



Improving Strategic Search: *Making the Best Bets Possible*

Jonathan P. Epstein, M.Ed., Senior Consultant
Sarah Parrott, Ph.D., Senior Consultant

If your institution is swimming in appealing candidates for admission each year, more than you could possibly desire, then this article may not be for you.

For all other colleges and universities, the bedrock of a healthy applicant pool usually involves large-scale marketing outreach, often with the assistance of high-volume name buys – known generically as “search.”

Over the years, the annual process of purchasing prospective student names has become an increasingly critical part of the student recruitment process for many colleges and universities. Chief enrollment officers in charge of making the name-buy decisions have since found that selecting and executing a sound, strategic search program is not easily achieved.

The House Doesn't Have to Win

The search selection process can sometimes resemble a casino-like atmosphere. It is not uncommon for the institution's enrollment professionals responsible for student name-buys to fear that they are throwing a large pile of money down onto the table, hoping the bets they are making will pay off. The lights are dim, the pressure is great, and the upcoming enrollment cycles may ride on the decisions made at that table. To make matters worse, the dealers of the name-buys rarely encourage anyone to slow down, bet less, or – heaven forbid – step away from the table.

It is possible to turn the intimidating complexity into an exciting strategic opportunity.

It is a bit stressful, especially when the dealers endlessly point to a few well-worn spots on the table labeled Texas, California, Florida, Arizona, and New Mexico. What if those are not good bets for your institution? How are you going to know? What if there are a few good names in there, but you are uncertain which ones they are? How can you approach the table with more information to guide your decisions?

If this sounds at all familiar, then this article just might be for you. You can turn the intimidating complexity into an exciting strategic opportunity. Indeed, it *is* possible to demystify the search process and select your prospective students with much more knowledge and confidence.

The Nature of the Game

With literally thousands of different institutions vying for students' attention, it has become incredibly difficult to differentiate your institution among the piles of glossy publications, letters, and emails to get your message heard above the din. Conveying your distinctive, compelling value proposition to prospective students at the right time is critical in generating applicants. Often, the safest solution to this challenge seems to be casting a large net by purchasing prospective student names in increasingly large numbers and marketing to them *en masse*.

Some smaller and mid-sized colleges have taken the “more is more” strategy to extremes, purchasing upwards of *half a million* high school student names each year. This is an incredibly expensive approach when all those prospective students receive at least one piece of mail from the institution. Colleges and universities routinely mail costly, odd-sized, multi-colored publications designed to “stand out” from all the other odd-sized, multi-colored publications that fill students’ mailboxes. In such cases, the large-scale search efforts can promote a feeling of security in the admissions office that the larger volume and carefully designed publications will result in greater numbers of applications. But how well does it really work? What is the return on such large investments? These are questions with detailed answers, and uncovering those answers is essential.

Even moderate search programs represent a large portion of an institution’s annual recruitment budget.

A great many institutions simply do not have the resources – or the desire – to purchase so many names and communicate with so many prospective students. They opt for a more measured approach. However, even moderate search programs represent a large portion of an institution’s annual student

recruitment budget. Because selecting and purchasing student names, creating, printing, mailing and emailing marketing materials, and then managing an ongoing recruitment stream with interested prospective students are all costly both in staff time and resources.

With all the costs, complexity, and consequences, when the new batches of high school student names are available each year, those who manage even the most successful recruiting operations still ask the question, “*How can I choose prospective student names more strategically for better results in the future?*”

Stack the Odds in Your Favor

The first step forward towards optimal search and student recruitment is to take a step *back*. You need a great deal of *information* to make wise decisions. Currently, there is a lot of dialogue about demographic changes, the “credit crunch,” rising tuition costs, “stealth applications,” and a whole host of other relevant and important issues that can influence college admissions. But, the best – *the most directly applicable* – information to support *your* search efforts comes from thorough analysis of your own most recent recruitment data and not from regional or national trends.

So, if information is your trump card, then the people who create and work with information on your campus should become your new best friends. Most institutions have an institutional research office or other analysts who are adept at extracting and analyzing recruitment data from your computer systems. If information is power, then access to information is not far removed.

If information is power, then access to information is not far removed.

Begin by collecting all of your recruitment data, starting with name-buys (both responders and non-responders to your search efforts). Then, identify the actions and activities that yielded applications and enrolling students and which did not. Most institutions keep track of “responders,” usually known as “inquirers” in their computer systems, and frequently discard the non-responders who never expressed any interest. This practice may work well in terms of mailings and other recruitment tactics, but those original purchased names need to be incorporated into your analysis.

For example, how many of your original name-buys ended up as “stealth applicants” who never had contact with your institution prior to their application? Of the stealth applicants, how many eventually enrolled? Or, how many of your original name-buys share many of the same characteristics with your enrolled student population and look like they *should* have applied? Did any of them end up enrolling at your direct competitors? If so, how could you have more effectively cultivated their interest?

Next, line up your original pool of name-buys with your inquirers (including search responders), applicants, admits, and enrolling students. Using a simple three-digit zip code as a reference, take a look at how many *applicants* and *enrolled students* you received from your initial name buys. In the end, applicants and enrolling students are the groups that count most in the recruitment process. If your results look like those in the example below, where thousands of names were purchased in these Texas areas but few applications resulted, you may need either to recalibrate your strategy for buying names, concentrating resources on achieving verifiable results for your institution, or to consider expanding recruitment efforts beyond name buys in these areas.

TX		All					
		Prospects	Search	Inquiries	Apps	Admit	Enroll
750 - North Texas	TX	2566	2459	107	1	0	0
751 - Dallas	TX	465	422	43	0	0	0
752 - Dallas	TX	858	809	49	2	1	1
753 - Dallas	TX	3	1	2	0	0	0
754 - Greenville	TX	40	26	14	0	0	0
755 - Texarkana	TX	37	31	6	0	0	0
756 - East Texas	TX	18	14	4	0	0	0
757 - East Texas	TX	34	26	8	0	0	0
758 - Palestine	TX	5	4	1	0	0	0
759 - Lufkin	TX	13	9	4	0	0	0
760 - Fort Worth	TX	458	414	44	1	1	0
761 - Fort Worth	TX	312	279	33	1	1	1
762 - Fort Worth	TX	162	151	11	0	0	0
763 - Wichita Falls	TX	45	34	11	0	0	0
764 - Fort Worth	TX	97	92	5	0	0	0
765 - Waco	TX	58	40	18	0	0	0
766 - Waco	TX	18	12	6	0	0	0
767 - Waco	TX	13	6	7	1	0	0
768 - Abilene	TX	14	14	0	0	0	0
769 - Midland	TX	16	10	6	0	0	0
770 - Houston	TX	2187	2053	134	6	3	2
772 - Houston	TX	10	9	1	0	0	0
773 - North Houston	TX	1211	1139	72	1	0	0
774 - North Houston	TX	1412	1329	83	1	0	0
775 - North Houston	TX	867	800	67	2	1	0

Geographical analysis is only one way to explore your data to extract important information. Once you have a working database of recruitment information, you can easily analyze conversion rates – the percentage of inquirers that become applicants – by a variety of characteristics: public/private high school, first contact, date of contact, and many others. When you ask questions and have a way to get solid, evidence-based answers, you have what you need to make the best decisions.

The key is to actively explore as many possible differentiators between applicants and non-applicants as you can imagine. Multivariate statistical modeling can take this process to another level. What is important is that the more information you draw from the data that you already have, the more you know about what may be successful in a recruitment process and what may be a reach or an unwise risk.

Much like counting cards at the blackjack table, when you truly know what cards have come before, you have a better idea of what could be coming next. In other words, you have *information*. Put into the context of a recruitment operation, that information begins to turn the table and stack the odds in your favor. And ultimately, data-based information is what’s necessary for making annual strategic name-buy decisions with confidence.

Bring In Reinforcements

Unlike the free drinks at the casino, you have access to free or inexpensive third-party data that can actually improve your decision-making rather than impair it. And to be the best player you can be, it is important that you know about the reinforcements that are available so that you can take advantage of them.

Alongside a wide range of demographic and market data that can be purchased, as well as historically compiled and integrated data from The College Board, one example of accessible, inexpensive, and very valuable third-party data is the StudentTracker service from the National Student Clearinghouse. StudentTracker, available at low-cost or no-cost (to institutions that are members of the Clearinghouse), allows institutions to determine where their non-enrolling students enrolled. In other words, you can find out, with certainty, which institutions succeeded in enrolling the students you desired.

Third-party data, when integrated with your own institutional data, can provide valuable insights. What would you do differently if you knew the profile of students in your own recruitment pipeline that enrolled at head-to-head competitor institutions? Or institutions that are dramatically more selective? You could align your focus, staff efforts, and resources with those prospective students who might have a genuine interest in your institution and expend less time and energy on those that do not.

Stay with the System

Focusing on data and analysis, testing and verifying, and creating information is hard work that takes time and requires patience. Most of all, it takes discipline. But the benefits are worth it. Finding the nuggets of third-party data that are available to you, building a comprehensive database that yields new information about your recruitment pipeline, and committing to the “culture of evidence,” in which results are measured instead of felt – these are all components of a systematic strategy that leads to real rewards in the long run.

The first rewards come when you can step back in front of the dealers with a smile and make your strategic search bets with knowledge and confidence. You now have powerful *information*. You ignore the fast talk and the flashing lights, and you make your decisions knowing they are based on the best information available and the new knowledge you created. And after a sound recruitment cycle, when your applicant pool is robust and diverse, you will know that you spent your resources wisely and realized the best return on your recruitment investment.

About Maguire Associates:

Founded in 1983, Maguire Associates is a research-based consulting firm exclusively serving educational clients. We have been a leader in the evolution of enrollment management since its inception. We have served over 350 clients, applying innovations in market research, analysis, and predictive modeling to help our clients understand the dynamics of past performance, apply insightful knowledge to sound decision-making in the present, and attain critical outcomes in the future.

We have a strong track record of supporting efforts across an institution – from strengthening the admissions process and helping achieve robust, balanced incoming classes; to strategic pricing and ensuring the most effective use of financial resources; to image/brand development and competitive positioning; to improving student retention; and to engaging alumni in all facets of institutional life.

For more information about our analytical recruitment service, *EMPOWR: Optimizing Student Recruitment*, please contact Maguire Associates at: 978-371-1775 or email us at empowr@maguireassoc.com. A full description of *EMPOWR* can also be found on our web site at www.maguireassoc.com/services/empowr.html.