A Collection of Insights for a Challenging Economy

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Advancing Higher Education Through Insight and Innovation
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Reflections from a Challenging Time

For all of us involved in the stewardship of higher education, the headlines throughout the 2008-2009 academic year chronicled an anxious journey. Would the severe economic downturn drive tuition up, aid to students and families down, and force students away from college? Would the outcome create severe excess capacity at smaller, private colleges; ballooning yields at public institutions nationwide; and unrecognizable enrollment patterns?

The recent enrollment cycle was immensely problematic and stressful, presenting complex challenges for virtually all institutions and resulting in disappointing outcomes for some. But we also now know that a significant number of institutions found success, even in the challenging economy. Many minimized price increases. Some moderated enrollment targets, dug more deeply into applicant pools to admit more students, and/or increased financial aid packages in anticipation of the recessionary market forces.

Performance in this climate appears to be as much a function of how well institutions have positioned themselves for and reacted to the economic downturn as it is to the downturn itself. But a key question to be asked moving forward is whether the midcourse corrections that helped institutions succeed this past cycle are sustainable this year and beyond, and at what cost.

Throughout the turmoil of these times, the Maguire Associates team shared thoughts, data, trends, and advice for our colleagues on campuses across the nation and around the world. Our Insights for a Challenging Economy series, launched last fall, served the purpose of contextualizing and quantifying the anxious journey, while providing strategic recommendations all along the way. Focusing specifically on timely issues at key dates throughout the enrollment cycle, Insights earned a significant and loyal audience of readers – stewards of higher education all – and we are grateful that you have found our perspectives helpful.
We promise to continue to sharing *Insights*, offering our analysis of what is happening, what to do, and what can be learned from the past. And the experience of the immediate past is truly relevant. While 2009-2010 will surely not prove identical to the year that preceded it, this compendium of previous *Insights* can undoubtedly continue to be a meaningful resource to help all of us learn from the new baseline that the last enrollment cycle has established, in preparation for success in the next.

Sincerely,

Kathy Dawley
President

Kathy joined the Maguire Associates team in 1989 and has served as president and CEO since 1996. Her insightful leadership has benefited Maguire Associates and the many colleges and universities where she has collaborated with boards, presidents, leadership councils, and departmental teams to plan and achieve their strategic and operational goals. A skilled listener, analyst, communicator, and organizational strategist, Kathy is committed to advancing organizational goals by applying market-based research in highly effective programs across the university/college life cycle.
Managing Fear, Building Evidence in Tough Times

MAGUIRE ASSOCIATES has been serving colleges and universities for 25 years. We have witnessed many periods of economic uncertainty in that time, always working with clients to calibrate what is happening and collaborate on how best to respond to it.

Clients have been expressing understandable anxiety recently about the economy. Institutions are worried about making their enrollment numbers, ensuring their students have needed financial resources, protecting their endowments, or adjusting their annual fund and capital campaigns.

We are all truly in this together. So, in that spirit, we offer two related insights for managing and leading through tough times and the constant hype that can make them seem worse:

- **Managing Fear:** Fear is natural and understandable. We need to give ourselves permission to be worried – up to a point. Some level of fear can actually play a useful role in helping institutions focus on the right questions and break down the organizational silos that otherwise reduce their effectiveness. Still, we have seen some colleges and universities make short-sighted, self-defeating decisions in difficult and demanding times.

  Happily, we have witnessed many other institutions rise to the challenge with creativity, grace and poise. Frequently, it is not the initial problem that imperils an organization, but how it works through fear to handle the situation. Many have later regretted cutting the very budgets needed to weather the storm effectively and build constructively for better days ahead.

- **Building Evidence:** Evidence is the enemy of needless fear. In these cases,
knowing what’s going on is always better than not know-ing. However, it can be difficult to know what is really and truly happening in the midst of a challenge without access to the facts. Those institutions that succeed in tough times build and maintain a culture of evidence and the internal systems, processes and expectations to sup-port it.

Now is certainly not the time to jettison your well thought-out strategic objectives, as tempting as that can be in these circumstances. You may want to reprioritize them, however, or reallocate the budgets that support them. How are you measuring and recalibrating your priorities, and which of them is most important or at risk right now?

We are suggesting to clients that they track and monitor applications earlier and more often than usual, discerning in detail whether and how the composition of the applicant pool differs from previous cycles. We are also suggesting that it is essential at this moment to protect your investment in current students by soliciting their feedback and actively ensuring their satisfaction. It is far less expensive to retain a student than it is to acquire a new one. Who among your students is at risk right now and how will you know?

**Tough Times**

Gut instincts can be useful in challenging times, but don’t purely become a “guttician.” Hard evidence provides the
discipline and perspective needed to overcome fear and manage through daunting circumstances. Without real-time situational awareness, however, individuals and institutions risk acting mindlessly no matter their capabilities and track records.

Being mindful in turbulent times means taking a deep breath, pausing for reflection, communicating like never before with colleagues across departments, and developing and utilizing the evidence you need to make the best decisions. Times like these make it difficult to maintain this discipline in the face of fear and impatience. But times like these are when we need that discipline most.
Our relationship with Maguire Associates is a partnership that has grown and evolved over time. Bellarmine University has drastically changed over the past five years, our new student enrollment has grown seventy-five percent in that time period, and working with EMFASYS has helped us maximize our growth potential without sacrificing the academic quality of our incoming students.

Joseph J. McGowan
President
Bellarmine University
Louisville, KY
Four Strategies for a Difficult Economy

Today’s economic conditions are monopolizing discussions among leadership teams and boards of trustees at many colleges and universities. It is a nerve-wracking time, to say the least. Financial stresses now loom very large in pending decisions about enrollment, tuition increases, net revenue, financial aid policies, and discount rates.

In our first edition of Insights for a Challenging Economy (October 16th), we emphasized the importance of managing fear and building evidence during times of turbulence. In response, many of you asked what specific actions should be considered right now to manage these challenges in ways that do not compromise your long-term strategy and sustainability.

Here are four immediate strategies to consider:

1. **Remember the continuing students.** A common mistake is to focus so totally on the incoming class that existing students may be short-changed. Consider both first year and returning students when setting price increases for tuition, fees, room and board. Decisions made now about list price tuition and room and board increases, net cost increases, and discount rate will directly shape your ability to retain returning students - especially sophomores.

Retention strategies often focus on those at risk academically. Yet today’s circumstances mean that institutions should also identify and proactively focus on students who might be at risk economically. Colleges and universities that do not adjust their institutional aid for continuing students in conjunction with cost increases may risk encountering increased attrition rates. Indeed, families of students who matriculated only two months ago may not look kindly at next year’s increase in net cost, shying away from even heavier loan burdens and considering educational options elsewhere. It is far
less expensive to keep a current student than to find a new one, so it is important to set aside funds to help students who risk leaving for financial reasons.

2. **Communicate value early and often.** Value is an essential message to share and frequently repeat with students and parents. Value is the relationship between cost and quality, so both of these dimensions should be communicated. In economically challenging times, families need more than ever to understand why their money is best spent at one institution as opposed to another. Offer convincing arguments about the return on their educational investment at your institution, both in cost and quality terms. Encourage your president to send a letter to prospective and current students and parents acknowledging today’s difficulties, underscoring what is being done to address them, and reinforcing your value proposition. Develop other such creative ways to reach your audience and communicate identifiable institutional value.

Here is where building a culture of evidence really helps. Career and employment outcomes, internships and experiential learning, and professional networking opportunities are at the top of the list of family priorities that shape their value perceptions. Also, make sure that every prospective student and parent is aware that families are not necessarily asked to pay the listed tuition price if they cannot afford it. In this spirit, tough times require recognizing students and parents as true consumers and investors.
3. **Focus on enrollment over rankings.** Given this year’s circumstances, it is more important to enroll a class than to ratchet up institutional prestige. Focusing on actions that ensure a robust incoming class and limit continuing student attrition may require some short-term concessions. In the long run, an institution benefits more from the revenue and positive environment that accompany a healthy enrollment than from small improvements in statistical performance.

4. **Review financial aid plans.** Financial aid should focus on the price sensitivity of admitted students. Identifying specific ranges of net cost that have historically yielded the optimal number and mix of students is a key part of succeeding in an uncertain season. Some institutions carefully monitor and restrict their discount rate – both for incoming classes and total enrollment – and are hesitant to raise it. Experience shows that when aid is deployed strategically and discount rates approached flexibly, however, a modest increase in the discount rate can actually result in significantly greater net revenue.

Given that knowledge, this might not be the time to restrict your financial aid budget and discount rate for first-year and returning students. Controlling costs for families in this climate will encourage new students to enroll and continuing students to stay.

**Anticipation Over Anxiety**

Anticipating future scenarios is central to effective decision making in difficult times. This coming spring provides a case in point. Families may well wait until the very final hours before making enrollment decisions, with more of them than ever focusing on net cost. Well-prepared colleges and universities will have spent the prior six months – and that means now – analyzing, adjusting, and articulating their value proposition in the ways presented in this and future Bulletins.
Institutions that excel during tough times also use present dangers to collapse organizational “silos” that limit collaboration within management teams. Maguire Associates believes that enrollment management represents a lifelong relationship with students across a continuum of administrative functions including Admissions, Academics, Career/Life Preparation, Student Life, Alumni Affairs, and Institutional Advancement. Students and parents do not care how your institution is organized. However, they do care about the value and accountability the entire institution delivers to them as consumers and investors. There is no better way to deliver that message and ensure that performance than through improved communication and cooperation across departments. Without good communication and collaboration, too much time and money are lost in ways that most institutions can ill afford these days.

More on these leadership and organizational development issues in a future edition of *Insights for a Challenging Economy.*
Three Suggestions for Surviving Today and Thriving Tomorrow

It is a challenge in a difficult economy to ensure that the loudest and seemingly most urgent issues do not monopolize your time. In moments of uncertainty and stress there is enormous pressure to focus on urgent matters, whether or not they are genuinely important.

The two-by-two matrix depicting the relationship between importance and urgency (right) illustrates this point. As always, and even more so in this unstable economy, a key to effectiveness is to concentrate on issues that are important and urgent (upper-right quadrant) while not losing sight of important matters that may not seem as urgent right now (lower-right quadrant). With inattention, the latter can become urgent very quickly.

Determining the relative importance of the issues on your daily agenda will test the utility of your strategic plan. After all, what matters most ought to be evident in your institution’s highest strategic priorities. Otherwise, virtually everything on your desk or in your voice mail or email can seem urgent. How do you and your colleagues allocate your valuable time? How do you avoid being consumed by distractions that are urgent but not truly important (upper left quadrant)? Many higher education professionals are...
telling us that they feel overwhelmed these days, and it’s no wonder. It is not always easy to identify and prioritize what is most important.

Here are three urgent and important enrollment-related suggestions that provide some useful perspective:

1. **Assess and solidify your application pool.** Monitor your application volume and composition carefully and frequently in these final weeks of 2008. Identify how this year’s pool differs from last year’s – ideally, last year’s pool at this time in the cycle. Given current economic conditions, diligent internal research is more important than ever. For example, it can be useful to identify changes in application patterns within key high schools or by geographical region, zip code, even submission type – online versus paper, institutional applications versus consortium applications. Target messages of value and affordability to prospective students and families who reside in areas with lower average household incomes. More expensive institutions may need to expend more energy sharing such messages or risk losing desirable applicants.

We also offer the reminder that there is a significant difference between applications and completed applications. Completed applications will constitute your admitted – and subsequently enrolling – class. That is why it is so important to allocate resources to encourage prospective students to begin their applications as soon as possible and, once the applications are received, to process those
applications in a timely manner. That kind of speed provides real-time market intelligence that may give you a competitive edge in uncertain times.

In previous years, there were fewer risks in waiting to see how many applications would be completed by January and February. This year, use each new application submission and your institution’s stepped-up application-processing efforts as opportunities for personal interaction with applicants. Answer their questions, share your messages, encourage them to complete their application, and speak directly to their interests and concerns.

2. **Stay focused on next year’s prospects.** The pressure to capture the attention of this year’s high school seniors can be all-consuming. However, high school juniors are also engaged in their own college searches right now. The period between Thanksgiving and the New Year is when juniors (and even sophomores) spend considerable time discussing college options with family and friends. Don’t shortchange your fall 2010 and 2011 recruitment by missing opportunities now to place your institution’s name and value message in front of juniors and sophomores.

There will be a next year, no matter how harrowing this year may seem. Without concerted efforts to cultivate strong interest among this year’s juniors, however, you will be fighting an uphill battle to get their attention later in the process. Stay in front of high school juniors, even while you maintain a full-court press for this year’s enrollment.

What is the best way to recruit next year’s enrolling class? Context really matters this time around. It is important to ask yourself the same questions that high school juniors and their families are or will be asking. While current seniors and their families have had only a few months to experience this difficult economy prior to making application and enrollment decisions, next year’s seniors and their parents will have had over a year to assess their
circumstances and set their college priorities.

It is important to understand how perceptions of families and students may change as a result of a prolonged economic downturn. Will next year’s high school seniors be more distressed or less distressed? How will the experience of a bumpy 2009 affect their decision making? Will this year’s messages resonate with next year’s listeners? Don’t hesitate to ask them! Reach out now with surveys and other inquiry tools. Better information from the students and families you seek to recruit and engage will lead to better strategies for your institution.

3. **Optimize recruitment resources.** It is no small task to execute a successful enrollment strategy in tough times. Your resources are not unlimited. One proven way to manage effectively without busting budgets or working 24 hours a day is to deploy your attention strategically.

For example, some institutions are currently evaluating how they recruit and treat transfer applicants. In an environment in which maintaining enrollment is critical, transfer students can be an overlooked and undervalued resource. Consider investing modest recruitment and financial aid resources in recruiting transfer students. In some cases, transfers seek high-quality education at reasonable costs and your institution just might be their answer. Make sure you communicate that affordability message to transfers as well as traditional students. There’s no reason why some traditional freshman
recruitment efforts – recruitment emails, phone calls, prospect name buys – can’t be creatively tailored to become part of a deliberate and intentional transfer-student recruitment strategy.

Lastly, the prospective student-name purchasing season has arrived and ramps up to full speed in the next few months. For many institutions, this is a very expensive item in the recruitment budget. To achieve the best possible return on this investment, take time to analyze the historical outcomes from your previous name purchases. Use sound research techniques to assess whether your outreach to prospective students has been too broad or too narrow. After all, few institutions can afford designing, printing and mailing expensive publications to prospective students who will simply never apply. Assessing your return-on-investment in this manner will save you significant time and money.

**Time Matters**

Time is as precious a resource as money. Some would argue that it is our most precious resource. Right now, everyone is working against time. The objective is to work effectively and efficiently. Even in the throes of uncertainty, success comes to those who separate the important from the urgent, keeping both short- and long-term institutional objectives in view. We encourage you to take the time now – analytically, strategically, and creatively – to maximize the value of your time during the challenging days ahead.
What I appreciate most about Maguire Associates is that they respond, not just to the presenting questions that we have, but they provide an opportunity to elaborate on the overriding issues at hand.

Peter Stace
Vice President for Enrollment
Fordham University
Bronx, NY
THOSE SEEKING or providing higher education are searching for both savings and good returns on their investments, across the country and around the world. Colleges and universities are rapidly adjusting to the new realities of a challenging economy. Current financial conditions have made it imperative for institutions to examine how they are defining and measuring success. Doing so inevitably focuses leaders’ attention on spending wisely and protecting enrollment revenue.

As a traumatic 2008 concludes and administrators look with renewed energy to the coming year, it is the right moment to consider ways to assess and improve resource allocation. Indeed, for the determined, informed, and visionary, this environment creates meaningful opportunities for investments of time and money in new or revised processes, operations, and strategies that may not have been possible in better circumstances.

Difficult times certainly create great urgency to optimize revenues and control expenses. Interestingly, an uncertain economy also creates openings for significant improvement in how leaders assess, manage, reward, and promote an institution’s most valuable and expensive asset – its employees.

Here are some strategies for succeeding and leading – through investment, recruitment, and assessment – when money is on everyone’s minds:

1. **Investment: Be pound wise and penny foolish.** Cutting budgets alone cannot compensate for the sharp changes in today’s market conditions. Yes, in this environment, there are many appropriate and understandable reasons to reduce spending, especially when it comes to utilizing scarce resources for tasks that provide little value but have become part of an annual budgeting habit. If nothing else, tough times mean questioning everything and cutting inefficient and
ineffective expenses that should have been reduced or eliminated long ago.

Of course, resistance to unnecessary or careless spending is always warranted, in good times and bad. Yet, there is rarely comparable scrutiny to prevent cutting spending on valuable, strategic initiatives or in areas whose value may not be fully appreciated or assessed. In evaluating proposed investments or cost reductions, use deliberate diagnostics and cost-benefit analyses to assess those expenses. Let the evidence be your guide.

If you are not yet using research, market feedback, dashboards, and other metrics to evaluate performance in this manner, then adopting these approaches ought to be a high priority investment. Without valid evidence, determining where to increase or decrease budgets is fraught with unnecessary risk and guesswork. Additionally, evidence must be evaluated within the context of a shared understanding of your institution’s highest strategic objectives. As a rule, one should be reluctant to slash expenses on strategic priorities. That choice too often results in inadvertently reducing revenue, impairing image, damaging morale, and losing talented employees.

2. Recruitment: Apply real intelligence to marketing programs. Surely, student recruitment ought to be one of the last functions subject to unthinking, revenue-sacrificing budget reductions. However, it should still be subject to a healthy scrutiny. For example, outreach that is not...
informed by underlying research can really miss the mark. Now more than ever, it is critical to understand your specific market segments – how they react to your pricing and value messages, which media and materials are successful in cultivating their interest, and which are not. Broad-based, blanket approaches to recruitment are an overpriced luxury these days, absorbing too much money without commensurate results.

Here are some areas in which better market intelligence can help you boost the return on your marketing investments:

• Purchase search names in demographic and geographic areas using prioritized criteria that have already proven effective for your institution. Purchasing names alone rarely opens new markets. Assess search’s genuine effectiveness through thoughtful and unbiased analysis.

• Segment recruitment mailings to ensure that appropriate messages go to the right audiences. The greater the relevance, the better the results.

• Utilize email for cost-effective outreach, not just for invitations or announcements. Email is an ideal tool for helping prospective students communicate with current students and faculty, learning what is unique and wonderful about your institution.

• Allocate your financial aid awards strategically, deploying awards proactively to build an enrolling class of desired – or required – size, composition, and cost.

3. **Assessment: Take a closer look at skills and performance – including your own.** Some of the same principles and skills regarding evidence-based decisions that we advocate for student recruitment spending practices can be applied to other organizational dimensions. Professional development, talent assessment, and reward and recognition programs are sometimes casualties
during economic downturns. However, it is important to understand that the best performers are often identified in the most demanding and trying circumstances.

Who among your team is distinguishing him or herself right now with calm, thoughtful, strategic, and unselfish behavior? What evidence do you have to validate their success? And what evidence can you use to demonstrate that the institution values their commitment and effectiveness? Many fine people will seize this opportunity to rise to the occasion. Now, more than ever, exemplary performance needs to be noticed and rewarded.

While it may be right to declare a temporary salary or hiring freeze in some situations, it is never right to abandon strategic talent management. There may be people on your team who are performing so far above and beyond the call of duty right now that they deserve special recognition in whatever form it can be provided, as a bonus or other alternative. Failure to understand this imperative may result in the costly departure of an institution’s best employees. Difficult times always require creative measures. Ask yourself what you can do in the closing weeks of this year to thank your team in a meaningful way. Then, acknowledge your very best performers either in public or private. Finally, ask yourself and a trusted colleague or two to assess your performance under trying circumstances and how you might improve your own leadership.
A New Year’s Resolution

It is not easy to develop a culture that reinforces the importance of making financial and talent decisions based on evidence and measured evaluation. It requires an unrelenting commitment to developing and investing in systems that generate the evidence needed to consider institutional and individual performance. Developing and maintaining this capacity requires consistent communication and open dialogue about institutional performance and priorities.

At the brink of an historic year ahead, now is the time for uncovering new knowledge, developing new habits, and supporting stated priorities with action, attention, and resources. When security and certainty are elusive, both institutions and individuals are better served when they can report – whether to deans, vice presidents, presidents, or trustees – that they have the evidence to support their financial and human resource decisions. Make a New Year’s resolution to seek out the information to support your most important decisions and build the systems and practices to provide all essential data for the future.

Whatever the numerous, complex conversations you believe may have been put off for too long at your institution, our holiday wish for you and your colleagues is that 2009 will be the long-awaited moment when “someday” becomes “today.” There is no better time to start than right now.
During the years of high demographics, Maguire Associates helped Boston University reach for and achieve high quality in our incoming classes. And as the demographics change, Maguire Associates will be there to help us maintain our quality and help us understand the decision-making patterns of students.

Laurie Pohl
Vice President, Enrollment & Student Affairs
Boston University
Boston, MA
Why Effective Communication Matters Now More Than Ever

Leadership and stewardship of institutional resources are especially challenging in times like these. To manage them most effectively, college and university officials need to know whether they are communicating with their faculty and staff colleagues as efficiently and productively as possible. Clarity of communication is an especially important matter now as boards and executive teams meet to make pricing and budget decisions for next year.

Too often in frantic, fast-moving times, important strategic conversations are ineffectual, delayed or even forgotten. While many of us are already struggling to keep our New Year’s resolutions, we should never forego a resolution to improve communication. At a moment in which our nation has embraced a transition that placed a premium on thoughtful and persuasive communication, we can all heed the reminder of its power and importance in governing our own administrations.

Here are three suggestions for improving communication within your institution:

1. Manage meetings better and hold fewer of them.

Managing meetings well is no trivial matter. How executive teams conduct their interactions may indicate how well – or even, in some cases, whether – their organizations will survive this economic downturn.

Poorly run meetings can have terrible consequences, especially now, when efficient allocation of resources is essential. Every one of us has suffered through interminable meetings that lack precise objectives or actionable outcomes. One true story is of a department head who loaded up his meetings with so many undeveloped ideas and unspecified actions items that his direct reports simply chose among a jumble of possibilities and did only what they wanted. He then
spent the first part of the following meeting wondering why people weren’t doing what he had asked.

By contrast, well-run meetings can deliver immediate, tangible results and therefore save time and money, encourage fresh thinking, synthesize disparate parts into a cohesive whole, and sharpen decision-making. Changing what happens in meetings starts by being mindful of how you currently design and manage meetings and then choosing to change things for the better. In our roles both as client facilitators and contributors, we at Maguire Associates have thought long and hard about the attributes of great meetings.

Five steps we embrace for ensuring more productive meetings are:

• Question whether a meeting is needed in the first place. Are there better ways to gather input, consider options and make a decision? Is the subject matter for the meeting truly important, or is it simply urgent without commensurate importance? Does your strategic plan already provide the operational guidance needed to make a decision without an endless series of meetings?

• Test the conclusion that a meeting is warranted by developing a proposed meeting agenda. What two or three specific objectives – and no more – do you wish to address in the meeting and why?
• Invite all – but only – the right people to the meeting. Most major challenges facing colleges and universities today are systemic and transcend any one department, which means that collaboration across silo boundaries is a necessity. At the same time, beware of having too many cooks in the kitchen.

• Identify an appropriate facilitator for the really important meetings. Good facilitators know how to connect and synthesize varied opinions, which can make the difference between success and failure. Facilitators also help overcome the distractions of personalities and politics that can otherwise diminish a meeting’s effectiveness.

• Conclude each meeting by reviewing and confirming agreement on the major outcomes. Ensure that each participant understands what has been decided and his or her specific role in its implementation. Ambiguity can be costly, especially when the margin for error today is slimmer than ever. There should be great clarity around action items, division of labor and timetables. Distributing a written summary within days if not hours of a meeting is both very useful and an important demonstration of leadership.

2. Encourage dissent and model clarity in communication – don’t go to Abilene!

Professor Jerry Harvey of The George Washington University underscores the pitfalls of imprecision found in poorly run meetings and other ineffective communication. In his classic story of the Abilene Paradox, Harvey tells of a family that collectively chose to drive a great distance to a diner in Abilene, Texas at which, as they later found out, none of the family members actually wanted to eat. This is a story of a group of otherwise smart people deciding to do something that not one of them individually thought was a very good idea.
When participants are not encouraged – by appreciation and positive acclaim – to offer differing or even opposing views, a “go along to get along” mindset can fester within work groups. It is in these imprecise, subtly unsupportive and even fear-based environments that the Abilene Paradox occurs most frequently, exposing executive teams to the risks of dubious, ill-conceived decisions that few of their members actually did or will support.

Encouraging dissent comes easier for some than others. At a different institution, a president convened an offsite meeting of his management team to prepare their institutional values statement. During discussion of the importance of treating colleagues with respect, he disagreed with one manager’s definition of “respect,” flew into a critical rage, and abruptly ended the meeting.

Examples of unfortunate approaches aside, there is no better time than right now to invite openness and embrace precision in all interpersonal, print, digital and electronic communication.

3. Listen to your team and your markets.

As they meet right now to make pricing and budgeting decisions, the best executive teams will be mindful of how important it is to listen carefully to one another – to truly listen. Listening well sometimes means being willing and able to step outside one’s own point of view to understand a colleague who may look at things in a different, albeit helpful, manner. There is a wealth of diverse
perspectives within each institution just as there are colleagues whose contact
with prospects, students, parents, and alumni enable them to deliver fresh
viewpoints and invaluable feedback.

Consider reaching out to colleagues at other colleges and universities, too, not
to disclose proprietary information, but to note trends that institutions might
share and solutions you might utilize. If you belong to a consortium of col-
leges, keep close tabs on key indicators such as application volume and deposit
rates. Pay close attention to the trade publications, too, and create easy mecha-
nisms for your colleagues to share and comment on the most useful articles.

By soliciting feedback and listening to it carefully, institutional leaders can
apply increasingly greater levels of knowledge and insight to their decision
making. After all, knowledge continues to be the most potent antidote we have
found for countering the inevitable fear that people are feeling these days.
We [The Chronicle of Higher Education] asked Maguire Associates to conduct research studies on four-year college presidents and four-year college trustees. The work that Maguire Associates did was extremely helpful in narrowing the scope and directing the question format. Maguire Associates’ analysis of the data was complete and sophisticated. Both studies continue to get a lot of attention in the industry because nothing like it had ever been done.

Jeffrey Selingo
Editor
The Chronicle of Higher Education
Washington, DC
SHIFTING ECONOMIC WINDS over the past six months have brought an end to a powerful, healthy wave that many institutions have ridden successfully in recent years. While the work of college and university leadership teams is never easy, the recent student demographic spike, the abundance of online admission applications, and half a decade’s surge in financial markets have made for mostly smooth sailing – until now.

Understandably, for many there is fear about the course that this year’s enrollment cycle is charting and great concern about next year’s as well. Managing that fear effectively is essential because, if left unchecked, fear can produce misguided and even counterproductive decisions. Unchecked fear can disable even the truest internal compass. At this critical late-winter moment, when boards of trustees and leadership teams are making decisions about tuition increases, discount rates, cost-cutting, and how best to communicate these choices, resolutions informed and confirmed by evidence will best enable institutions to keep the horizon in sight and weather the storm.

What Are We Seeing?

We have reached an important juncture in this year’s complicated enrollment cycle. The market’s first major, measurable indicator is now largely available. By this time, most conventional admission application deadlines have passed. While institutions with rolling admissions are still anticipating a significant number of submissions, they too have a strong sense of the shape of their applicant pools.

To date, we have seen some noticeable shifts in student application behaviors that are attributable to the economy. However, if the economy alone were the overwhelming driver of changing behaviors, clear and consistent patterns of rising or
falling application numbers should be emerging. But, here’s the catch: they aren’t.

Some of the predictions commonly made over the last six months about this cycle are proving true. Applications for admission to public institutions are higher in most regions and across selectivity levels. For private colleges and universities, where the conventional wisdom suggested that applications could plummet this year, the picture is nowhere near as clear.

Right now, we see that many larger, urban universities with substantial portfolios of professional programs are doing well on the whole and that many liberal arts colleges are finding this a more difficult season. Aside from some of the elite, “no loan” institutions, a significant number of more-selective colleges and universities are experiencing a decline in applications for the first time in years. The experience among moderately- and less-selective institutions, however, is quite mixed, with comparable numbers of institutions experiencing significant declines, no declines, or notable increases. In fact, a great many smaller private institutions have fared very well thus far – at least in terms of applications.

Furthermore, most institutions are finding that the composition of their applicant pool is comparable to what it has been in recent years – a factor that is often at least as important as the sheer volume of applications. However, for some whose total application quantity is steady, there are substantial decreases in certain key markets or demographics, revealing a reality not as rosy as that conveyed by application num-
bers alone because increases are in markets where their yield is lower than in primary markets.

So, what does all of this mean? And what are the most important considerations for steering your yield tactics in the days ahead?

We offer three insights, not always obvious in the midst of this storm, to guide your perspectives during the next critical phase of this enrollment cycle:

1. **It’s Not Just the Economy.** It is tempting – and too easy – to blame the economy for everything and forego scrutiny of an institution’s specific attributes and performance. However, the early evidence points to substantial variability in results at different institutions and within institutional types, which logically means that factors over and above the economy are at work. Performance right now may be as much a function of how well institutions have positioned themselves for and reacted to the economic downturn as it is to the downturn itself. In short, results to date appear based not solely on what is happening to institutions or what institutions are, but on what institutions do.

   Among our clients and a number of other colleges and universities, for example, we note greater application generation at institutions that heeded the call over the past decade to focus their marketing messages on future outcomes and not just on academic offerings. In this climate, the impact of a strong, career-opportunity value proposition is proving to be significant. And some institutions whose recruitment messages have not been tailored or targeted in that way are likely feeling the pinch. Now more than ever, it seems that focused and disciplined recruitment efforts centered on meaningful and measurable outcome messages are being rewarded by the marketplace.

2. **Historical Data Matter Now More Than Ever.** We have heard at many professional conferences and read in more than a few recent articles the painfully over-
used mantra that “historical data no longer matter.” It may be comforting amidst uncertainty to warm ourselves to the idea that there is no way we can know what is happening, what to do, and what can be learned from the past. But it is nonsense. While it’s true that this journey is markedly different from the last, imagine a ship’s captain in troubled seas not utilizing past and current evidence in all its forms to navigate through such adversity. Assume your institution did just that, for the sake of argument. What is the alternative strategy?

During other recent downturns – the October 1987 stock-market meltdown, the savings and loan crises of the late 1980s, the chaos of 1990s downsizing, the “dot com” and telecommunications bubble bursts, our national mourning following September 11, 2001, and other events similarly billed at the time as the economic equivalents of the “storm of the century” – the last thing effective leaders chose to do was destroy the records, discard the map, and disable the navigation system. Yes, the current emergency is more complex and even more painful than most previous chapters. Yet, who among us can possibly argue that we have nothing to learn from how institutions including our own have acted and reacted during past downturns?

3. **It is Still Predictable.** Another disconcerting lament we hear suggests that you simply cannot make enrollment predictions and projections in this economic climate. We would like to disagree politely, but we cannot. We disagree profoundly. The truth is that this year’s outcomes
are still predictable, but with one unsurprising caveat: What we do not know is the amount of predictive power that has been lost – if any – due to economic turbulence.

There is clearly substantial uncertainty in the marketplace today. To whatever degree that families make decisions on a similar set of criteria as they have in recent years, however, our ability to predict and project remains stronger than it may seem. Let’s not forget that families have been considering cost when making enrollment decisions for quite some time. Cost will almost certainly be a larger consideration this year, as an extension of an ongoing trend, but it is not an entirely new phenomenon. It may be a difference in degree, but not necessarily a difference in kind. The same can be said for the timing of enrollment deposits – in general, they’ve been arriving at institutions at progressively later dates for years.

We believe it is essential to distinguish between an entirely new concept and the continuation, change in tempo, or other modification of an old one. The notion that enrollment decisions will suddenly be made upon a sweeping new set of criteria that no one could have considered or imagined is an illusion. The point is that we are still sailing in the same ocean. Today’s circumstances do not necessarily present a new paradigm with completely different input variables and outcome measures.

Finding Calmer Seas

Though fear can be as thick as the salty air and fog over the ocean, surrendering to it is not the answer to this season’s uncertainty. The unending pursuit of the facts is. One fact we know for sure is that we are 15 months into a severe global recession that, now more than ever, requires that we marshal evidence and use institutional memory, historical knowledge, and professional experience in concert to plan and execute successful strategies. The key challenge for institutional leaders
today is to ensure that employees and colleagues have access to every evidence-based and outcomes-based resource on deck.

In these – indeed, at all – times, deploying an enrollment management navigation system most effectively means:

• Closely monitoring and analyzing the data as they become available;

• Adjusting strategically and wisely to patterns you discern;

• Preparing contingencies in case you veer further off course than in the past, which places a premium on precise instrumentation that informs you quickly of such course discrepancies;

• Breaking out of the traditional framework when necessary by utilizing creative outreach efforts, incentives, and financial aid offers to encourage enrollment; and

• Developing a compelling messaging system that truly elevates and differentiates your value proposition while ensuring that every leader and communicator on campus knows how to use it.

Some institutions may find their way to home port this year a little lighter in applications, enrolled students, or revenue than they would like. For nearly every institution at sea right now, there will be a next year and ample time between now and then to build more capabilities, acquire more information, and adjust navigation tactics. There is time to generate
the research and develop the knowledge that will help you better understand the new baseline that this enrollment cycle establishes to avoid needless repetition of unsatisfying results.

This year is not lost, even for those institutions behind in applications now or in deposits as the spring and summer unfold. There are still important lessons to be learned and tools to help ensure that you find the pathway home by the time September rolls around – and if not optimally in 2009 then with renewed momentum in 2010.

You and your colleagues have likely traveled similar routes in the past. You can do it again.
"The staff at Maguire Associates has presented to our trustees, our admissions and financial aid staffs, and our faculty. It is not just the report and the data; it’s the informed translation that they provide. There is no level of our institution that they haven’t touched."

Jacqueline Liebergott
President
Emerson College
Boston, MA
Emerging Insights from Maguire Associates’ College Decision Impact Survey

We’ve all been hearing for at least six months that college-bound students and their parents are worried about the economy more than at any time in the recent past. Our data thus far provide confirmatory evidence that a significantly higher percentage of students are concerned about the economy compared with our last national survey. This is not surprising, given the global recession coupled with the long-term financial commitment that college enrollment requires. Interestingly, high school juniors and seniors are expressing relatively equal concern, suggesting that there will be implications for Fall 2010 enrollment, as well.

Now, the critical period in which students and families seriously weigh admission offers and financial aid packages has begun. In the next several weeks, they will choose which college or university to attend. On what will they base their decisions this year? Early insights from our new College Decision Impact Survey suggest that affordability and financial aid are among the highest priority concerns of students and parents in this year’s college search and selection process.

Maguire Associates has invited prospective college students and parents across the nation to participate in a survey designed to understand emotions, motivations, and intentions of college-bound students and their families in light of the current economic climate. The survey was launched last month in partnership with FastWeb and The New School.

The Power of Evidence

More than 16,000 high school seniors and juniors and nearly 4,000 parents have already responded to the survey. With completion of the first-phase of data collection expected at the end of March, the College Decision Impact Survey will add the power of evidence to the many opinions and claims being made in the media.
and elsewhere about what students and parents are thinking, feeling, and intending to do.

While it is too early to reach any final conclusions from the data, significant trends are discernable. Given the urgency of the moment, we want to share these early indications with you, our clients and friends, in this edition of Insights for a Challenging Economy.

Our first round of insights from the data indicates that:

1. As expected, many families’ financial situation has worsened during the past two years and some parents anticipate they will be less able to help pay for their child’s college education than they had previously expected.

2. The availability of merit- or need-based financial aid is more important to students than it was after the last economic downturn.

3. The majority of students and parents report that their family’s concerns about the economy will “greatly” or “somewhat” influence the schools to which students have applied or will apply. Even among families earning over $100,000 per year, 1 in 10 say their application decisions are greatly influenced by the economy.

4. Over a third of students report that they are likely to consider changing to a major that will be in greater demand or have a higher income potential.

5. When asked to indicate the likelihood of considering

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**News Headlines**

- March 2, 2009 -

**HOPING THE PRICE IS RIGHT**

“Do you raise tuition to shore up revenues, and risk losing valuable students in the process? Do you instead cut or freeze tuition, or at least minimize increases, in the hopes that doing so will keep the students coming back?”

- Inside Higher Ed
alternative arrangements for their college education – living at home versus on
campus, beginning at a two-year college and transferring to a four-year institu-
tion, taking a year off to earn money, etc. – the majority of students say they
are, on balance, not likely to modify their plans in such ways.

Given these findings, it becomes evident that clear and frequent communica-
tion regarding families’ net costs and the composition of financial aid offers – the
amount of grant awards relative to loans and work study assistance – can play an
essential role allaying fear and reducing misunderstanding about affordability.
Clear communication will be more important than ever.

**Emotions, Intentions, and Actions**

It is important to ask whether heightened emotions will translate into significant
changes in intentions and actions with regard to imminent college enrollment deci-
sions. At this stage in our data collection, strong expressions of uncertainty and
fear do not fully correlate with stated intentions for action. For example, thus far
there is no statistically significant relationship between students’ level of concern
about the economy and their preference for a public or private institution. It re-
mains a distinct possibility that the centrality of college education and the lifetime
implications of college choice are so paramount that many students and parents
may move beyond immediate concerns and make decisions based on what they
believe is best for them in the long term.

We cautiously share this potentiality with you not to make a bold prediction, but
to ensure that it is not merely the loudest, most apocalyptic voices being heard in
this important national dialogue. In the important second phase of the survey, we
will approach these students and parents again to find out what they actually chose
to do and why. A tracking study of this nature enables us to do a highly refined
analysis, not only of priorities and intentions beforehand but also of final enroll-
ment decisions, allowing us to learn explicitly about the relationship between
families’ stated intentions and eventual actions in this uncertain economy.

The Really Big Questions

We are all seeking accurate, actionable answers to big questions concerning college choice and today’s economy. The results of the College Decision Impact Survey will help higher education professionals explore and calibrate answers to any number of questions about critical enrollment issues, such as:

• **Choice and Criteria:** Will the economic crisis change what students and parents traditionally consider their most important search and selection criteria? How will application and enrollment choices vary across student subgroups? How much will distance-from-home and commuting opportunities factor into decision making?

• **Value and Affordability:** How will students and parents evaluate tuition list price versus net cost, and how will they determine value? What role will costs and the availability of financial assistance play in students’ final college choice? How will the family’s mix of financing resources realign in the current environment?

• **Willingness to Change:** Will students be more inclined than in the past to work part-time or even full-time during college, or even take a year off to work? Will more students view community college as a desirable alternative? Will there be a shift towards public institutions, and how large will it be? Will students be more drawn to pre-pro-
fessional programs and move away from liberal arts?

• **What about Juniors?** How will the preferences and plans of high school juniors (prospective Fall 2010 students) and their parents be affected by current economic conditions and what does that mean for recruitment during the next year? How will the views of juniors and their parents differ from those of seniors and their parents, if at all?

Maguire Associates is undertaking this effort as part of our ongoing commitment to provide the higher education community with the most current and meaningful insights in this challenging economy. We will share the full findings and comprehensive analyses of the College Decision Impact Survey in the Summer of 2009.
“Maguire Associates exceeded every expectation of The University of Alabama School of Law. The staff at Maguire is highly professional, prompt, both analytical and sensitive, and ultimately delivered invaluable advice.”

Kenneth Randall
Dean
The University of Alabama
School of Law
Tuscaloosa, AL

Meet Melissa Leung

As a Junior Research Associate, Melissa is involved with building models, preparing strategic trade-off scenarios, and executing institutional grant awarding for our clients.
Is That Your Final Offer? Four Recommendations for Finishing the Enrollment Race Strong

Colleges and universities across the country have now placed most of their acceptance letters and financial aid packages in the hands of students and families. While this is certainly a nerve-wracking time, it also presents a great opportunity as these students and families inquire about their financial aid packages. The tone and tactics of the response to families over the next few weeks may make or break incoming classes at many institutions across the country.

Dialing for Dollars

We’ve all seen that students and families are taking longer to make their college choices this year than in the past. Many institutions, especially private ones, report that enrollment deposits have been trickling in at a significantly slower pace than in recent years. It is important to remember that, unless you notice a sharp increase in the number of students who have informed you that they will not be enrolling at your institution, you still have a viable and active pool of potential enrollees. We’re noting that many institutions are experiencing a lag in deposits, but that is not necessarily a decrease in deposits. It’s essential to distinguish between the two because date-to-date comparisons between 2008 and 2009 can be disconcerting if not interpreted in context. That means, however, that there is critical work remaining between the time that admission letters are mailed and deposits are received.

This year in particular, families are being encouraged by college counselors and the media to negotiate, bargain, and try to encourage bidding among institutions for their sons and daughters. Their goals range from working diligently to find ways to afford a college education to simply seeking out every last financial aid dollar that an institution can be convinced to provide. And many families believe they must be first (or loudest) in line to have any chance of success for fear that
the money will run out. Not surprisingly, we hear that many institutions are fielding more “financial aid reconsideration” calls than ever before. To that, we say, “fantastic!”

Opportunity On The Line

Financial aid reconsideration calls are an opportunity, not an imposition. When an admitted student or parent calls your institution to discuss their financial aid package, it usually means they have genuine interest in enrolling. You’re probably on their short-list. How your front-line admissions and financial aid staffs handle those calls and navigate those conversations can either encourage an enrollment deposit or send students running to your competition.

It’s true that conversations about financial aid can be tense, tricky, and sometimes emotional for the families on the other end of the line. At the same time, these important moments are wonderful opportunities to engage families in candid dialogues about net cost, institutional value, and financing options. Additionally, it allows you another chance to make those families feel wanted and welcomed.

These next few weeks are among the most important in the marathon of the recruitment cycle. Here are four recommendations to increase your chances of finishing strong:

1. Execute an internal financial aid reconsideration plan. While some institutions handle financial aid reconsideration calls from families ad hoc, others have explicit strategies executed by dedicated committees that review
reconsideration cases in an organized way. The ability to say that the case will be discussed at the next committee meeting reduces the pressure to provide families immediate answers and affords the institution additional time to monitor progress of enrollment deposits, which can inform the enhancements (or lack thereof) to financial aid offers.

While families certainly feel – and very frequently express – a great deal of urgency for receiving a response as quickly as possible, it is best for both the family and the institution to allow some time after the emotion of an anxiety-producing phone call or meeting. Most families will appreciate your thoughtful review of their situation and formal consideration of their request.

2. **Train family-facing staff members with customer service phone skills.** We cannot over-emphasize the importance of effective customer service. When admitted students or parents call your admissions or financial aid office to discuss their financial aid package, do they receive a warm greeting and prompt service? Over the years, our research has indicated that students and parents continue to evaluate institutions based on each and every interaction with staff members, especially as they approach their final decision on where to enroll.

Communicating with both your financial aid and admissions offices should always be a positive experience. It is not merely the first or the best interactions that stand out in families’ minds, but also the worst and the most recent. Institutions that seize this opportunity to provide stellar customer service are positioned best to capture the positive emotion and reduce the anxiety that many students and families feel.

3. **Remember it’s not only about the money.** Many families who call institutions now are hoping for an increase in their financial aid. Yet many also feel valued and appreciated if their concerns are heard and respected, whether or not a single additional dollar is offered. Our experience has shown that, on
the whole, families who take the time to request financial reconsideration tend to yield at significantly higher rates—regardless of whether they receive more money from the institution. While this is obviously not true for every single family, it is important to keep this point in mind when you are not able or willing to grant an increase in aid. Such families are interested potential customers. If their experiences with your institution are positive and satisfying, there remains a good chance that you’ll receive their enrollment deposit.

4. Don’t lose sight of the big picture. Institutional budgets have been a huge national topic as investment values have declined and ancillary revenue sources have been more difficult to secure. Although it might seem to be counterintuitive in this financial climate, it is more important than ever to spend what is necessary on financial aid to achieve enrollment goals when budgets are tight across the institution. Falling short of enrollment targets nearly always results in lost revenue. In the aggregate, offering sufficient financial aid awards to enroll the desired class size rather than holding back to adhere to a rigid discount rate usually results in healthier classes and healthier budgets.

We are not advocating that institutions abandon their budget goals and simply throw money at each student who asks for more. Rather, we suggest that you consider – on a case-by-case basis – the revenue a student would bring to your institution if they enroll and not just the additional “cost” of granting a moderate increase in gift aid. In the
end, your discount rate may increase slightly in exchange for achieving long-term enrollment and revenue targets. This small concession will ensure that you avoid the unappealing prospect of too many empty seats come September.

The Last Mile

At this stressful moment in the enrollment cycle, as institutions manage dollars and enrollment very closely, there remains a very expensive “elephant in the room:” Prior to admitting a single student, a significant amount of money has already been spent to recruit the class, and those costs are constantly rising amid increasing competitive pressures. Student recruitment is a lengthy and complex process.

The point is that you have already committed an enormous amount of money, time, and institutional resources to reach the final mile of this race with the very students and families that are on the other end of those phone lines. Don’t forget the commitments you’ve made to come this far when deciding how much farther you are willing to go. You are armed with knowledge, information, and experience that extend well beyond the emotion of the moment. Just allow yourself to keep the entire race in mind as you approach the finish line – and you will make not only your best evidence-based decisions, but reach your enrollment goals as well.
Maguire Associates offers a wealth of research, insights, and analytical tools that empower people across Wheelock to make timely, well-informed decisions. This, in part, has enabled us to increase our undergraduate enrollment by 33% in a three-year period and our applications by 44% in a single year.

Mike Akillian
Vice President, Enrollment, Marketing & Communications
Wheelock College
Boston, MA

As a Research Associate, Tom is involved with building models, preparing strategic trade-off scenarios, and executing institutional grant awarding programs for our clients.
Planning for an Effective Summer:
Four Suggestions for Getting Ahead

As you start to think about well-deserved summer vacations – where a “discount rate” is a good deal on a hotel and the only “melt” to worry about concerns the ice in your lemonade – you’ll avoid some of the stress of this past year if you take time now to plan for a productive summer.

We have passed the most significant milestone in the traditional enrollment cycle – May 1st. This is always a moment of symbolic and practical importance, but especially so this year. However exciting, frustrating, disappointing, or anti-climactic your May 1st was, we at Maguire Associates extend our congratulations for weathering the anxiety, adversity, and apocalyptic rhetoric that has permeated media coverage of this challenging economy for the past six months.

There seems to be some modest sense of relief among many enrollment managers that May has arrived and higher education doesn’t appear to be as catastrophically different as some had feared. However, in order to make the necessary adjustments that will place your institution in a stronger position for 2009-2010, now is the time to engage in an honest and thorough review of the past year.

Don’t let summer get away

We often hear that summer is the time when institutional and departmental leaders can finally get critical planning and strategic work done. The reality is usually different. The summer months have a knack of getting away from us before the best intentions turn into the best work products. There is, however, a brief moment between now and Memorial Day when you can achieve two important objectives and lay the groundwork for an effective summer:

1. Reward the incredible efforts of your colleagues. Celebrate the many accom-
accomplishments that your team has achieved together in these past months. Make sure your hard-working staff members know that their work is appreciated, and that they are appreciated.

2. Focus deliberately on learning from this year’s challenges. Set an ambitious, realistic, and carefully scheduled plan to evaluate and improve those areas that were not as successful as you or your institution would have liked.

The time is limited, but it’s not short. Vacations, recuperation time, and motivation all play a role, but they don’t have to take the lead. If you determine your top priorities early, understand what you really want to get done, and take steps now to set these activities in motion, you’ll have the best chance of accomplishing them.

Shepherding your first year class towards matriculation is a bigger job than it’s ever been. And setting up your summer teams, plans, and initiatives requires the same discipline as your work in February. There are key components to successful projects: clear goals; accountability; firm schedules; assigned roles; and collaboration. If you wait until after the vacation carousel starts to spin to organize and coordinate your summer work, you might find that the more you try to put those plans in motion, the dizzier you get.

Here are four suggestions for a productive summer that still enable you to take some well-deserved time for yourself:

1. **You can’t lead everything yourself, but you can lead**
something. Our most recent survey of chief enrollment officers revealed two frequent concerns: not having enough time to plan and lacking sufficient time to do the work they love because of growing management responsibilities. Summer is the ideal time to address both of these concerns. Choose something that you can lead yourself that excites you and allows you to re-energize by having your hands on at least one part of the work you love. Summer is an important time for creating the foundation for the crunch of the fall and winter, but that doesn’t mean it can’t also be exhilarating and professionally fulfilling.

2. Adopt a 4A strategy – analyze, attempt, assess, adjust. Evidence is in the linchpin of effective planning and decision making, especially in an economy that is reshaping recruitment and enrollment plans nationwide. For example:

- Analyze: Where were the atypical changes in enrollment yield patterns this cycle? How much money do you spend on name buys and marketing campaigns? Are you getting the results you want from specific recruitment efforts?

- Attempt: The evidence is likely to support important adjustments in admissions and financial aid awarding strategies. The evidence may also suggest that you alter your name purchases, marketing mailings, and subsequent recruitment travel. Instead of considering a complete overhaul – which may be a bit extreme – test new methods first on a small number of markets.

- Assess: Capture the precise data needed to know how the tests actually fared.

- Adjust: Don’t repeat strategies or tactics over and over unless you are satisfied that they really do work. And if you are not, start the process again from the top.

The 4A Strategy means defining success and crafting practices and processes
that can be objectively evaluated. Too often, well-intentioned initiatives are added to operational workloads in such a way that either the goals are not defined or the performance data are not captured effectively. Without both, this kind of work is frequently frustrating and the results ambiguous. When the summer finally rolls around again, you should always be able to ask and get a clear answer to the question, “Did that work?”

3. **Be both ambitious and realistic.** There’s a delicate balance between seeking too little and seeking too much, both from yourself and from your team. Forge an agenda that is somewhat aggressive, but not so aggressive that participants conclude it can’t be accomplished.

Of course, setting the right agenda requires that you and your colleagues have determined which priorities are the most pressing. Not everything can be a top priority. Unclear or too numerous priorities are a recipe for inadequate performance. Plan some early wins to help yourself and your staff to see the wisdom and potential of an active and engaging summer.

4. **Mix it up.** People understandably want to tackle projects with folks like themselves, regardless of the effectiveness of the grouping. So stir it up this summer! Encourage people who rarely collaborate to solve problems together. Productivity and creativity are fostered when different perspectives are shared in ways that people don’t normally experience.
Do you have an issue or analytical project that crosses both admissions and financial aid? Instead of putting it in the hands of a director or dean to navigate the terrain, assign two admissions officers and two financial aid officers whose skills are appropriate and who infrequently have the chance to collaborate. As a matter of fact, why not also invite a key contributor from the research staff? Or the IT staff? Get some disparate opinions and encourage communication across departments. Assign seats; then give them a mandate, direction, a timeline, support, and a chance to produce.

**Choose both recuperation and renovation**

We all want the coming summer to be both rejuvenating and rewarding. The systematic, intentional approaches outlined here can themselves be both, especially when they foster a real sense of ownership, involvement, and the prospect of change for the better. These approaches, in concert with hard work and campus-wide support, are also what lead to robust enrollment of enthusiastic students that are likely to persist and thrive.

This is precisely why there is no better time than right now to start planning for an effective summer.
“We never dreamt of the potential this data and report would have for us. Other firms seem to have cookie-cutter suggestions. Maguire Associates gave us great thought and analysis. Strong evidence is the key to everything.”

Rosalind Barnes Fowler
Director, PRISM Campaign
University System of Georgia
Atlanta, GA
Reflections on and Lessons from the Previous Enrollment Cycle

As THIS MOST UNCERTAIN and difficult enrollment cycle glides mercifully to the finish line, we’ve reached a moment that is ripe for reflection. Insights gleaned now, in the moments when both the fear and the facts are fresh in our memories, are the sort that institutions can transform into newer, better strategies for the next recruitment cycle now underway.

Many college and university leaders were understandably fearful as this past year bounded roughly over rocky terrain. Along the way to the enrollment cycle’s predicted fatal capsizing – severe excess capacity at smaller, private colleges; ballooning yields at public institutions; unrecognizable enrollment patterns – something else happened: While this year presented complex challenges for most institutions and resulted in disappointing outcomes for some, there were many institutions that successfully built their first year classes, despite the forecasts.

Assessing Achievement

As colleges and universities with less than satisfying outcomes consider the experiences of the past year, it is useful to explore examples of institutions that achieved beyond what could have been predicted or expected. Are there common threads in their strategies and tactics?

In our observations over the past year at Maguire Associates, institutions that met their enrollment goals frequently shared some common strategies:

1. Seeking flat first-year enrollment rather than growth;
2. Minimizing tuition and fees price increases, where possible, to 4% or less;
3. Proactively digging deeper into the applicant pool to admit more students than
in previous years, and doing so in a timely manner; and

4. Allowing for – even planning for – a rising discount rate by preemptively expanding the generosity of financial aid awards.

Indeed, private colleges and universities stepped up very boldly, often in the face of budget cuts and layoffs, not only to protect financial aid budgets from cutbacks, but actually to increase financial awards and affordability.

Successful Strategies

The secret of enrollment success this year is that there is no secret. Any college or university, no matter how large or small, can incorporate effective strategies into their recruitment at any time, as long as they make a genuine commitment to one underlying principle: the best decisions are evidence-based. Executing evidence-based recruitment efforts at each stage of the enrollment process is best driven by what we call the 4A Strategy: Analyze; Attempt; Assess; Adjust.

In times like these – indeed, at all times – when resources are limited, institutions can be hamstrung by an inability to accurately determine the effectiveness of their individual efforts. This can occur because the initiatives have not been created, executed, measured, and evaluated in an intentional and comprehensive way. Experienced enrollment professionals know there is an art to student recruitment, but this art must be supported by science.

This past year, many successful institutions – including those

News Headlines

- Aug. 8, 2009 -

**IN STEP WITH TRADITION: CAMPUS TOURS THRIVING**

“Despite the troubled economy, the cost of travel, and the growth of online virtual visits, the New England college tour not only endures, but thrives - with some schools even showing an increase in visits.”

- *The Boston Globe*
presumed to be in danger – paid detailed attention to both of these dimensions. In doing so, they increased their applicant pools, hit their target enrollment goals, and maintained the desired composition of their classes.

With that inspiration in mind, here are three recruitment components we recommend considering for fine tuning your strategies going forward:

1. **Deploy sophisticated, strategic, statistically driven financial aid awarding:** More than ever, financial aid was a focal point of institutions’ enrollment strategies – and will almost certainly remain so in coming years. Late last year, some commentators suggested that no one could possibly predict yields this year and that we ought to throw historical data out the window. At this point, anyone that did so is probably wishing they had not heeded that advice.

   Many colleges and universities rely on a “matrix-based” approach to determine awards for various groups of students, usually arranged by measures of student “quality” and financial need. This method is used well when the matrix is updated every year through analysis of prior-year results. However, a significant amount of enrollment and revenue may be lost by awarding fixed amounts or percentages of institutional aid to large groups of students. Many successful institutions utilize predictive models to transform a matrix-based approach into a highly refined, individualized approach that specifies the amount of institutional aid for each student that the institution needs to offer in order to achieve ambitious yet realistic enrollment and revenue goals.

2. **Pay continuous attention to parents:** It has become common practice to involve parents in the recruitment process because they serve as trusted advisors for their children and, in the end, make influential assessments of the value of selected institutions. At some institutions, materials sent directly to parents only focus on financing the cost of education, when an institution’s value proposition is perhaps the most important message of all.
It’s important to remember that parents also participate in creating and advancing student interest in your institution. Some of the recruitment marketing we observe appears to have makeshift, sporadic, or sometimes nonexistent messages for parents, at least beyond the narrow lens of affordability. A page or two on the admissions website is not sufficient to engage these crucial influencers – who are sometimes decision makers – in the ongoing process of selecting a college. In vivid contrast, other institutions have developed carefully crafted parent outreach, that starts before the point of admission, to answer the question: Among many possible choices, why would this one be best for my son or daughter?

3. Test new tactics: Yes, it is essential to continue improving your recruiting practices. It is equally important, however, to seek out new tactics and methods for accomplishing recruitment objectives. Repeating even worthwhile outreach without constantly incorporating innovative ideas can leave institutions vulnerable to their more nimble, creative competitors.

The most inventive institutions investigate new concepts by measuring them. Doing so ensures they don’t get caught in the conventional pattern of always adding new work without eliminating the old – a recipe for confusing results and staff burnout. Using the 4A Strategy, they consider creating new promotional materials, compelling value messages, and ways to reach the marketing-saturated audience of college-going students. Trying something
new these days may even mean trying something very old that has gone out of style, like hand-addressed letters or even hand-written notes to desirable prospective students.

Pedaling Another Cycle Uphill

There is no doubt that this was a challenging year for enrollment managers. However, many institutions thrived in this environment by doing their work strategically and efficiently. New questions about the coming enrollment cycle are now starting to materialize on the horizon. Indeed, we know that rising high school seniors have spent the past year thinking differently about their own college search than classes in years past. What will they choose when next spring rolls around? How will colleges address the next round of challenges? How many can afford to be as generous for a second consecutive year? What other options exist?

In this challenging economy there are no guarantees, but there are signs that prosperity is still possible. Taking advantage of effective strategies and proven practices, mixed with a healthy dose of innovation, is the way to give yourself and your institution the best opportunity to achieve success in such difficult times.
We [at The University of the South] are very positive about the quality of people, the technical skills in market research, and the thoughtful reflection that Maguire Associates brings to the table. We have great respect and appreciation for the Maguire organization.

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