in the case of billion-dollar brands, to the chief marketing officer.

Although 59 percent of respondents reported that a team is responsible for meeting enrollment goals, more than a third place responsibility for enrollment on just one individual (see Figure 7, on page 11) and thus lag

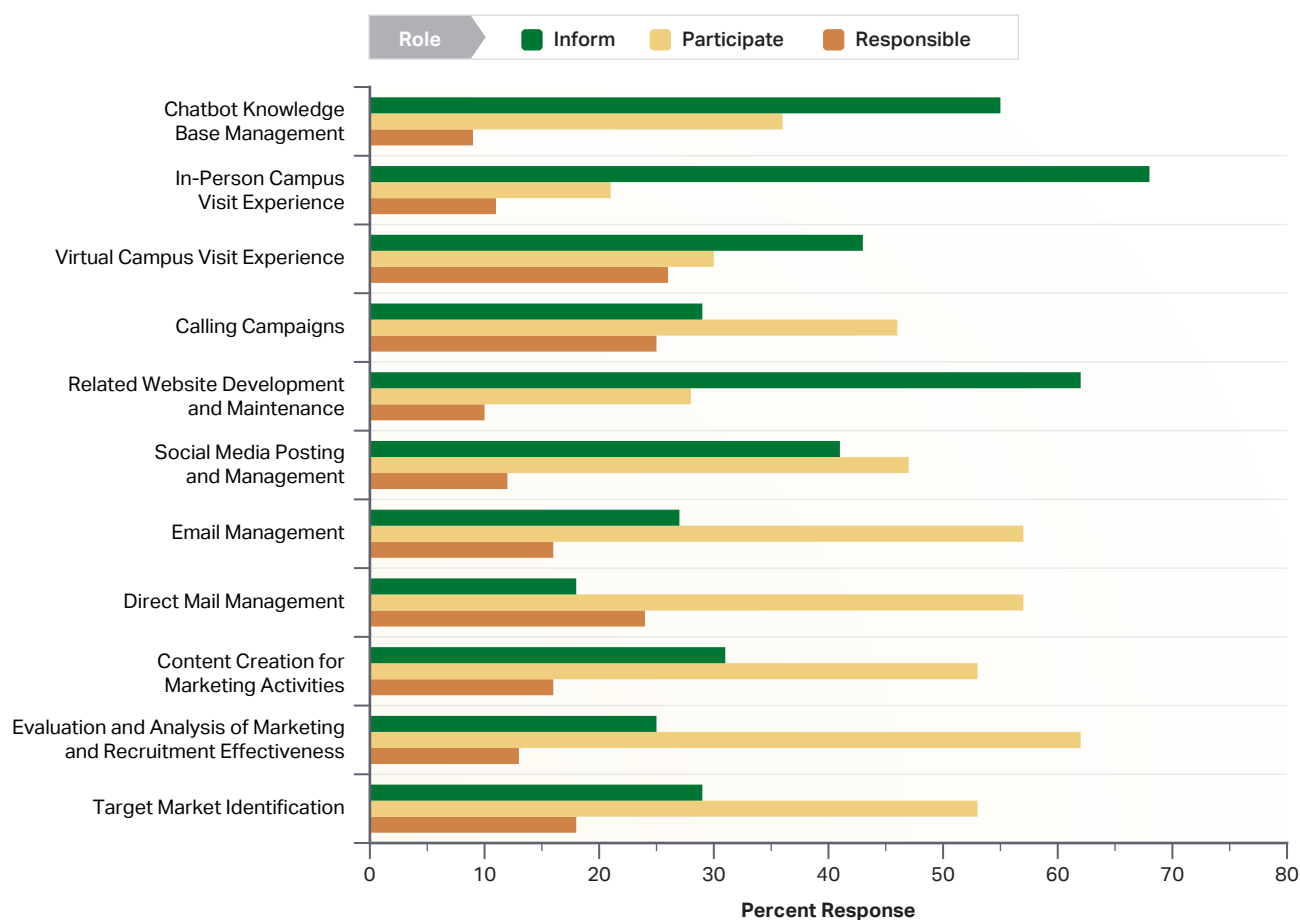


FIGURE 6 ➤ External Staff Level of Engagement in High School Senior Recruiting/Marketing Related Functions

Responsible: not a delegated function. **Participate:** Influence decisions related to that function.
Inform: relate information about a function but have no decision-making influence or authority.

behind best practice in brand management. In addition, as noted previously, the recruiting team, while responsible for much of what drives enrollment, may need an expanded role in marketing, in particular.

Institutions perceive their peers as better than they are at using multi-channel marketing.

Today's high school seniors are, for the most part, technologically connected to the world around them. According to a recent Pew report, 95 percent of teens in the United States have access to a smart phone, and 45 percent say they are online "almost constantly" (Anderson and

Jiang 2018). Everything revolves around mobile, Internet, and social media. To reach these prospective students, institutions must be effective at targeting prospects in each modality and must have a consistent message and presence across all of them. When asked how their own institution's marketing in these channels compared to peers' (competition in many cases), responses varied. Large percentages of respondents did not feel good about their level of competition. In a world of hyper-competition for applicants, "average" compared to peers could be regarded as a non-starter. As Figure 8 (on page 12) shows, there is considerable room for improvement.

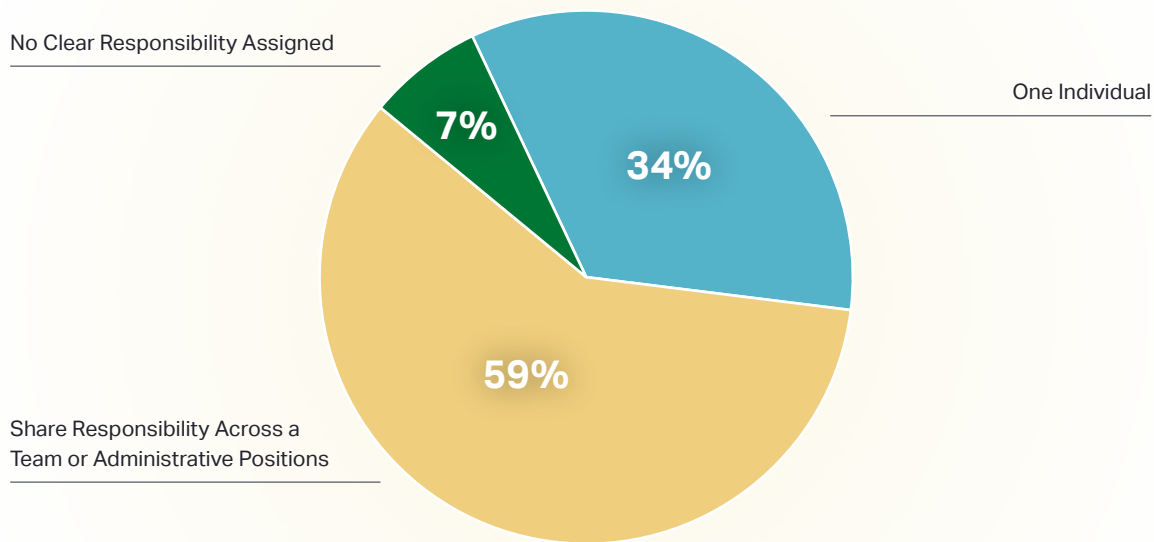


FIGURE 7 ➤ Responsibility for Meeting High School Senior Enrollment Goals

Institutions are comfortable with their level of brand cohesiveness.

Many survey respondents feel that their institutions convey a consistent message across all communication vehicles, but here again, centralizing message creation and delivery for high school seniors could result in a more effective message to prospects (see Figure 9, on page 13). Top brand managers would not accept a “somewhat agree” position for long and would decidedly have improvement goals within their MBOS.

Institutions could improve their use of omnichannel marketing.

Developing excellence around omnichannel marketing could very well make a difference with potential recruits. The ability to work effectively in all channels may be key to attracting tech-savvy prospects: it communicates that the institution is good at technology and thus enhances perceptions of its relevance. Respondents were less than confident about their ability to serve prospects through omnichannel marketing (see Figure 10, on page 14). A study of more than 90,000 students found that “more than 70 percent of all students

name their final selection criteria as one of these six factors: affordability, availability of desired program, reputation/academic quality, career outcomes/job opportunities for graduates, value of education for cost of attending, and feeling of fit (Reid 2017). Institutions need to be able to address these factors utilizing an omnichannel approach to ensure that prospects get the information they need and want in order to make a decision about enrollment.

Institutions are extending marketing and recruitment efforts beyond areas supported by enrollment data.

Another driver of the need for an effective multichannel strategy has to do with the geography where institutions need to broadcast their messages in order to attract applicants (see Figure 11, on page 15). As survey responses indicate, this outreach can extend beyond the locale in which an institution is located. Traditional methods such as mailed catalogs and applications require too much time and expense compared to digital communications. Given the shift to a no-growth environment, questions that institutions need to ad-

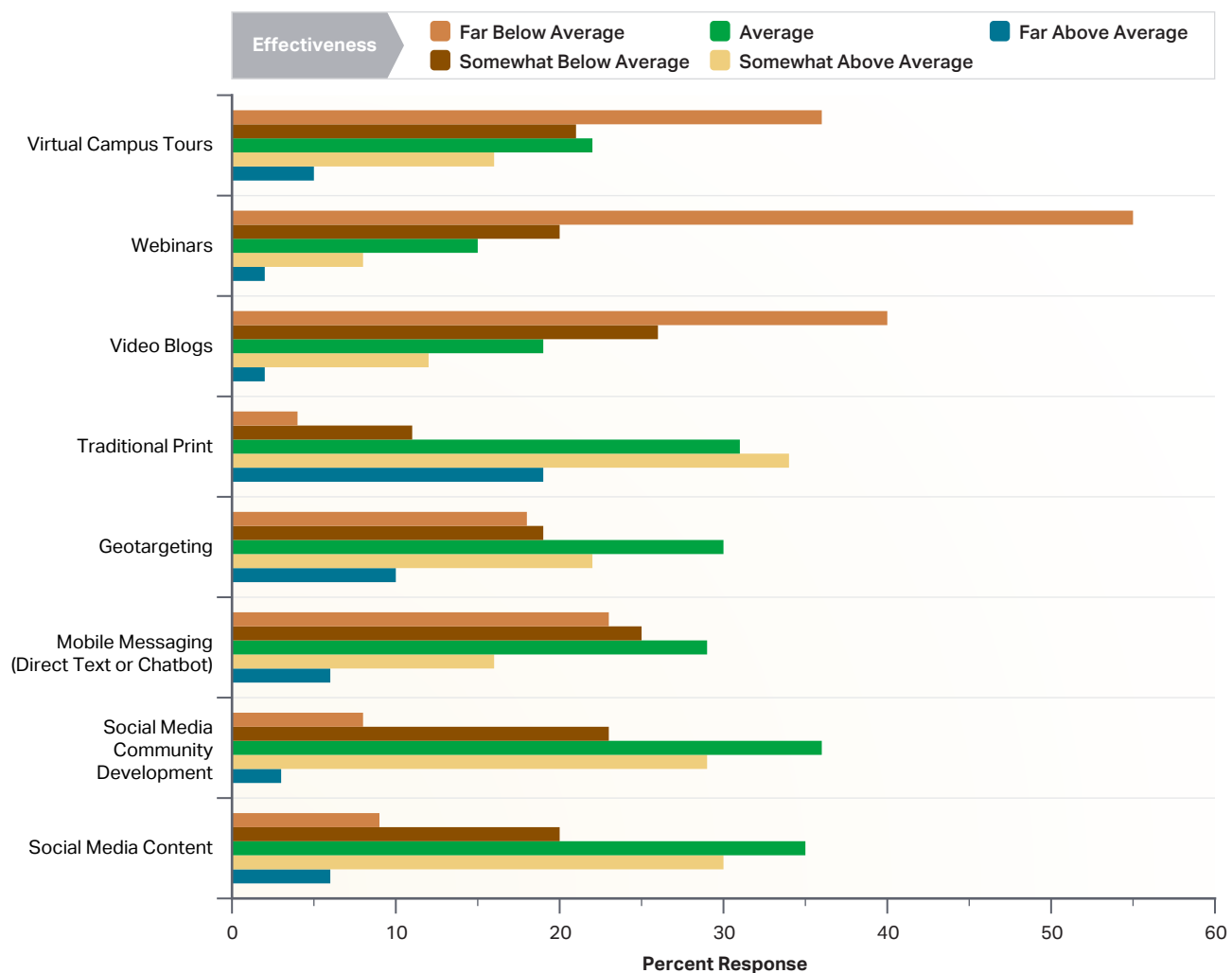


FIGURE 8 ➤ Effectiveness of Multi-Channel Marketing Platforms Compared to Peer Institutions

dress include “how far outward will we have to reach in the future, and how do we counter the enrollment pattern that students most often select an institution near home?”

Not only is it important to recruit effectively within the United States, but multiple languages should be utilized in digital, mobile, and social media communications in order to reach growing international markets. This places responsibility on an institution’s marketing team to identify target countries and develop strategies and plans for attracting the best students.

Summary

Whereas commercial brand management has existed for decades, higher education appears to lag behind corporate America. The best-case scenario was found to be at higher education institutions where there is a high degree of collaboration between institutional branding and messaging with high school senior recruiting. In other situations, however, recruitment executives found themselves separate and distinct from institutional marketing.

In interviews, these executives noted a lack of consistency that resulted in a weaker and less effective

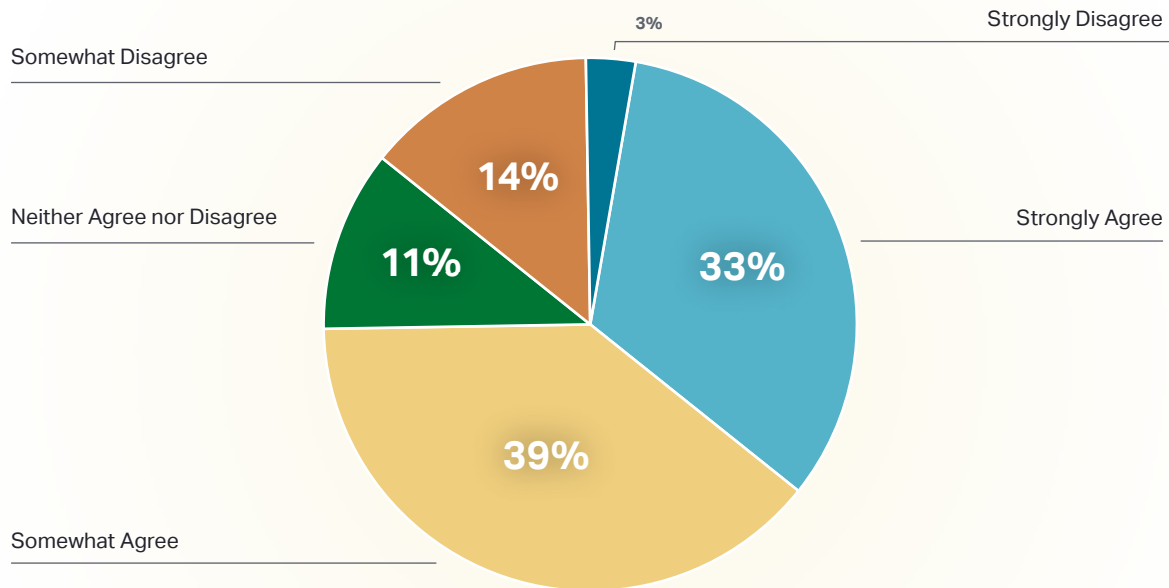


FIGURE 9 ➤ Level of Agreement with “Our institution conveys a cohesive identity and brand across multiple channels”

message for high school senior prospects. Bringing “recruitment brand marketing” under one university brand manager might support better application results, resulting in a larger pool of high-performing students.

Key Drivers of Recruitment Success

Three performance-based relationships were evident among the responses. Three significant variables seem to drive enrollment results. Specifically, these were correlations between response variables and the number of applicants to four-year programs. The correlations¹ showed:

- Those institutions that have close alignment between enrollment goals and institutional mission had higher numbers of applicants (correlation 0.267).
- Those institutions with high levels of a combined variable inclusive of “cohesive identity,” “listen and engage in social conversation,” and “tracks applicant interactions” had higher applicant numbers (correlation 0.227).

- Those institutions with high levels of performance in “multi-channel calendaring and messaging,” “persona development,” “integrated messaging,” “electronic messaging,” and “customer service electronically” also had high applicant numbers (correlation 0.226).

Correlations within the study were meaningful at the 95% level of confidence. The three major correlations, each explaining about a quarter of the effect, were as follows:

- When an institution’s mission is tied to recruiting goals, the result is more applications to that institution.
- More students apply to institutions that present a cohesive identity; listen; and track and engage students during the consideration process.
- More students apply to institutions that use effective multichannel messaging, include online calendaring and customer service, develop student personas to better relate to them, and manage their relationships with interested students electronically.

¹ Statistically significant at the 95% confidence level ($p < 0.05$)

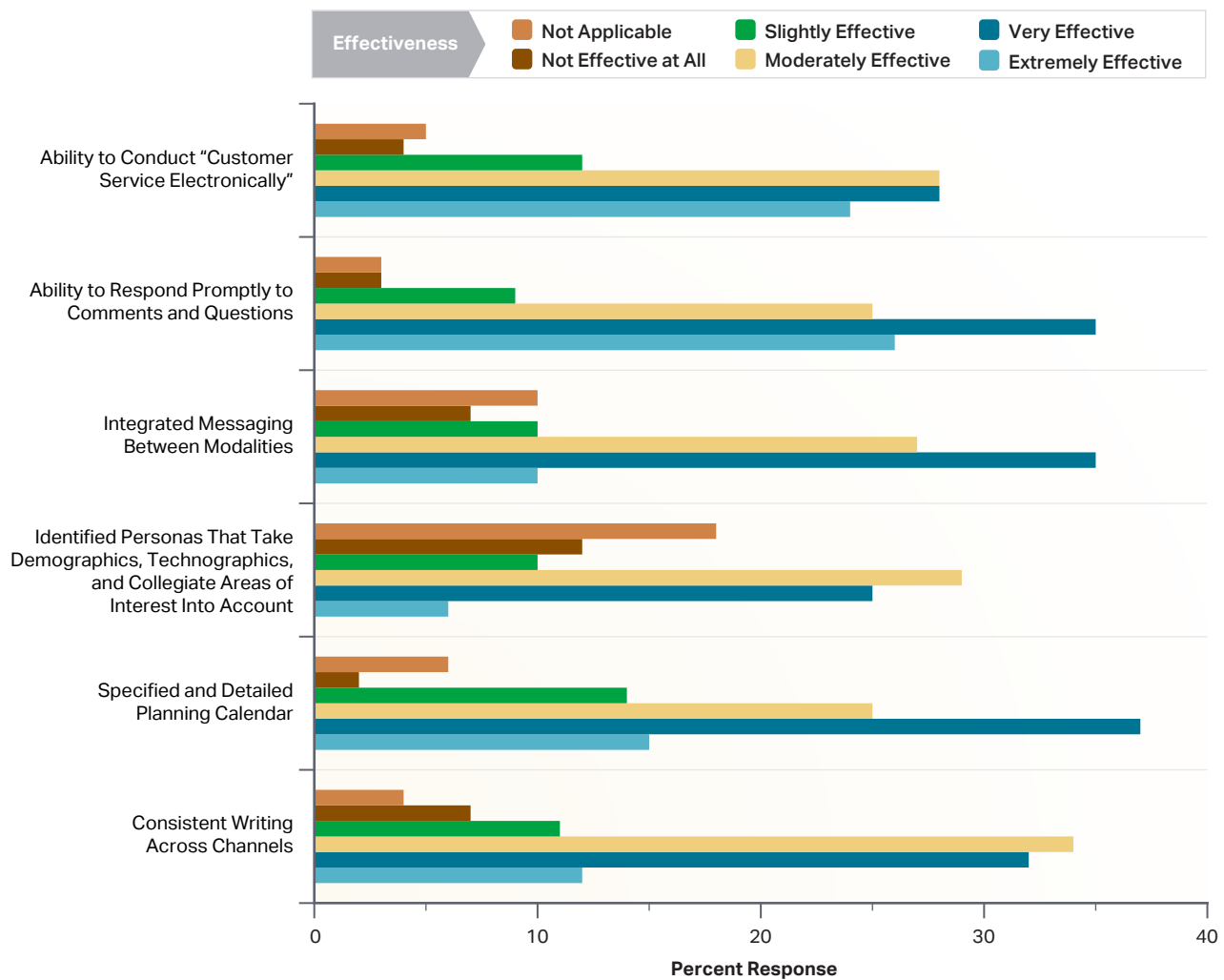


FIGURE 10 ➤ Effectiveness of Multi-Channel Marketing Management Compared to Peer Institutions

These findings support the need to have a consistent brand, beginning with the relevance of the mission, and to communicate that mission—along with the curriculum that supports it—to prospective students via their multi-channel world. The better an institution is at communicating why a student should want to attend, what value they will realize from their education, and that they are being listened to and engaged with, the more students will want to pursue their college career there. While this all sounds straightforward, the current research indicates that higher education is still trying to learn what it teaches. Some institutions are clearly in the lead, but overall, every college and uni-

versity has to improve its efforts if it is to survive and thrive in the coming years.

Recommendations for Practice

This study is highly informative for recruiting teams. In a world where daily messaging levels are increasing (some estimates are that individuals are exposed to 3,000 or more messages each day), higher education must consider how to compete. Some aspects of recruiting to consider include:

- How to implement a brand management model with the recruiting team: Consolidate responsibility for recruitment marketing to one in-

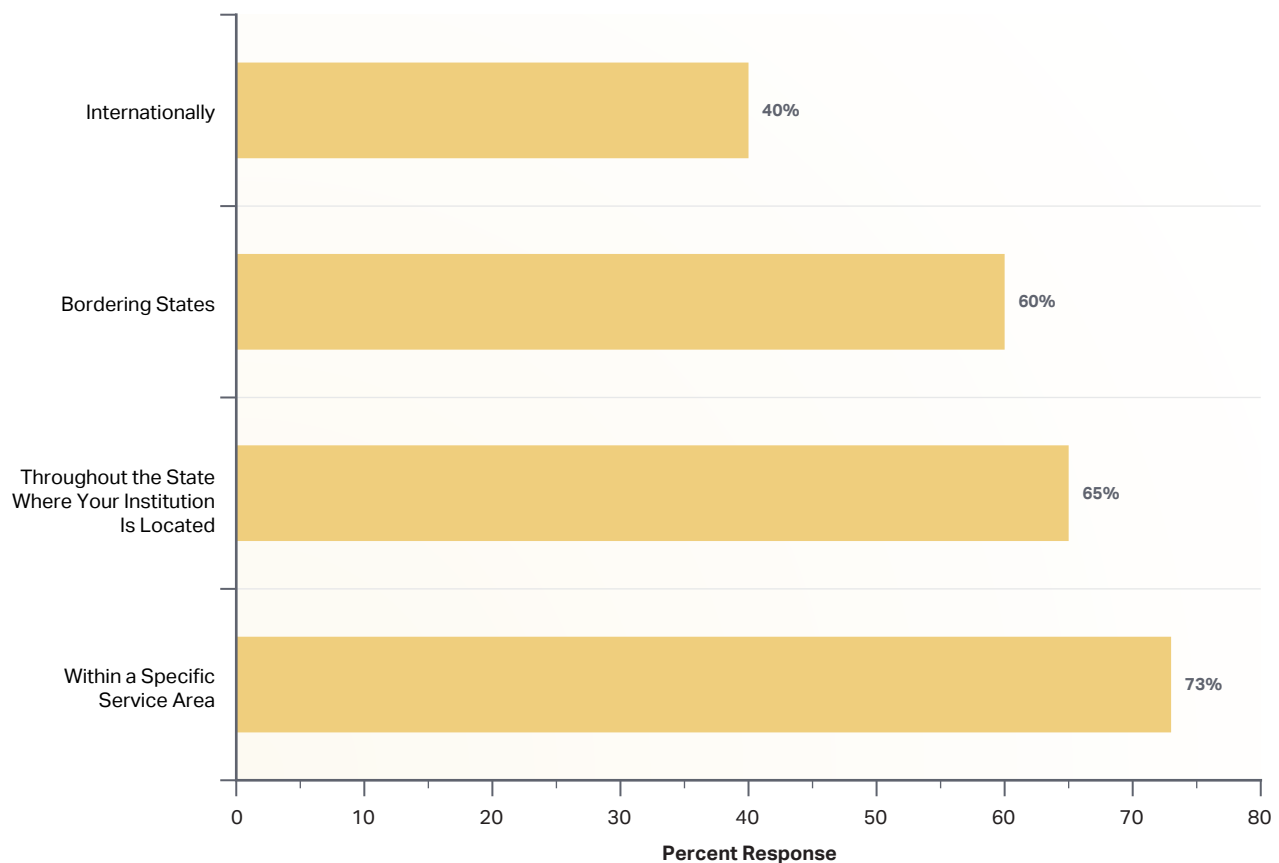


FIGURE 11 ➤ Responses to “How broadly do you recruit in order to meet your student recruitment goals?”

dividual, and give that person the budget and resources to do the job well.

- How to stay current in multichannel technologies such that as student prospects learn to communicate in new ways, institutions can engage them in those ways.
- How to adopt a strategic planning process that periodically updates the institutional mission and identifies student target geographies and relevant academic majors.
- How to build a customer relationship approach that engages, listens, responds to students, and

encourages them to apply to and enroll at their institutions.

Developing answers to these questions may help institutions attract higher percentages of students to continue their education after high school, in essence growing higher education’s share of market. As societal complexity increases, technology-related skills are essential for navigating even the simplest requirements of daily life. Everyone should want to go to college.

AUTHOR’S NOTE

The authors would like to acknowledge and thank contributors Vithala Rao, Deane W. Malott Professor of Management at the Johnson Graduate School of Management at Cornell as well as Dawn He, graduate assistant at the Johnson School. Vithala offered valuable suggestions regarding the study design, and both he and Dawn helped with analytic and statistical support.

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