# 6 TOP STRATEGIES TO DRIVE MATRICULATION

## Solutions to Institutions' Top Enrollment Challenges

HANOVER RESEARCH

# INTRODUCTION

While the nationwide college enrollment decline is improving in comparison to previous years, higher education enrollment management still faces a veritable number of challenges—particularly in converting prospective applicants into enrolled students. One-third of all high school graduates who plan to attend college do not enroll come fall, marking a clear need for institutions to improve their matriculation policies so students make it to campus.

There are several reasons why admitted students may fall out of an institution's enrollment funnel. Rising tuition, overwhelming information on admissions websites, communication breakdowns between schools and applicants, and struggles to meet the needs of underrepresented and non-traditional students all negatively affect institutional enrollment.

Departments involved in enrollment, such as admissions, tuition and financial aid, and student experience offices, can all take steps to drive matriculation. In this toolkit, we provide solutions to address the top matriculation and enrollment challenges that institutions face.

# 6 TOP STRATEGIES TO DRIVE MATRICULATION

**1.** **Leverage Data to Inform Matriculation Strategies**

**2.** **Communicate Consistently with Applicants**

**3.** **Develop Tuition Reduction Models**

**4.** **Refine Financial Aid Strategy**

**5.** **Meet Adult Learners' Specific Needs**

**6.** **Provide Support for Underrepresented Populations**

# LEVERAGE DATA TO INFORM MATRICULATION STRATEGIES

## CHALLENGE:

Effectively gather data to identify potential reasons for admission-to-enrollment conversion failure.

## SOLUTIONS:

- **Deploy Predictive Analytics:** Advanced forecasting methods and predictive analytics allow institutions to use historic enrollment data to predict future enrollment patterns.

- **Develop Enrollment Funnel Models:** With an enrollment funnel model, institutions can manage the process of advancing students from a relatively large pool of prospects through several key conversions.

- **Gather Data from Key Sources:** Data gathered through admissions websites, education fairs, and recruiters help inform the sources or channels through which prospective students enter the funnel. In addition, schools can search FAFSA applications to identify potential stealth applicants (those not accounted for in an institution's inquiry pool).

Enrollment Funnel Model

PROSPECTS

INQUIRIES

APPLICANTS

ADMITS

DEPOSITS
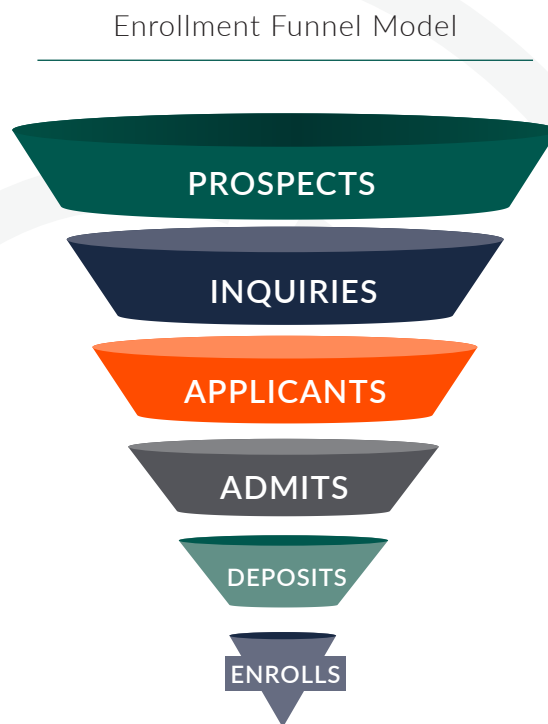
ENROLLS

## IMPORTANT CONSIDERATIONS FOR ENROLLMENT FUNNEL MODELS

- Critics of traditional enrollment funnel models suggest that there is too much emphasis on moving students from one enrollment stage to the next and loading the largest, top part of the funnel (e.g., awareness of the institution).

- Many traditional enrollment funnel models do not account for stealth applicants, or applicants that are not accounted for in an institution's inquiry pool.

## KEY TIPS FOR DEVELOPING ENROLLMENT FUNNEL MODELS

- Depending on an institution's strengths and weaknesses, adjust which part of the funnel the enrollment office focuses on annually.

- Use historical funnel data to determine recent-year trends to track progress against goals for the following year.

- Use a funnel model that provides for more precise conversion tracking by factoring out stealth applicants.

# COMMUNICATE CONSISTENTLY WITH APPLICANTS

## CHALLENGE:

Breakdown in communication between college and applicant is one of the leading contributors to failure to enroll.

## SOLUTIONS:

- **Optimize Online Admissions Information:** Students often get lost in the sheer amount of information available on admissions websites and struggle to identify the most relevant content. To optimize online self-service, provide simple and well-organized online content that helps students understand enrollment next steps.

- **Communicate Frequently with Students:** Send customized, student-centered outreach emails frequently to applicants, with messaging that focuses on students becoming architects or designers of their own education. In addition, call students to drive open house attendance or to schedule overseas meetings.

- **Provide One-on-One Support:** Consider hiring and assigning registration case managers for all new students to provide direct, individual enrollment support to applicants.

### THE CHALLENGE OF "ONE-STOP SHOPS"

While often proposed as a solution for communication failures, "one-stop shop" student services centers are often unsuccessful at solving this primary challenge. Students may face long wait lines, frequently changing offices, having to repeat information, and conflicting messages about their enrollment—confusing students and leading some away from enrolling.
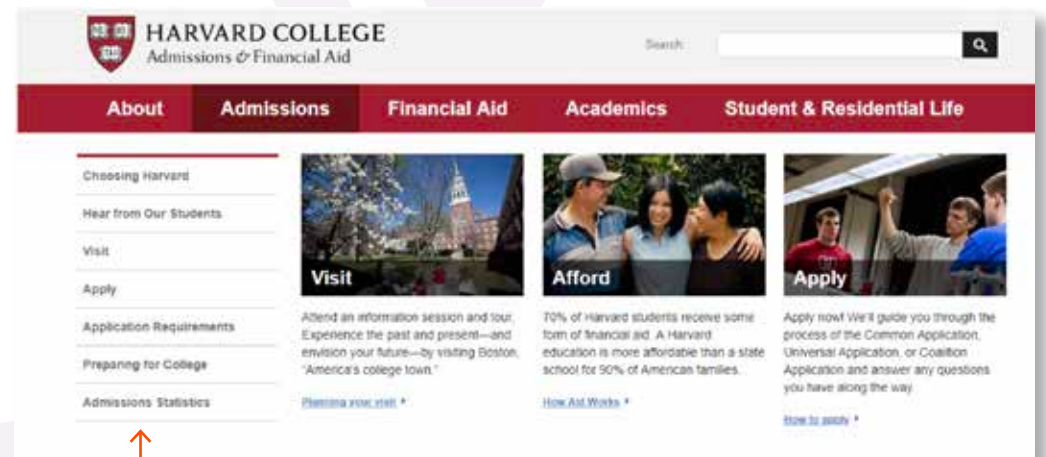


Harvard University's admissions website is easy to locate, provides an organized sidebar, and calls out three important areas of its site: **vist, afford**, and **apply to the school**.

# DEVELOP TUITION REDUCTION MODELS

## CHALLENGE:

Rising tuition costs have impacted the ability and the willingness of many to attend college.

## SOLUTIONS:

- **Offer Tuition Discounts:** Tuition discounts, usually in the form of grants, offset a high tuition sticker price. Tuition discount rates reached an all-time high in 2016 with an average 48.6% of institutions' total gross revenue returned in financial aid for new freshmen.

- **Develop Fixed Tuition Models:** Tuition guarantees, or a "fixed tuition model," sets a level tuition rate that students pay for the entire course of their program, typically no more than four years. The model offers students and parents increased transparency about the total cost of a college degree. Changing an institution's tuition model, however, requires significant planning; institutions should allocate at least a year or more to plan for the change.

- **Provide Tuition Reductions:** To simplify cost structures and ward off sticker shock, some private institutions are experimenting with tuition reductions. In 2016, Utica College changed its practice of offering tuition discounting to some students to flattening tuition by 42% with no discounting. Following the reduction, transfer applications grew by 65%, freshmen applications by 10%, and the school saw an increase in prospective student campus visits.

## RISKS IN DEVELOPING NEW TUITION MODELS

While new tuition models may simplify tuition and provide more price transparency to students and families, they may also come with drawbacks. Tuition reductions, in particular, may come with corresponding cuts in financial aid, which could reinstate cost-based enrollment issues in the long run. It is important for institutions developing new models to take precautions with data analysis and forecasting to determine if the new model will be the best fit for the school and its students.

# REFINE FINANCIAL AID STRATEGY

## CHALLENGE:

Insufficient financial aid can keep students from applying to schools—or even enrolling in higher education at all.

## SOLUTIONS:

- **Develop Predictive Models:** Predictive models can help identify aid types and amounts to maximize matriculation and retention rates. Grant aid can target ability to pay, while merit scholarships can target willingness to pay. For merit aids, larger awards may be needed to attract students with higher academic profiles. Using the data gathered from these models, offer high-need students the best possible aid package to reduce the need for loans.

- **Frontload Scholarships:** Scholarships should be frontloaded in the matriculation process to attract and incentivize academically gifted students. Consider targeting prospective students from purchased search lists. In addition, monitor outcomes and return on investment to determine whether similar offerings should continue.

### COMMUNICATING AID TO FAMILIES

More than half of students surveyed in a 2016 survey report they need better explanations and clearer language to help them understand their financial aid offers. To help students and families understand financial aid,

- Implement a comprehensive marketing campaign early in the recruitment process

- Use simple, clear language when discussing aid packages

- Equip staff to help students and families navigate the financial aid process and, where necessary, to guide them to favorable third-party loan or scholarship options

# MEET ADULT LEARNERS' SPECIFIC NEEDS

## CHALLENGE:

An increasing number of older, non-traditional age students are enrolling in college—but many institutions are unsure of how to meet their needs.

## SOLUTIONS:

- **Offer Discounted Applications:** Free or reduced cost applications help alleviate small but important costs for adult students.

- **Provide Credit for Non-Traditional Learning:** A study of adult learner students in public and private institutions reveals that the ability to transfer credits and/or acquire credit for learning gained from life and work greatly impact enrollment decisions. Provide these credits to attract a wider base of students from non-traditional backgrounds, such as the military.

- **Form Partnerships with Business Leaders:** Partnerships with businesses and industry leaders provide experiential learning opportunities and career-relevant learning.

### TARGETED MESSAGING FOR ADULT LEARNERS

While the non-traditional and adult student population represents an opportunity for enrollment growth, institutions may not understand how to entice them to enroll. Use student stories and open houses to effectively communicate to adult learners how the institution:

- Connects students to stable employment

- Teaches skills that are in high demand in the job market

- Provides individualized attention and customized learning, helping adult learners craft their own learning plans

# PROVIDE SUPPORT FOR UNDERREPRESENTED POPULATIONS

## CHALLENGE:

While Hispanic undergraduate enrollment more than doubled between 2000 to 2015, there is still a significant gap between the number of Hispanic college applicants and graduates.

## SOLUTIONS:

- **Reach Out Early:** Early outreach is especially important for minority students, who may see college as unattainable and therefore do not prepare properly to apply to college. Early outreach programs, such as summer residential programs for high school students prior to their senior year, can help students make an easier transition to college. These programs can also be valuable for educating the parents of first-generation college students on the day-to-day activities their child will experience.

- **Build a Feeling of Community:** Tactics such as student open houses, campus visits, and overnight stays are important tools in building a feeling of community for prospective underrepresented students. In addition, diversity homepages help establish a community and collect information for minority students. Institutions often use diversity pages to advertise efforts being made to diversify campuses, organize student diversity groups, and organize and promote diversity events.

- **Diversify Faculty:** Hiring more minority professors has been found to have a positive impact on minority students by providing direct, personal support by leaders who may have unique insights into underrepresented students' college experiences.

### NAVIGATING LANGUAGE DIFFERENCES

Hispanic parents who are 35 years or older are more likely to be only fluent in Spanish and face a larger language barrier than their children. Because of this, students with non-English speaking parents face greater challenges in enrolling due to a lack understanding of next steps. To help address language barriers,

- Publish admissions and enrollment information in multiple languages

- Ensure that non-English-speaking students and families can talk with fluent staff members to navigate the enrollment process

- Involve minority parents in the recruitment process by inviting them to open houses and arranging face-to-face meetings to discuss financial concerns and funding options

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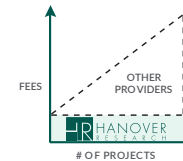200+ analysts with advanced multiple methodology research expertise

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- **Student Experience:** Spot at-risk students early, identify the drivers of attrition, and pinpoint factors driving poor post-graduate outcomes.

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