

Student Engagement in the Recruitment and Admissions Funnel

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College and university enrollment has been declining over the last 15 years; those enrollment numbers are impacted by a decline in new student enrollment, returning student enrollment, and student retention (U.S. Department of Education, 2020). Despite the enrollment losses, some institutions like Liberty University, Grand Canyon University, and others have remained steady or grown during this period (Jenkins, 2018). Indiana Wesleyan University's (IWU) National & Global (N&G) campus experienced a decline in enrollment starting around 2010 and accelerating from 2015 to 2021 (Indiana Wesleyan University, 2021). During this time, some programs realized slight enrollment increases but not enough to offset the decline of business and nursing program enrollments. The enrollment problem was explored with the N&G vice president of marketing, which set the stage for the partnership between IWU and the researcher.

Problem Identification

The identified problem was rooted in communication with potential students, enrolled students, and graduates. Communication with constituents in the student pipeline must be more consistent, present a unified institution, and manage optimal connectivity. Implementing a communication plan was expected to facilitate a positive experience for stakeholders in the student pipeline through better, optimized communication. The study was needed because communication was initiated from multiple departments on several platforms, across numerous media, with varying content quality and styles that did not align with institutional branding. The initial problem identification and investigation paved the way for further diagnosis of the problem and the development of potential solutions.

Diagnosing the Problem

The problem was diagnosed by looking at the known environment, industry, and organizational facts, considering assumptions associated with the problem, identifying knowledge gaps, and ideating potential solutions. The specific problem was the loss of potential and enrolled students, resulting in decreased revenue, layoffs, and a decline in faculty and staff morale. The partner organization identified insufficient communication as a potential contributing factor to the decline in enrollment. The vice president of marketing suggested that improvements in communication systems might impact enrollment. The driving research question was formulated to research and identify solutions: What can IWU National & Global change operationally to improve prospect enrollment and student retention? Guiding research questions were developed to focus on key environmental, industry, and organizational factors contributing to N&G enrollment challenges.

Exploring Potential Solutions

The N&G units were primarily concerned with communicating what is important to their team at a given time, perhaps disregarding the big picture or just being ignorant of the full impact of their communications. Coordinated communication could be more optimal for both the institution and the students served (Craig &

Markowitz, 2017). Enrollment of new students and retention of enrolled students is vital for the survival of IWU National & Global. Students, faculty, staff, and other stakeholders rely on a healthy and thriving institution.

The literature review focused on different perspectives of the enrollment problem facing N&G by systematically examining the guiding research questions based on key factors influencing enrollment and retention. The secondary research resulted in identifying factors that are carried across all stages of the enrollment funnel. Factors influencing selection and persistence included demographic influences, disadvantaged prospects, the perceived value of higher education and alternative career choices, financial barriers, motivation, mentoring and counseling, competition and marketing, and extraneous factors like financial aid fraud. The review also examined factors influencing online education and Christian higher education. A benchmarking study of similar institutions and best practices of other industries was conducted. Finally, potential solutions were identified, and further exploration was considered.

The research revealed potential gaps in where and how N&G engages prospects and students. Research suggested a concentrated effort with prospects in the enrollment funnel's consideration phase might enable N&G to improve yield and increase enrollment by maximizing existing awareness campaigns. The challenge identified for N&G was optimizing communication cadence to make valuable prospect connections.

Multiple Perspective Inquiry

Inquiry into the problem was accomplished through two focus groups, one face-to-face and one online, via MS Teams. The student participants ranged from associate to master's level across multiple academic disciplines. The focus group findings revealed persistence was required from the prospects for them to get enrolled. Also, many prospect emails, texts, and phone calls did not receive a response. Dr. Eileen Hulme, Chancellor for N&G, shared there is a large group of students who disappear, and they found these potential students not only did not enroll at IWU but also gave up completely on their educational pursuits and did not enroll elsewhere. The focus group revealed a potential connection between enrollment counselor connectivity with prospects and persistence to enrollment.

Solutions were explored to fill the communication gap and facilitate prospect enrollment. Based on the focus group findings and an evaluation of solutions, the researcher proposed implementing enrollment counselor-hosted weekly Microsoft (MS) Teams sessions with student prospects. The solution proposal to IWU included elements of other solutions to enhance the effectiveness of the change proposed. The partner presentation was met with the approval of the solution without changes. The approval initiated the development of a change management plan.

Change Management Approach

A change plan was developed to ensure the successful rollout of the enrollment counselor-hosted weekly MS Teams sessions. The Prosci ADKAR model provided the framework for implementing the N&G solution. ADKAR's people-centric approach aligns organizational needs with the students' and staff's needs.

The chancellor for N&G identified a lost population of prospects who drop out of the IWU enrollment funnel and do not enroll elsewhere. Engagement was identified as a potential contributing factor, and the EC-hosted weekly MS Teams sessions could provide a viable solution to fill the gap.

Conclusion

The research findings and the recommended solution could help solve the engagement gap at any institution of higher learning. Institutions struggling with insufficient enrollment staff can maximize their efforts by implementing the solution recommended in this study. Some turnover and overload challenges across the industry for enrollment teams could be overcome by implementing enrollment counselor-hosted weekly MS Teams sessions. The solution optimizes the enrollment counselors' time by answering many everyday questions in a group setting and freeing up their time for more critical enrollment questions. The enrollment counselor-hosted weekly MS Teams sessions and other enrollment efforts are anticipated to increase enrollment in the 2023–2024 fiscal year.

N&G could increase enrollment numbers to over 10,000 students in the 2023–2024 fiscal year. The odds favor a successful turnaround, with 55 enrollment counselors connecting with multiple students in 150 weekly sessions. If every enrollment counselor implements the strategy as planned and converts one student from each session, one who might have joined the unexplained lost, it would equate to 150 enrollments. If 15 potentially lost prospects per session are converted in the fiscal year, that would translate to 2,250 enrollments.

References

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