



HIGHER EDUCATION

THE CASE FOR DATA-DRIVEN PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

INTRODUCTION

In the highly competitive market of higher education, institutions have an ongoing challenge of attracting students by designing a portfolio of compelling academic degree programs. Institutions with well-diversified program offerings enjoy increased enrollments, higher revenues, and enhanced public profiles. Students also benefit from access to degree programs that provide the skills in greatest demand by employers and graduate institutions.

However, institutions should not create new programs without considering multiple factors. Faculty or community members might encourage the development of a program based on personal interest or perceived interest from the student body but have no solid evidence indicating long-term viability of the program. Outside organizations might offer attractive partnership opportunities for program development but similarly lack sufficient evidence of potential success. While institutions do occasionally take risks and develop programs with uncertain prospects, they should at least consult available data and attempt to understand the level of risk involved. Should an institution get the program development equation wrong, it risks wasting limited funds and resources, placing a heavy distraction on faculty time, and missing the opportunity to delight students with better suited, more attractive course offerings.

This research brief will review the various research methodologies and tools that higher education institutions have available to them to ensure their program development decisions are data-driven.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

02 / INTRODUCTION

03 / I. WHAT TO MEASURE:
PROGRAM EVALUATION FACTORS

04 / II. HOW TO MEASURE:
RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

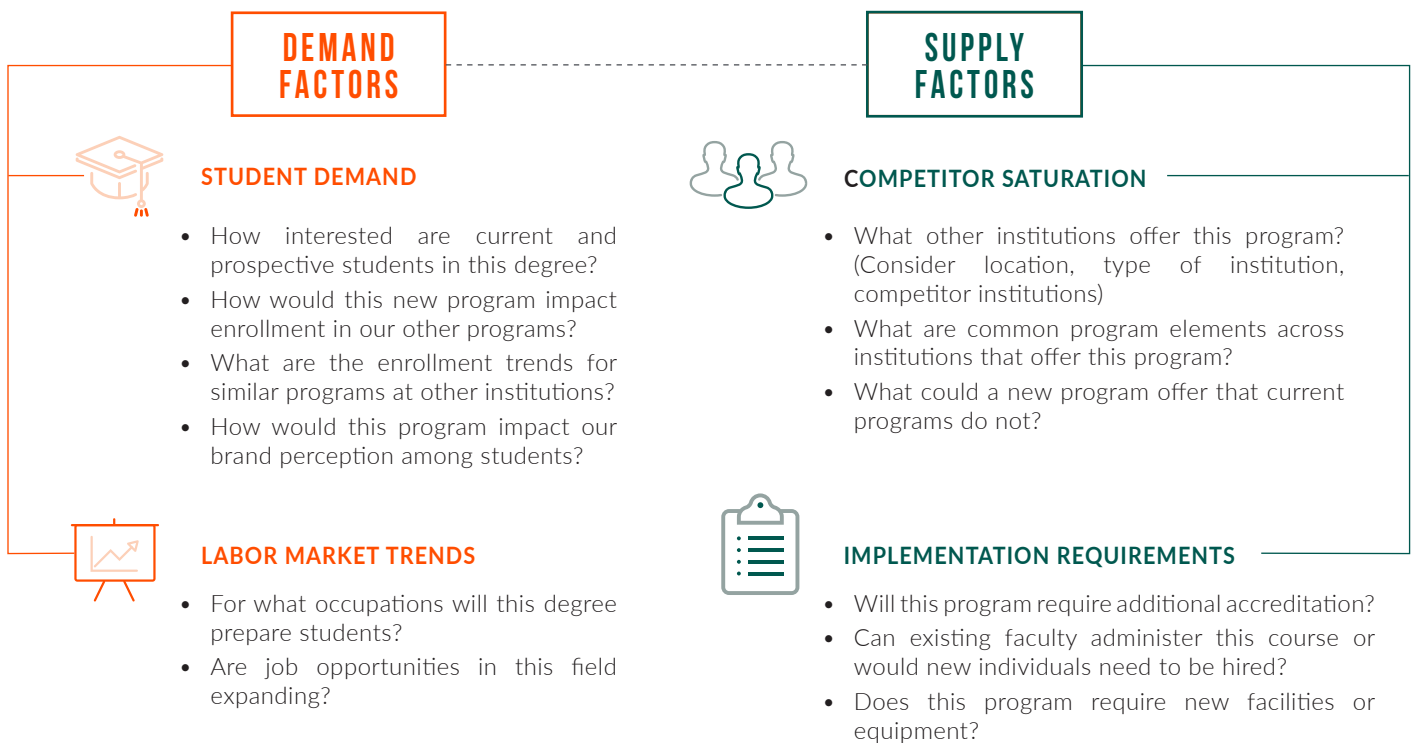
09 / RESEARCH SOLUTIONS

I. WHAT TO MEASURE: PROGRAM EVALUATION FACTORS

In evaluating potential new degree programs, there are a variety of factors to consider, but largely the equation can be viewed as one of supply and demand. Universities should consider the level of **demand** for the program among students and employers. In their evaluations, institutions must ascertain the strength of the collective interest in the program and forecast whether interest will continue to trend positively or if it will flatten or wane over time.

Universities must also gauge **supply** factors, including the market saturation levels of the potential program among peer and aspirant institutions and implementation requirements such as faculty resources, new facilities, and accreditation processes. Universities need to determine how the institution can provide a given degree in a way unique from its competitors.

KEY DECISION FACTORS



Higher education institutions can employ a variety of research tools and methodologies to measure the relative impact of each of these factors and ensure their program launch decisions are well-grounded.

II. HOW TO MEASURE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGIES

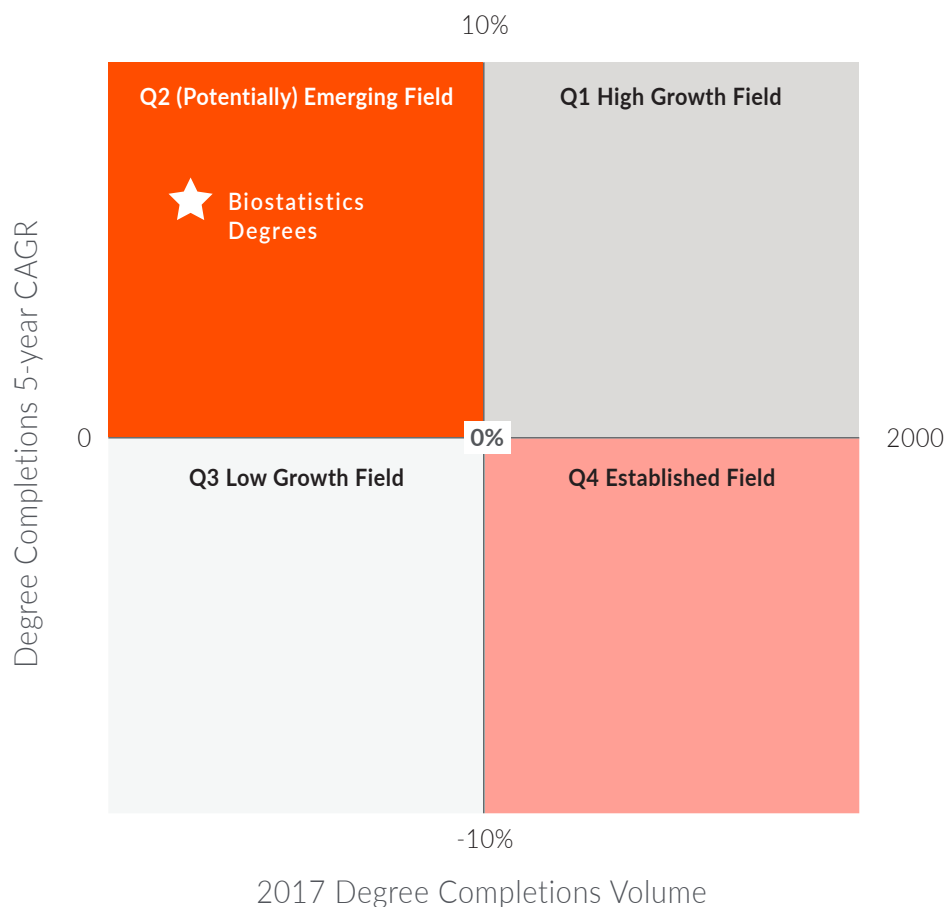
#1. KEY TREND ASSESSMENT

Key trend assessments cover the essential indicators related to academic program viability. These data points, which focus on indicators of labor market trends, competitor saturation, and student demand provide a foundational assessment of a program's potential viability and, ultimately, an indicator of whether more in-depth market research is warranted.

- **Student Demand:** Some of the most useful available data to approximate student demand come from The National Center for Education Statistics' (NCES) Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS), which publishes degree completions data classified by field of study. By analyzing conferral volume, compound annual growth rate (CAGR), award levels, delivery format, and other variables, institutions can assess trends in demand for particular programs.
- **Labor Market Trends:** In gauging the interest of employers and the trajectory of a given occupational field, the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) and state-level occupational projections provide a good baseline assessment of labor market alignment and job prospects for proposed degrees.
- **Competitor Saturation:** Evaluating competitor saturation helps an institution determine how unique a program might be within its target market. Using IPEDS data or a more extensive review of competitors' offerings, institutions can better understand the geographic concentration of programs and the level of existing competition. If few institutions in the state or region offer a similar degree, the proposed offering may provide an opportunity to fill a gap in the market.

GETTING A STUDENT DEMAND SNAPSHOT: PROGRAM OPPORTUNITY DASHBOARD

A **program opportunity dashboard** is a helpful tool to provide an initial gauge of program viability in terms of student demand. The sample grid below shows an example of a potentially emerging degree field, with high annualized growth but low degree completions volume, suggesting a potential opportunity for market entry.



WHEN TO USE:

A key trend analysis is particularly well-suited to the early stages of program planning, enabling institutions to make a rapid "go/no go" decision on whether to pursue further investigation. This level of assessment is useful when institutions are considering a large number of potential new programs and need a way to prioritize their efforts.

#2. STANDARD MARKET ANALYSIS

While a key trend assessment provides a helpful baseline of a program's potential attractiveness, institutions may require additional levels of detail. A standard market analysis provides broader contextual information on labor market trends, competitor saturation, and program implementation requirements. The analysis employs a variety of resources including news publications, professional organization data, job posting trends, and other publicly available source material.

STANDARD MARKET ANALYSIS ELEMENTS

	FACTORS	HOW TO MEASURE
LABOR MARKET TRENDS	Educational Attainment	The Bureau of Labor Statistics publishes national educational attainment levels for specific occupations. Analyzing average attainment levels can help an institution determine which award level is most appropriate for a new program.
	Job Postings Trend Analysis	Using job posting aggregators, institutions can assess the job market for relevant occupations. This type of analysis provides a snapshot of trends in job postings and common skills required or preferred by employers.
	Professional Organizations	Many occupational fields have associated professional organizations that compile valuable program data and field-specific trend literature.
COMPETITOR SATURATIONS	Competitor Offerings	A thorough review of competitor websites and program marketing materials can draw out curricular or positioning trends, in some cases highlighting specific programs that are unique or exemplary.
IMPLEMENTATION REQUIREMENTS	Accreditation Requirements	Some programs require accreditation by outside professional organizations in order for graduates to be qualified for licensure or practice.
	Required Resources	Some programs may require certain facilities or opportunities for students (internships, clinical practice), or require that faculty have a certain level of training. Research can help institutions determine what resources are necessary for effective program operation.

WHEN TO USE:

A standard market analysis can be useful for emerging or developing fields where exploring the factors impacting program demand may be particularly revelatory.

#3. EXPERT INTERVIEWS

Primary research adds a valuable dimension when assessing the viability of a proposed academic program. The incorporation of expert interviews—for instance, high-level professionals in the specified field of study, or administrators of similar or exemplary programs—can yield more nuanced, qualitative commentary on factors influencing program success, potential pitfalls, and lessons learned. These types of insights are direct, actionable, and largely unattainable through other research channels.

While conducting interviews necessitates a longer timeline, the results enable institutions to go beyond conferral and occupational data to obtain a multidimensional understanding of the market. This is particularly important for the assessment of very niche markets or emerging fields, which are generally not captured by IPEDS and occupational projections data. Program administrators and industry experts can help speak directly to current enrollment trends, student interest, and job opportunities for graduates.

WHEN TO USE:

Expert interviews can help provide detail and context for niche markets where publicly available data are scarce. Also, expert interviews are instrumental in understanding complex program evaluation issues where color commentary may yield insights.

CASE EXAMPLE

USING EXPERT INTERVIEWS TO EXPLORE A DOCTORAL PROGRAM



CHALLENGE:

Statum Universitas* (Statum) wanted to analyze the viability of a professional criminal justice offering at the doctoral level. Statum, which already operated well-established bachelor's and master's offerings in the field, was considering capitalizing on existing institutional resources to expand its presence in the criminal justice space. Given that professional doctorates in criminal justice are exceedingly rare in the United States, however, common demand indicators provided limited insight into the potential for the degree.

SOLUTION:

To obtain a true sense of the degree's market potential, Statum pursued interviews with industry professional who had experience in advising on curriculum development. These individuals offered a ground-level perspective on trends in the field, advice on which types of specializations would likely be most appealing to students, and guidance on the most effective means of marketing this emergent degree type.

*Redacted Hanover Client Example.

#4. SURVEYS

A survey-based approach can help institutions quantify the level of interest for new programs and understand student preferences for delivery format, scheduling, curriculum structure, and other factors. When institutions can obtain an appropriate sample, a survey of prospective students is the most direct, comprehensive means of gathering data on program demand.

In some cases, it can also be effective to incorporate questions related to program development into existing instruments—such as student satisfaction, end-of-program surveys, or alumni surveys administered at regular intervals. This type of approach offers “snapshot” data in the exploratory phases of program development, providing in-the-moment information on how existing programs could be enhanced or improved, or on new program types that may be appealing to students.

WHEN TO USE:

Surveys are well-suited for both the early stages of program planning (for instance, to isolate the best opportunities), as well as the later stages, to guide program design.

CASE EXAMPLE

USING STUDENT SURVEYS TO EVALUATE NEW PROGRAMS



CHALLENGE:

Wake Forest University School of Law (Wake Law) was considering implementing a new Master of Studies in Law Program (MSL) as a viable opportunity in an evolving student marketplace. The university needed to validate proof of concept, determine the specifics of program implementation, and identify development strategies for the new degree program.




SOLUTION:

After verifying the growing market potential for the introduction of the MSL program at Wake Law, the institution conducted a range of perception surveys and analyses across both employer and student cohorts that enabled it to identify drivers of program growth, benchmark program desirability across competitors, project opportunities for potential graduates, and identify a target student demographic. As a result, Wake Law was able to successfully launch the MSL program.

RESEARCH SOLUTIONS

Given the importance in crafting compelling program offerings, higher education institutions have a keen interest in ensuring the decisions they make are evidence-based. Using a variety of research tools, institutions can explore the many factors impacting program demand and ensure they are making the right resource allocation decisions.

RESEARCH TOOLS

DEMAND FACTORS	STUDENT DEMAND 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key Trend Assessment • Data Analysis of Student Demand Indicators • Enrollment Trends Analysis • Expert Interviews • Current and Prospective Student Surveys
	LABOR MARKET TRENDS 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key Trend Assessment • Labor Market Trends Analysis • Graduate Outcomes Analysis • Job Postings and Trends Analysis • Interviews with Potential Employers • Alumni Surveys • Employer Surveys
SUPPLY FACTORS	COMPETITOR SATURATION 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key Trend Assessment • Data Analysis • Interviews with Administrators and Faculty • Brand Perception Survey
	IMPLEMENTATION REQUIREMENTS 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Best Practices for Program Implementation • Interviews with Administrators and Faculty • Student Surveys on Program Delivery Preferences

SOURCE LIST

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PAGE 6

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ABOUT HANOVER RESEARCH

Hanover Research provides high-quality, custom research and analytics through a cost effective model that helps clients make informed decisions, identify and seize opportunities, and heighten their effectiveness.

HANOVER'S HIGHER EDUCATION SOLUTIONS

Hanover enables higher education institutions to offer a world-class educational experience and operate an efficient and sustainable institution. Hanover's Higher Education Solutions tackle the academic and administrative challenges facing every department at your institution—amplifying your individual efforts with our tried and tested suite of solutions. Our partners include higher education institutions of all varieties: from large to small, public and private, two-year, four-year, professional, graduate, and for-profit schools.

ACADEMIC SOLUTIONS

- **Enrollment Management:**
Target the optimal pool of students and maximize application and acceptance rates.
- **Academic Development:**
Strengthen your academic portfolio through market analysis of existing and potential new programs.
- **Student Experience:**
Spot at-risk students early, identify the drivers of attrition, and pinpoint factors driving poor post-graduate outcomes.

ADMINISTRATIVE SOLUTIONS

- **Finance:**
Increase revenue and dynamically evaluate costs to run an efficient, financially viable, and growth-oriented institution.
- **Advancement:**
Highlight your institutional impact with donors and alumni.
- **Marketing :**
Reach the right audience at the right time with the right message.

GRANTS SOLUTIONS

- **Grantseeking Capacity :**
Develop your organizational capacity to pursue grant funding.
- **Funding Research:**
Spot grant opportunities aligned to your funding needs.
- **Pre-Proposal Support:**
Facilitate the development of competitive project concepts prior to submission.
- **Proposal Review & Support:**
Provide review and revision to ensure robust proposal submissions.
- **Proposal Development:**
Engage full proposal development support.

OUR BENEFITS



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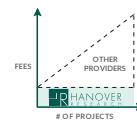
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