



# RECRUITMENT: Just because you build it, doesn't mean they will come.

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**Thirty years ago, Kevin Costner was on to something.**

**He built it. They came.**

**It worked for baseball fields in rural Iowa;  
it also worked for colleges and universities.**

**For decades, centuries even, that tactic worked.**

**Those days, though, have passed for colleges and universities.**

That baseball field in Iowa? It's a tourist destination, but higher education is facing a financial crisis. Schools need to grow revenue. To do that you need to grow enrollment.

It's true that a dramatic increase in the overall number of programs, specifically adult and graduate, has created a highly competitive marketplace. But a lack of leads isn't the problem. The students are there. The real issue is that colleges and universities want to "play catch." They want to wait for students to walk in the door, ready to sign on the dotted line. The truth is that nobody will grow enrollment with this strategy. You need to get better at recruitment by converting the leads you are getting.

It's not enough to admit students that find you. You have to recruit by dedicating resources, both financial and staff, into lead generation and pursuing students,

particularly adult learners, in a much more intentional way over a longer period of time.

Today, more than 22 percent, 37 million Americans, have attended college but not completed a degree. There is a national push, one that is supported by the White House, to increase that number. The Lumina Foundation, an independent, private foundation focused on higher education, has a goal of seeing 60 percent of Americans with high-quality degrees, certificates and other credentials by 2025. That's 16 million students in 11 years.

It's not surprising then that adult students are taking center stage in the discussion surrounding the crisis in higher education.

Are you part of the conversation? It's time to change the strategy.

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## THEN AND NOW: Recruitment Defined

Higher education had it too easy for too long.

As recently as 10 years ago and going back to the 1970s, colleges and universities didn't have to work to meet and exceed their enrollment goals. That was true for institutions that served both traditional and non-traditional students. It was particularly the case, though, for schools that offered graduate level degrees. These programs, few and far between, often literally scattered across the country, presented an opportunity for a profit margin disproportionate to the necessary investment of time, money or resources. The onus was on the student. Admissions became a competitive system of hoops and barriers catering to the haves and ignoring the have nots.

Then, 15 years ago, online learning became part of the equation and everything changed. Not only were more schools able to offer programs that were flexible for adult learners, they were able to reach beyond their backyard to find those students. It's no coincidence that it was around the same time that for-profit institutions joined the game. These programs – designed for adult students – shifted the market substantially.

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**As a result of all these factors, there is now a new playbook for higher education recruitment. It's no longer enough to assume that students will find you.**

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Schools would like to believe that enrollment issues can be blamed on a shift in the number of students attending college. That's just not the case. The real issue is that schools are still focused on admitting students, not recruiting them.

Leads are not the problem.

If there are 37 million Americans who have started a degree but not finished it, there are 37 million leads for adult and graduate programs. Add to that the number of high school seniors graduating each year and that's a lot of leads.

The diversity of that lead pool has changed, too. Just 27 percent of undergraduates are traditional undergraduate students – those who earn a high school diploma, enroll

full-time immediately after finishing high school, depend on parents for financial support and either do not work during the school year or work part-time. They are the exception rather than the rule. Non-traditional students are creating a new majority among undergraduates on college campuses across the country.

Admission departments are structured around responding to requests made by prospective students. They ask for more information, they get a packet in the mail or maybe an email. All too often, that is where the recruitment process stops. Students will let us know when they are interested, right? And if they don't follow up further or enroll, they're "bad leads," right?

Not so fast.

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**Admissions was then.  
Recruitment is now.**

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## LOOK IN THE MIRROR: Why Higher Education Should Care

The harsh reality is you aren't as good at recruitment as you think you are.

We often hear from schools that they work with prospective students "very well" and provide high levels of "personal attention." So we put them to the test. We monitored the response of 16 colleges and universities – four public 4-year, four private 4-year, four for-profit and four national known schools – from a single web inquiry over the course of 60 days.

The results? There is no perfect recruitment model.

Nearly every school has an opportunity to do a better job in recruitment. They can do this by following a process. Personalization of even "canned emails" makes it a bit better. Technology – depending on the level of complexity – is crucial. Even without technology, though, some process can be put in place. Process and accountability is what is lacking in most recruitment shops.

It's also worth addressing the elephant in the room. Recruitment isn't a dirty word. How you recruit – or if you recruit – does not diminish a school's academic reputation.

For-profit institutions know how recruitment can pay off. They've made millions doing it.

The majority of private and public institutions in the country are using outdated recruitment methods. Don't believe us?

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You won't have to look much further than your main competitors, the schools to whom you lose students. What are they doing? It's not their campus, their flexible schedules or their faculty credentials that put them ahead of the pack. It's one fact: they will almost always be out-recruiting you.

Critically examine your internal processes. Get honest about your people because it's people – not marketing, shiny objects, gimmicks and wild promotions – that recruit students. Schools built around admitting students don't have a way to hold their recruitment process accountable. Recruiters can play a crucial role. One of the strongest relationships students have on campus is with their recruiter, yet schools often hire admissions counselors or advisors and expect them to grow enrollment with little or no training and development.

Take a cradle to grave approach with professional advising. Build a student success team, build a process for re-engagement and re-recruit your own students at least twice a year. In 2008, there were 37 million adults with some college but no degree. Why? Avoid losing students to that statistic by understanding their intentions from the start. Working hard to get them in on the front end is only worth it if they persist to graduation.

That means a wasted recruitment lead goes beyond the single potential student. It reverberates out to all the other students – friends, coworkers, family members – they may have referred based on their positive experience.

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## Lose one student because of an unsatisfactory recruitment or retention experience and you've lost much more.

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In the context of building brand loyalty, one student isn't worth \$25,000, they are worth more like \$100,000. That's the value of doing recruitment right.

Think about it another way. How hard does your development office work for a \$20,000 donation? You should be working just as hard for each recruit. Their tuition dollars are just as valuable, particularly those pursuing graduate degrees without scholarship funds off-setting tuition. Instead of wooing students like they do donors, schools put up barriers to admission.

In the context of adult learners, it has historically been the case that colleges and universities undervalue their enrollment. Policies and procedures have been written and programs developed with the undergraduate in mind.

The undergraduate is the golden egg. The graduate student is the ugly duckling.

When it comes to revenue, though, the truth is exactly opposite. Graduates pay more and cost less.

There are also more of them. Between 1970 and 2000, the enrollment of adults in higher education age 25 and over increased by 170 percent. In the same time frame, students under age 25 increased only by 41 percent.

As the demographics shift, so has the conversation. On a global scale, the labor market is demanding a more educated workforce. It's incumbent upon those in the industry to contribute to raising the overall education of society.

At an institutional level, it's equally imperative. Grow graduate programs and grow revenue.

For all these reasons, recruiting adult learners is going to continue to be key to an institution's financial success into the future.

## DOING IT AND DOING IT RIGHT: How You Can Do This

There is not a single magic process that will automatically help you to grow enrollment. The key, the magic, is to have a process.

First, though, let's talk about how you talk about students, leads, prospects. How we refer to them is revealing. If you think about your lead pool being an inquiry, applicant or an enrolled student you are missing out. The admissions process is much more nuanced.

**Admissions:** This treats the process of picking a college like taking tickets at a movie theater. It's a passive procedure of moving applicants down the path they have already decided.

**Recruitment:** This is an intentional process of moving a potential student from the point of thinking about a school to actually becoming enrolled and involved in classes. This involves selling of the idea of going back to school in general as well as selling a specific institution. This process takes place over an extended period of time.

**Prospect:** The pool of people within your target geography who meet the persona of your typical student. For example, individuals with some college but no degree would fall into a prospect pool for degree completion.

**Inquiry:** A prospect that has asked for more information about a school and given their contact information. Inquiries come in via numerous types of lead generation efforts and should be coded by source for better tracking. An inquiry falls into one of three types:

- **Cold Inquiry:** An individual who requested information but hasn't re-engaged. They don't open email or return phone calls. Maybe the contact information wasn't good to begin with.
- **Warm Inquiry:** An individual who opens electronic communication. Their interest is tepid. They may have registered but not shown up for an open house or told a recruiter that they are "just looking" and not interested in starting back to school for at least six months.
- **Hot Inquiry:** An individual who is engaged in the process. They've initiated an appointment with a recruiter, have begun the application process and attended an information session.

**Incomplete Applicant:** An individual who starts the process, fills out the application, has letters of reference sent, but leaves a required element unfinished.

**Applicant:** When the application process has been completed and is ready to be reviewed for admission into the school.

**Enrolled:** A student who has completed all required steps and is officially registered for class. They have not started classes, but they are registered.

**Competition:** Most often if two schools are being considered despite differences in cost, delivery and flexibility, the factor that will make one school win and one school lose out on that student is the recruitment process.

Many schools focus their resources on hot inquiries and incomplete applicants. They are the low-hanging fruit.

The tougher sell, the warm inquiries, are often the true missed opportunities at most schools. It's not that they are not engaged. Because they aren't ready to sign on the dotted line today, though, they are often ignored. Get results by developing a process for continuously working your warm inquiries. Pull out the ladder and search the higher branches of the tree.

This process will require patience. These are quality leads. But they will not convert quickly. Digital leads need nurturing over a period of time.

Still, time flies. Days, weeks and months go by quickly. Create a process that follows an inquiry over at least 45 days, or even better, 60 days. Stay top of mind with prospects. Find the sweet spot between persistent and pestering. Don't call five times a day. Similarly, don't wait for them to pick up the phone.

Establish a regular and routine method that continues beyond those initial few months, tapering to twice a year electronic communication at a minimum. Want to do better? Contact them quarterly electronically, once or twice a year with direct mail. Want to wow them? Touch base over the phone at least annually. That's caring, not annoying.

To develop this process, first assess what you are already doing by asking these questions:

- What are we doing now when a lead comes in?
- Are all leads responded to in the same manner?
- How is a lead tracked in our system?
- Is every lead tracked in our system?

## MOVING THE NEEDLE

Changing your institution's approach to recruitment isn't just about charting a new course for the college with regard to enrollment, revenue and retention. It's bigger than you.

A recruiting reset is about educating more Americans to compete in a global economy, driving toward a better tomorrow for future generations. Change is hard. But it's worth it. There's a huge opportunity, not just for your institution, but also to change people's lives.

Access to education changes lives on a dime. Education is the key to a successful transition from a knowledge-based economy to one that demands critical thinkers and communicators.

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The jobs are there. Some 64 percent of hiring professionals surveyed by the Chicago-based consulting company Challenger, Gray & Christmas said that their companies plan to recruit from the pool of 1.8 million college graduates who will enter the job market in the Spring of 2014. As of February 2014, employers had about 4.2 million unfilled jobs, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

They have jobs, but so do you. It's your job to educate the employees the economy needs. More Americans need us to do better by showing them a path to higher education that leads to higher wages and a better quality of life.

The nation needs us to do a better job by turning out employees that can compete in a challenging, changing global economy.

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## Higher education opens up opportunities. Don't be stingy. You should be recruiting from the rooftops.

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Get those vocal chords ready by considering these three issues, asking questions and taking action on the answers:

- Between 1970 and 2000, the enrollment of adults in higher education age 25 and over increased by 170 percent. In the same time frame, students under age 25 increased only by 41 percent to the point that just 27 percent of undergraduates are traditional undergraduate students.
  - Is this true at your institution?
  - Do you have the data about your current student population to answer that question?
- There is no perfect recruitment model, but nearly every school has an opportunity to do a better job in recruitment.
  - How do you follow up and track leads now?
  - How do you train recruiters?
  - How do you hold your recruitment process accountable?
- Today, more than 22 percent – 37 million Americans – have attended college but not completed a degree. There is a national push to move that needle to the point that 60 percent of Americans have high-quality degrees, certificates and other credentials by 2025.
  - What role do you want to play in educating Americans for a global economy?

### RESOURCES

#### **Closing the Skills Gap - Economist Intelligence Unit Survey - 2014**

<http://www.economistinsights.com/leadership-talent-education/analysis/closing-skills-gap>

#### **Changing Course: 10 Years of Tracking Online Education in the United States - Sloan C. - 2012**

<http://www.onlinelearningsurvey.com/reports/changingcourse.pdf>

#### **The Differentiated University - The Parthenon Group**

[http://www.parthenon.com/GetFile.aspx?u=%2FLists%2FThoughtLeadership%2FAttachments%2F85%2FThe%2520Differentiated%2520University\\_WP\\_web\\_final.pdf](http://www.parthenon.com/GetFile.aspx?u=%2FLists%2FThoughtLeadership%2FAttachments%2F85%2FThe%2520Differentiated%2520University_WP_web_final.pdf)

#### **Great Jobs Great Lives - Gallup / Purdue - 2014**

[http://www.wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2014.ptw.\(60\).pdf](http://www.wsac.wa.gov/sites/default/files/2014.ptw.(60).pdf)

#### **Recovery: Job Growth and Education Requirements Through 2020 - Georgetown University - 2013**

<http://cew.georgetown.edu/recovery2020>

#### **The Students of the Future - Presidential Innovation Lab**

<http://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Documents/The-Students-of-the-Future.pdf>



### About the Author

Dr. Brenda Harms is an experienced higher education administrator with a diverse marketing and admissions background. Her perspective on higher education marketing and recruitment is strengthened by her hands-on experience serving in both academic and administrative roles at a branch campus. During that time, she was also involved in the development and delivery of accelerated on-campus and online courses. Her book, *Up to Speed: Marketing to Today's Adult Student*, was published in March 2010.

While Brenda's primary interest is the recruitment and retention of adult students, her knowledge and experience relating to higher education has greatly benefited consulting projects focused on institutional marketing and student recruitment.

Dr. Harms is active in the higher education community, having served as the secretary/treasurer of the National Association of Branch Campus Administrators executive committee and as the 2008 national conference program chair. She is also an avid speaker, having presented at several national conferences, including the CIC, CASE, CAEL, ACHE, NABCA, and CAP conferences.

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