

 CASES FROM THE FIELD

Using Data-Driven Decision-Making through the Enrollment Funnel in Graduate Public Health Programs

By Angela Sullivan, Amanda Bosque, Matthew Fifolt, and Gregory Pavela

In 2023, a school within a large, public, four-year research university adopted a new framework for strategic enrollment management (SEM) practices, led by the Office of Student and Academic Services (OSAS). The development of this framework was catalyzed by key school personnel with backgrounds in enrollment management, a decline in enrollment following the COVID-19 pandemic, anticipation of the impending enrollment cliff, competing public health programs within the state and region, and the implementation of a new schoolwide strategic plan.

The primary deliverable of this initiative was the creation of a new report, the “Enrollment Funnel Report,” which traces every student inquiry, from initial contact through enrollment. The primary audience for this report includes chairs, program directors, and supporting administrators to help them better understand the flow of prospective students through the enrollment funnel. The report categorizes prospective students across all of the school’s degree concentrations into a single enrollment funnel category, facilitating comparisons between departments and degree concentrations, as well as within departments across admissions cycles. In addition to the creation of the new report, the authors also conducted a series of workshops designed for faculty program directors, admissions committee members, and anyone involved in the recruitment, admissions, or retention of graduate students. These workshops were designed to help faculty program directors better understand their role in recruitment and admissions in the school and to begin to provide the necessary knowledge and skills to act based on best practices as well as initiatives informed by the enrollment funnel report.

In 2023, a school within a large, public, four-year research university adopted a new framework for strategic enrollment management (SEM) practices, led by the Office of Student and Academic Services (OSAS). Strategic enrollment management is defined as the policies, processes, and organizational structure associated with each step in the pathway from prospective student to graduation within higher education (Hossler and Bontrager 2014). The development and implementation of a new framework at the school was spurred by hiring key school personnel with a background in enrollment management, anticipation of declines in enrollment due to the end of the COVID-19 enrollment increases, new public health programs within the state and region, and the development of a new strategic plan within the school.

An important facet of the new enrollment management framework included increased engagement from graduate public health faculty program directors, given research indicating that collaboration between graduate faculty program directors and enrollment management professionals is key to a successful enrollment management strategy from prospective students through graduation (Boske, *et al.* 2018; Ford, *et al.* 2024; Paris and Kania III 2024). In this best practices article, the authors describe how decisions were made regarding reporting and engagement strategies for graduate faculty program directors, goals for the application of this initiative, and plans for future data tracking.

Background

Policies and practices regarding enrollment management, specifically the use of tracking data to guide enrollment management practices, are not new to the field of higher education (Clagett and Kerr 1992; Thotharat, *et al.* 2019). Undergraduate programs have long used tracking applications to drive recruitment, admissions, and enrollment processes (Goff and Shaffer 2014). The idea of an *enrollment funnel*, however, is still nascent to graduate public health programs (Clayden 2019; Ruger 2020; Robinson 2013). Until recently, accredited schools and programs of graduate public health have lagged behind their undergraduate counterparts in their use of stra-

tegic enrollment management (SEM) (Robinson 2013). This delay in the adoption of formal SEM frameworks by schools and programs of graduate public health may be due to graduate programs often being separate and decentralized from undergraduate enrollment management (AACRAO 2022), lack of expertise from faculty and staff in administrative admissions or enrollment management roles, and a lack of resources at the graduate program level to devote to customized approaches (Smith and Harris 2021). However, there is potential for graduate programs to identify specific stages of the enrollment funnel where additional outreach could improve the conversion of admitted applicants to enrolled students (Merritt, *et al.* 2020).

At the school, the results of strategic planning and the hiring of key personnel enabled a shift away from reporting admissions and enrollment data only at the departmental level toward more granular, programmatic concentration reporting. This shift was made, in part, to provide faculty program directors with the information needed to assume greater responsibility for recruitment, application submissions, application review, and enrollment. Providing program-specific enrollment data at each stage of the funnel enables program directors to make data-driven decisions on communication strategies, recruitment efforts, and other enrollment management initiatives, supported by OSAS.

Prior to this initiative, there was limited engagement between the admissions and enrollment management team and graduate public health faculty program directors. Monthly, a report of the number of graduate applications, admitted students, and enrolled students was sent to all faculty in the school. This report showed current enrollment numbers by departments rather than an actionable report disaggregated by distinct academic concentrations housed and managed within each department.

Developing the Enrollment Funnel

Data for the tracking of records across the enrollment funnel come from two sources: Salesforce and the Schools of Public Health Application Service (SOPHAS).

Salesforce is a customer relationship management (CRM) software used by the institution for recruitment and admissions for graduate and undergraduate students. Salesforce is the service behind website-driven inquiry forms for prospective graduate students, events, and communications. For admissions, Salesforce is the tool used for the supplemental application for all practice-based graduate public health programs, such as the Master of Public Health (MPH) and the Doctor of Public Health (DrPH). Research-based graduate public health degrees such as the Master of Science (M.S.) in Biostatistics; PhDs in Biostatistics, Environmental Health Sciences, and Health Behavior; coordinated degrees such as the MD/MPH; and others apply directly to Salesforce. SOPHAS is a centralized application service (CAS) for Schools and Programs of Public Health accredited by the Council of Education on Public Health (CEPH). Centralized application services can be used by accredited public health programs to simplify the application process for students and widen the top of the funnel. With a single application to SOPHAS and accompanying supplemental materials and transcripts, applicants can apply to as many accredited schools and programs of public health as they choose.

Creation of Enrollment Funnel

The goal of the enrollment funnel report is to trace every inquiry from initial contact through to an outcome, including enrollment. Since graduate program directors for specific degree concentrations are the intended users, the report needed to present concentration-level data rather than departmental summaries, a limitation of previous reports. The report is also intended to help program directors better understand the flow of prospective students from one stage to the next. Finally, the report categorizes prospective students across all degree concentrations, allowing for comparisons between departments and throughout the application and admissions cycle.

The first step in developing the funnel report was to identify all possible categories of the enrollment funnel that a record might occupy, so that every record in the CRM could be placed into a single category. Table

1 below illustrates how these categories trace the path from initial inquiry through application, review, and final decision. For example, among 96 records associated with a single degree concentration during the current admissions cycle, 62 remained in the “inquiry only” stage, and 34 individuals started a SOPHAS application; of these, one did not submit their application, seventeen records were deemed “lost” due to inactivity by the university before an admissions decision was made, one record was “incomplete” due to missing information required before departmental review, and one record was withdrawn by the applicant prior to an admissions decision. Of the sixteen records with completed applications, two were still under review (“decision pending”), others had a decision (*i.e.*, “denied” or “admitted”). After applying these categories to all records, each record is assigned a final state.

Data for the report came from bimonthly data exports from the school’s CRM and CAS. After initial data cleaning using a custom-built Python package, every record was assigned to one of the categories as presented in Table 1. Because the CRM uses multiple codes to refer to the same department or degree program, each variation is mapped to a single *master* concentration name. Once a record was assigned to the correct degree program, its progress through the enrollment funnel was determined using a series of logical operations considering all available data and the assumption that for a record to be in a more advanced category, it must have initially been in an earlier category. For example, if a record was classified as “decision pending,” it was grouped under the broader “apps every reaching department review” status, and all funnel categories prior to the “decision pending” stage were associated with the record. Likewise, any applicant with an admissions decision of “admitted” was assumed to have progressed through all the prior funnel categories and further classified as “enrolled,” “not enrolled,” “withdrawn,” “change of term,” or “deferred.” Formatting the report in this way allows program directors to see the number of prospective students at each step, compare conversion from one stage to the next, and allocate recruitment and admissions resources accordingly.

TABLE 1 ► Example Report for a Single Degree Concentration

Stage	Count	Description
Total Records	96	All unique records processed
Inquiries Only	62	Records that never progressed beyond the initial <i>Inquiry</i> stage
Total Applications (Post-Inquiry)	34	All applications that progressed beyond the initial <i>Inquiry</i> stage
App Started — Not Submitted	1	Current number of applications created but not yet submitted
App Submitted — Lost	17	Records categorized as <i>Lost</i> before admission decision recorded
App Submitted — Incomplete	1	Current number of submitted applications with missing info
App Submitted — Withdrawn	1	Records <i>Withdrawn</i> by the applicant before an admission decision
Apps Ever Reaching Department Review	16	Total applications referred to for department review
Decision Pending	2	Applications awaiting a departmental admission decision
Decision Made	14	Total applications for which an admission decision has been recorded
Denied	4	Total applications with a <i>Denied</i> decision
Admitted	10	Total applications <i>Admitted</i> or <i>Admitted with Contingency</i>
Enrolled	7	Admitted applicants who subsequently enrolled
Not Enrolled	1	Admitted applicants who did not enroll
Withdrawn	1	Withdrew application <i>after</i> an admission offer was made
Change of Term	0	Admitted applicants whose entry term was changed
Deferred	1	Admitted applicants who were granted a deferral to a future term

Resulting Enrollment Funnel

The enrollment funnel shows the number of students in each step of the enrollment phase (inquiry, application, admissions, and enrollment) for each concentration. This allows for data-driven decision-making related to differences in approaches to prospective student inquiry response; management of communications between offices in both the School of Public Health and the Graduate School and applicants related to incomplete applications; and identification of other areas for improvement for individual graduate faculty program directors. With concentration-specific data, the authors were able to identify gaps in communications from the graduate school to applicants admitted through the CAS. These communication gaps related to supplemental application requirements led to delays in communications to applicants, likely leading some applicants to accept offers of admission elsewhere. These data also

allowed for a review of doctoral program application deadlines, necessitating changes. Finally, the report indicated that during the most recent admissions cycle, the second-most-popular MPH concentration in terms of “Inquiries” was Population Health, second only to Epidemiology. The Population Health concentration is a recently developed, individually tailored concentration designed for students enrolled in a coordinated degree program, suggesting that coordinated degree programs are of particular interest to prospective students. Accordingly, the school enhanced the websites for coordinated degree programs, paying special attention to the rationale for pursuing additional education and training in public health in conjunction with another degree.

The goal of this improved process is to increase conversion from each stage of the enrollment funnel. Conversion, typically discussed in terms of rate or percentage, refers to the number of applicants who flow

from each stage of the enrollment funnel to the next. In other words, the program director for any specific concentration can now dissect the data related to each stage of the enrollment funnel. For example, if a program receives a high number of applicants who complete applications but fail to submit their supplemental materials, OSAS might identify a breakdown in communications between the school and the applicant. The program director, OSAS, and the Graduate School can then organize their efforts to update communications, conduct phone calls to applicants, or allocate resources to recruitment events that target in-progress applicants.

Faculty Program Director Workshop Series

In Fall 2023, OSAS hosted a series of workshops for faculty program directors, admissions committee members, and anyone involved in the recruitment, admissions, or retention of graduate students. The series included three distinct workshops: Best Practices in Admissions Review & Interviewing, Admit-to-Enroll Conversion Workshop, and Faculty Academic Advisor Workshop. These workshops were designed to help faculty program directors better understand their role in recruitment and admissions in the school and to begin to provide the necessary knowledge and skills to act based on both best practices related to admissions, advising, cultural competence, and enrollment management, as well as specific initiatives based on the results of the new academic concentration-specific report. Future workshops will provide program directors with hands-on training in interpreting and using the enrollment funnel report as well as identify opportunities in their respective programs to improve recruitment and enrollment strategies.

Discussion

Between the delivery of workshops tailored to the school and the detailed enrollment management funnel, there is an opportunity for a coordinated, strategic admissions approach that includes buy-in from the faculty. Ideally, future workshops will include panels or addresses by faculty program directors related to findings

from the enrollment funnel. For example, during initial meetings with faculty program directors to review the detailed enrollment funnel, it was discovered that even faculty who reached out directly to prospective applicants and admitted students had not communicated with applicants who were “in progress” with their applications. This allows for a customizable communication strategy that includes a white-glove approach to recruitment during all stages of the enrollment funnel.

There are limitations to this approach. First, this strategy may not be generalizable to populations outside of the authors’ school. Second, the impending enrollment cliff related to the decrease in the number of high school graduates could change best practices on navigating these changes (Campion 2020). Furthermore, the current political environment could impact the future of public health education and enrollment in schools and programs of public health. Finally, a limitation specific to the enrollment report itself is the assumption that a record in a downstream category must pass through all upstream categories, which may overestimate total inquiries. Some students may begin an application without making an inquiry for more information; however, other prospective students may inquire about a program at a recruitment event that isn’t recorded in Salesforce. Thus, the top part of the enrollment funnel is the most difficult to accurately measure and likely overestimates total inquiries.

Conclusion

The next step for OSAS will be to monitor the enrollment funnel process and document shifts in conversion and yield. By providing relevant information directly to faculty program directors, the authors anticipate increased engagement and ownership of the enrollment process across departments within the school. Future directions include expanding the enrollment funnel to other graduate programs within the school and implementing faculty-driven, best practices workshops.

Currently, OSAS is planning a workshop where two program directors will share their specific recruitment and communications strategies. While these faculty members are both housed within the school, the lead-

ership model within their respective departments is very different. One approach involves a faculty member serving as program director for each of the three programs within the department (an M.S., a Ph.D., and a Dr.PH.) under the title of vice chair of education. The other approach involves having a single faculty member serve as program director for each degree program within the department.

Overall, the development of the new report and provision of additional training for program directors provide the school's educational leadership with access to more granular data and facilitates strategic decision-making for specific degree programs. Doing so ex-

pands the perceived responsibility for recruitment and admissions beyond a single office to include program directors and supporting staff within a department. By providing data only at the departmental level, previous reporting structures tended to reinforce the perception that primary responsibility for recruitment and enrollment was with OSAS, rather than a joint responsibility between OSAS and program directors. As this new approach to strategic enrollment management develops, ongoing assessment of conversion rates and yield data will inform refinements to both the reporting structure and the faculty engagement strategies that support it.

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