CASES FROM THE FIELD

Ten Techniques to Increase Collaboration between Admissions and Marketing Offices

By Carrie H. Phillips

Admissions and marketing offices face a challenge of increased pressure to enroll future students. As strategic enrollment management (SEM) efforts expand, many universities may look to bring marketing offices into the strategic enrollment conversation, which could result in increased collaboration between the two offices. This article offers ten techniques these offices can employ, regardless of their campus structure, to better work together and collaborate to enroll students. These suggestions are practical techniques based on lessons learned at Arkansas Tech University, as it sought to increase collaboration between offices.

Higher education institutions are under increasing pressure to recruit more students. This pressure can be attributed to several factors, including a decrease in the number of high school-aged students, reductions in funding, and increased expectations for using new channels in marketing (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center 2019; Pew Charitable Trusts 2019; Jaschik 2019). One reason institutions aim to recruit more students is that fewer are attending college. In fall 2019, the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center (2019) reported that higher education enrollment dropped below 18 million students for the first time in more than a decade.

Higher education is also receiving decreased funding from federal and state governments. Most recently, Alaska topped the chart as the state receiving the most substantial federal support for higher education, which sat at nearly 16 percent, meaning most states receive far less (National Student Clearinghouse Research Center 2019). The trend of waning support appears to be occurring at the state level as well. Pew Charitable Trusts (2019) noted that ten years ago, states funded higher education nearly 140 percent more than federal funding levels. However, as many states have experienced massive cuts to higher education funding, that number currently sits at approximately 12 percent above federal levels (Pew Charitable Trusts 2019).

With fewer students attending college and fewer state and federal funds available, higher education enrollment and marketing leaders face increased expectations to yield students. A 2018 survey of nearly 500 admissions officers reported that these individuals felt significant pressure to meet their class by May 1 (Jaschik 2018). The study also found that admissions officers were concerned about how new channels, including social media, would impact their work in recruiting and yielding prospective students. The survey found admissions officers desired to utilize social media to promote their institution but were concerned that they lacked the resources and training to do so effectively.

Institutions face significant challenges and will require new processes and approaches to overcome them. This is why some colleges and universities are rethinking their admissions model and moving toward a strategic enrollment model. This model presents an opportunity to align admissions and marketing efforts more closely and offers an approach that results in better recruitment outcomes.

Literature Review

Strategic Enrollment Management

The concept of strategic enrollment management (SEM) began in the 1970s as a way to manage the enrollment process in a holistic manner (Hossler and Bontrager 2015). Attempting to streamline enrollment services to serve students better, some of the common functions that have been part of SEM practices include financial aid, registration, student accounts, and payment processes (Coomes 2002).

At its core, SEM planning allowed institutions to take a data-focused approach to recruit future students by studying environmental trends and how those could impact pools of potential applicants (Society for College and University Planning n.d.). This allowed institutions to set goals around student makeup and build coalitions across campus to work toward those goals (Society for College and University Planning n.d.). This approach required an administrator to lead these decisions, which led to the rise of the enrollment management division to oversee such efforts (Coomes 2002).

As pressures to increase enrollment continue to grow, additional universities might consider the concept of enrollment management. The College Board (2018) suggested that many of the current market forces, including public perception of college cost and a lack of value to the student, are likely to push toward continued expansion of enrollment management to better understand and manage incoming classes of students.

With the expansion of the enrollment management field, Schultheis (2013) looked at critical partnerships that can assist in overcoming university challenges. One partnership he identified was engaging the marketing office in the enrollment management conversation. He argued that such a partnership ensured that marketing and enrollment divisions are communicating consistently about the university experience, students to target, and locations for reaching prospective students. Hossler and Bontrager (2015) also noted the critical role that marketing plays in SEM. They argued that while admissions offices are the primary location where students enter the university pipeline, there must also be a strong relationship with the marketing office to ensure the admissions experience and marketing messages to potential students align.

Growth of Marketing as a Field

Marketing to promote an institution is a practice that is almost as old as universities themselves. Early universities placed advertisements in newspapers and magazines promoting their campuses (Carnegie Dartlet 2015). Now, marketing of higher education is a multi-billion dollar business offering much more than newspaper ads and glossy view books. Cellini and Chaudhary (2020) noted that in 2017, the higher education industry spent nearly $730 million on advertising efforts, including television, cable, outdoor, and online ads.

Higher education marketing has become a profession of its own. As universities face increased competition, marketing offices have transitioned from engaging in small-scale efforts recruiting local students to national and international recruiting utilizing a range of tactics (Einstein 2019). These robust marketing efforts require both sophisticated skills and a strong understanding of marketing strategy (Einstein 2019). As such, many institutions have hired entire teams of marketers working to promote the institution, with many having a marketing head who is part of the university's executive leadership team (Einstein 2019; Wildavsky and Sands 2014).

An additional reason higher education marketing has seen significant growth in the past 30 years is because of new technologies available as part of digital marketing (Digital Marketing Institute n.d.). There are a plethora of digital tactics that can be utilized in higher education marketing, and the number of tactics is likely to continue to grow (Digital Marketing Institute n.d.). One common benefit to digital marketing is analytics that help determine a tactic's effectiveness (Digital Marketing Institute n.d.). Duffin (2020) measured several tactics utilized in higher education marketing and found the digital ones were 20 percent more effective than traditional ones. With the development of new digital marketing tactics, coupled with increased challenges in higher education, marketing teams will likely continue to play an important role in university recruitment efforts.

Organizational Models

How universities are organized is also worth examining. A *Chronicle of Higher Education* survey looked to see where the marketing office was housed in the university structure and found nearly half of survey participants noted their office reported directly to the president (Wildavsky and Sands 2014). Meanwhile, nearly 10 percent of participants stated that the marketing office reported to the vice president of enrollment management, making it the fourth most common response. While this organizational model is not the most common, 60 percent of survey participants noted their top measure of success was the number of students enrolled (Wildavsky and Sands 2014). This finding suggests that for admissions and marketing offices to be successful there should be a strong relationship between the two.

Hossler and Bontrager (2015) agreed and advocated for involving the marketing office as a next step in SEM growth. They argued that the institution's success in growing enrollment depends on the ability for marketing efforts to be understood and executed across campus. A starting place to bring marketing into the SEM conversation is to focus on collaboration between marketing and admissions offices. This involves creating a bond between two offices that have much to gain from one another but that may have previously experienced more friction than function.

Institutional Profile

Arkansas Tech University is a public institution with an enrollment of approximately 12,000 students across two campuses. The university offers a range of credentials, starting with a certificate of proficiency and expanding through a doctorate (Arkansas Tech University 2018). Arkansas Tech reorganized its structure in 2018 to focus on enrollment management efforts. The Office of Admissions, the Office of University Marketing and Communication, and the Office of Financial Aid all moved under the same division (Arkansas Tech University 2017). This change created an environment where the Office of Admissions and the Office of University Marketing and Communication collaborated in new ways.

Now, more than two years after the move, the two offices work reasonably well together, have established lines of communication, and are continuing to evolve the relationship. The suggestions offered in this article provide several techniques the Arkansas Tech offices used to enhance collaboration in a meaningful way. While the work is aspirational and more work is always needed to ensure offices work well together, the following provides a guide that may be of use to other offices considering such a move.

Methodology

The idea for this article occurred somewhat haphazardly, as the initial topic came from a dinner conversation at a conference. Following the conference, the author compiled initial thoughts regarding first-hand experience with such collaboration. The author then conducted six unstructured interviews with others in admissions and marketing offices across the nation. These interviews were a convenience sample of colleagues, and the purpose was to review the initial list of talking points for accuracy and provide additional topics for consideration. Following the writing of the initial draft, the author engaged in member checking, sending the findings to two of the colleagues to verify the information in the interviews had been appropriately understood. It is worth noting that this article did not follow a full qualitative process, as the author came into the research with some ideas to share based on personal experience. However, the article's purpose was to offer insights from the field by sharing the practices at one institution. Through this case study, readers will gain an understanding of some techniques currently utilized by one institution in the field.

Ten Techniques for Collaboration

Meet Regularly

The first technique for increasing collaboration between admissions and marketing offices is to engage in regular, meaningful meetings. This step takes a significant amount of time, but it is probably one of the most critical elements to create a strong relationship. Regular meetings are essential to understand what aspects of the relationship are most important for each office and to help each office understand the other.

It is essential to work together to determine the frequency of the meetings, whether weekly, semi-monthly, or monthly. The first meeting is also vital to set norms that will guide the relationship. Some of the norms implemented by the two Arkansas Tech offices included using polite technology, assuming good intent, and providing honest feedback. These norms are critical to building trust and growing the relationship over time. It is also beneficial to create an agenda and send it to staff before the meeting as well as to distribute meeting notes after the meeting. This helps ensure a productive meeting and that neither office is surprised by the discussion topics. At Arkansas Tech, agenda items are sent to one representative who provides both the agenda and the meeting notes. Although this task takes time for an employee, it is critical to ensure members from both offices have access to the same deadlines, talking points, and conversations. Without regular meeting notes, the two offices would be set up for failure, as the odds are likely that each office would have different memories of the meeting, agreements reached, or actions needed.

Finally, it is critical to have multiple members from each office attend for several reasons. First, it helps ensure thoughts and decisions are considered from various viewpoints. Additionally, having numerous attendees helps ensure continuity of operations, as not everyone is able to attend all meetings. Finally, multiple team members help each office feel invested in the collaboration. When the Arkansas Tech offices began meeting, each office agreed to send two or three representatives to the weekly meeting.

Select a Starting Point

The second technique is to remember that there is never a perfect time to begin such a partnership. When trying to improve collaboration at Arkansas Tech, it quickly became apparent that there would never be an ideal time to start because of the varied workload of both offices. As such, each day the offices were working without integration was a missed opportunity for both to fully realize their potential. One suggestion is for the leadership of both offices to determine the slowest times for each area and then begin working toward implementing a plan at that point.

For Arkansas Tech, the best time to begin working together was as the fall semester was wrapping up but before the activities of the spring semester began. The two offices have used this time for big-picture conversations on strategies for the upcoming year. Then, strategic communication pauses for several months while visit activities happen. After those end, the strategic discussion begins again but with a more practical goal of working through print pieces. This strategy works because it allows time to set a vision during a calm time for both offices. Then, the visioning can pause while both offices work on other tasks. After the tasks are complete, the office can begin the practical work that needs to occur. This plan works for Arkansas Tech, but every collaboration is different, meaning different approaches will be required. Additionally, as systems at each institution and office change, the ideal time to meet may also change; therefore, meeting times should be revisited annually.

Collaborate on Communication

A third critical technique to increase collaboration between the marketing office and admissions office is to collaborate on communication flows to prospective students. Many admissions offices have multiple communication flows to potential students, including undergraduates, transfer students, graduate students, parents, high school counselors, and more. Collaborating to engage these audiences can benefit both offices, which is one reason this collaboration is particularly beneficial.

Pursuing this relationship from the admissions office is beneficial because the marketing office can assist in several ways. First, the marketing office is likely the keeper of the university brand. As such, they may be able to assist in making sure admissions emails speak in a tone that is consistent with other university marketing. When beginning to work on these messages at Arkansas Tech, the two offices worked together to incorporate university talking points into the planned messages. Additionally, the marketing office had access to media-rich content, such as high-quality photos and b-roll video that could be incorporated. With Generation Z (Patel 2017) having an attention span of approximately eight seconds, access to this content can help increase the likelihood students read the emails. This collaborative process worked well at Arkansas Tech and ensured the Office of Admissions had access to photos and videos to incorporate into emails.

From a marketing perspective, this relationship is also beneficial. The marketing office seeks to ensure brand consistency across all audiences. The admissions office is likely one of the major offices that communicates on behalf of the university. By collaborating, the marketing office is better able to deliver the university's brand messages to a large university constituency. Additionally, the marketing office spends hours creating on-brand photos and videos for the university, and having these shared with a broader audience is likely exciting for them.

Have Patience

A fourth vital technique to remember is that building collaboration between two offices takes time. Ryan (2018) mentioned that building trust is one of the highest priorities that offices and leaders should have when working toward collaboration. Ryan (2018) suggested building trust is an intentional process and should be a regular focus in order to see long-term growth. When the two offices at Arkansas Tech began working more closely together, both had to commit to being honest, truthful, and providing context about why decisions happened the way they did. This caused both offices to, at times, feel vulnerable and unsure if the other would prove worthy of the trust shared with them. However, over time, both offices shared and received trust. This has encouraged the offices to continue working together intentionally. This long-term philosophy is best explained by a colleague in the Office of University Marketing and Communication. After attending a conference, she learned that creative teams should try to improve projects by two degrees each time they occur. She explained that this applied to relationship-building and work tasks. The focus on small improvements helps the marketing office stay fixated on finding little ways to make a project better each time, as opposed to trying to significantly revise a project each cycle. This approach can apply to projects or building collaboration between offices. The concept of two degrees affirms the long-term nature of collaboration processes. However, it also allows one to pause on occasion and reflect on the work achieved. In a particular moment, two degrees does not seem significant, making it easy to build collaboration around an idea that is slightly different. However, over time, many two-degree moments can result in a substantial, meaningful change that otherwise might have proved too challenging to tackle all at once.

Create University Personas

The next suggestion to increase collaboration between the two offices is to create personas for the students the university wants to reach. At Arkansas Tech, the offices developed four personas for the current profile of students. Building personas helps build collaboration because it ensures decisions are not personal. When discussing a spread in a print piece, using a persona adds depth to the discussion because it forces the offices to have the conversation in the eyes of the student. This can also aid in decision making on other topics, including giveaways, digital ads, imagery, and more. Using the persona process is also beneficial when considering what tactics to use. If the tactics do not fit for a particular persona, it may be worthwhile to look at different ones. By utilizing personas, the two offices can look beyond personal preferences on copy, images, and layouts and, instead, make decisions based on what a student who fits a particular persona would prefer.

To help explain this idea, here are a few early Arkansas Tech personas. One was the "blue-collar scholar" to describe the student who had to work significantly while attending school. Another persona was the "involved-in-everything student," which was the student who wanted the classic college experience of being in clubs and activities. The process of developing personas involves collaboration between the two offices to assess who are the students most likely to attend the university. Spending time identifying critical characteristics of campus students and clustering those into broader themes—much like coding in qualitative research—takes active participation from both offices. Discussion is needed to ensure the personas are developed accurately. Additionally, it is beneficial to annually revisit the selected personas to see if they have changed.

Share Successes

The sixth technique for building collaboration between the two offices is to brag about one's own office as well as the office one is trying to collaborate with. Bragging is essential for several reasons, and the first is that it positions one's office as an expert. For instance, when the Office of University Marketing and Communication was recognized for a national award for recruitment marketing, this was shared with the Office of Admissions so they could join in celebrating a victory that impacted the division. The announcement was also shared internally before it was shared with the entire campus community. This gave both offices the inside track on the information, allowing them to answer questions if asked.

Another part of bragging is to celebrate when the other office has accomplished something great. For instance, after the Office of Admissions hosted a successful preview event, the Office of University Marketing and Communication delivered pizza to say congratulations. The unexpected touches are essential because they help build morale. Offices love to feel appreciated and celebrated by other teams. After all, who does not love pizza?

A final aspect of bragging involves utilizing university protocols for recognition. At Arkansas Tech, there is an opportunity for service "wows." These allow departments, faculty, and staff to recognize the work of others. For example, if members of the financial aid office go the extra mile to ensure timely award packaging, the department might be nominated for a service "wow." This follows the university-recognized process of celebrating departments, and many times, these "wows" are shared with supervisors and executive teams. Utilizing these platforms to brag about the office is a way to honor them formally. However, because this is a formal university recognition, it is used only for occasions where significant recognition is warranted.

Employ Focus Groups

Another way to build collaboration between the two offices is to work together on focus groups. This allows both offices to gain official insights from critical audiences such as prospective undergraduates, graduate students, transfer students, or adult learners. Focus groups can provide insight on a variety of topics that are important to know when recruiting these groups. Arkansas Tech has used focus groups to understand communication preferences, get feedback about content for print pieces, understand preferences for giveaways, and learn about website updates.

The reason focus groups are beneficial is, by default, that they build collaboration. Once the decision for a focus group has been made, the two offices can collaborate with the audience to study which locations to utilize (for high school or transfer populations) and what topics would be most beneficial to ask about. By collaborating on the logistics, both groups will likely be interested and engaged in the process. After the focus group is completed, the results offer an additional opportunity for collaboration. Chances are both offices were right and wrong about their perceptions regarding the questions asked. Reviewing the results allows both offices to better understand the findings and how the results might impact projects that involve the audience studied. A final way to build collaboration is to provide the raw data to both offices. This shows trust and allows each group to dig as deep as they would like into the results instead of just viewing synthesized responses.

This process also builds collaboration because it can regularly be replicated for increased learnings. Focus groups do not have to be formal. At Arkansas Tech, some focus groups have taken place at area high schools and on video calls. They typically last about an hour and cover three to five topics. The total cost for the focus groups is about $50, which includes the cost of a pizza or a small gift card for the participants. It is not uncommon for Arkansas Tech to host multiple focus groups throughout the year to understand different aspects of the work between the offices. This normal process of collaborating to create, schedule, conduct, and analyze focus group findings results in continued collaboration between the offices.

Provide Insider Knowledge

This next technique for building collaboration is the idea of keeping the other office informed and trying to prevent them from being surprised in meetings with other departments at the university. For example, at Arkansas Tech, there is a meeting of all divisions monthly for departments to share updates. In these meetings, both offices might have items to share with the general public, but they try to make sure the other office is aware of the information first. This is important for building trust, as people like to feel as though they know what is going.

Keeping the other office informed also extends to another situation. If one office hears something that may impact the other, sharing helps build collaboration between the two offices. For example, the Office of Admissions heard about a possible schedule change to athletic events. They shared this with the Office of University Marketing and Communication to ensure the office was prepared and knew to double-check the dates for print pieces. Such efforts help ensure both offices are prepared.

This can also be a great time to share the "why" behind decisions, as it gives the other office an opportunity to be an advocate. For example, the Office of University Marketing and Communication sent requests for specific website updates to the campus academic departments. The office shared this process and why it was important with the Office of Admissions, which was then able to help advocate for the request as it made its way through the university channels. While these offices work together, they also have different roles where they do not work as closely. Sharing the "why" allows the offices to support each other on projects with other groups.

Share Key Insights

The ninth technique is to share insights that are important to each office, and this can include a variety of topics. This is crucial because it helps each office understand what aspect of their work was a struggle for the other office. Typically, admissions and marketing offices focus on different parts of the recruitment process, so sharing feedback helps the offices better understand each other. For example, once a print piece is created, the marketing office often never hears what worked well and what didn't. Understanding any issues that came up—whether related to layout, paper choice, missing content, or something else—can help the marketing office adjust future pieces to ensure they are successful. Sharing such insights helps the offices work together to develope new approaches or ideas to overcome any challenges.

This should not be the first technique that is utilized and should come after several months of working together. Discussing issues and opportunities for both departments requires the offices to be vulnerable; therefore, it is much more likely to be a positive experience once the offices have gotten to know each other. Employing this strategy too early might result in arguments, lack of trust, and increased frustration from both offices.

Discuss Advertising

The final technique is to talk about advertising campaigns. Marketing offices typically utilize ad campaigns targeting undergraduates. The way to build trust and collaboration is to involve both offices in these campaigns. An initial step is for the marketing office to share the plan so that the admissions office is aware of the advertising. This is a good practice because it allows admissions to respond to questions that future students may have regarding the advertising.

Continuously fostering collaboration between marketing and admissions requires ongoing communication and revisiting the "how and why." For example, a conversation about ways to strategically use advertising dollars to support admissions efforts is necessary. Such a conversation does not guarantee advertising dollars will be deployed differently; however, it may give the marketing office a better sense of how advertising could benefit the university from the admissions perspective. At Arkansas Tech, the Office of University Marketing and Communication asked for input and learned that the Office of Admissions could benefit from advertising to assist with yielding students already in the pipeline. Previous advertising had focused on lead generation, so this was a significant adjustment. After further conversation, the two offices decided that making the shift would be beneficial. This collaboration resulted in a substantial change, and after it was made, both offices had a renewed interest in the partnership.

The collaborative approach to sharing results after the admissions office has been involved in the process is necessary. Sharing outcomes does not have to be a formal process, but it is vital to ensure both offices feel a part of the advertising efforts. Examples of results that could be shared include: the number of engagements on a digital ad, the number of dollars spent on a print ad, or the number of leads completed from a request for information form. The marketing office should share as much as they feel comfortable, and sharing can be increased as collaboration continues. However, it is crucial to begin the culture of sharing campaign results.

Conclusion

As the pressures to build a class of students each year appears to be increasing, universities may be willing to engage in new partnerships to see better outcomes regarding student classes. One potential partnership worth considering is strengthening the relationship between admissions and marketing offices. Arkansas Tech implemented this strategy by forming a Division of Enrollment Management.

The Arkansas Tech Division of Enrollment Management includes both offices and has yielded significant collaboration in recent years. This resulted in growth in the university's freshman class during the first full cycle after the change occurred. This was one of many positive results after the division formed and suggests that there may be a correlation between increased collaboration and tangible enrollment outcomes.

The techniques offered in this article are designed to help admissions and marketing offices build collaboration. They are based on the experiences at Arkansas Tech and reinforced through interviews with other admissions and marketing colleagues. However, it is worth noting that each institution has a unique set of circumstances, so there could easily be additional techniques that would prove valuable for offices seeking to build collaboration. This article aims to share the experiences from one institution and encourage conversation about meaningful ways offices can work together to achieve their SEM goals.

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Under her leadership, ATU's marketing team has launched a new logo and a new unified marketing campaign for the institution as well as developed key brand messaging platforms for the university. Phillips began her higher education career in social media where her work helped land the university on *The Today Show* and helped the university campus ambassador Jerry the Bulldog, be featured by Purina.

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