



**QUESTIONS FOR EXCELLENCE:
A BOARD GUIDE TO COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY PLANS
Essay 8**

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Asking About Student Recruitment

Popular images of student recruiters include everything from selfless counselors to hucksters. They are pictured as being either crass pushers who seek to get someone to buy an unneeded item, or matchmakers who seek to bridge the chasm between a helpless potential student and the very college she needs to change her life. Recruiting is imbued with the intention of helpful education at the same time that it employs the lingo of commerce.

Admissions people use terminology such as image making, branding, market analysis, and lead conversion. Recruiting should not be condemned just because it uses the language of marketing. Recruiting *should* be condemned if people are induced to become students who cannot succeed. Student recruiting requires the analysis, skills, language, intensity, and communication of marketing to match a potential student to a college that has the strengths and institutional characteristics that will most benefit him or her. A college or university's financial viability depends on students genuinely profiting from their experience at the institution.

Recruiters fail when they do not communicate a college or university's strengths and character to those who can best benefit. They fail when too few potential students come to understand institutional benefits or when those attracted are unable to benefit. Nevertheless, it is not a recruiting failure if the institution's strengths and characteristics are too meager to attract students or if the set of people who might benefit is small. These deficits are, perhaps, a failure of mission and vision.

This chapter asks trustees to take a professional look at the recruiting plan of the college or university. The questions concern institutional image, market analysis, marketing effectiveness, and pricing. They are designed to gauge the sophistication of the analyses employed by the institution and the depth of the market knowledge gained. The true tests of recruiting success, however, go beyond these questions to graduation rates,



college financial viability, and graduate career success. Sophistication of analysis does not guarantee success. True recruiting success depends on the polished sophistication of all facets of the institution.

Image and Media

When an acquaintance discovers a trustee's university affiliation, the trustee often gains a quick anecdotal reflection of image. "Oh, I've never heard of your college or university." "I've heard that they have a strong liberal arts program." "Isn't that where there was all that controversy over...." While these reflections are interesting, the institution and the board need a stronger basis on which to judge the effectiveness of their communications effort.

More precise information on image is not only useful in its influence on "message," it is useful for guiding strategic change. The president of a ranked "party school" (unfortunately, its apparent image) may realize from this information that the campus has a serious substance abuse problem. Or a college may learn that it is best known for the poor condition of its residence halls. Changing the image in these situations becomes less important than changing the fact.

The questions below reflect the importance of a more systematic understanding of the world's view of the institution. The questions will help a college or university realize the need to correct either the image or the fact, or both.

What do potential students, lost students (applicants who chose another institution), and community people think of when they hear the college's name? In other words: What is our image? Trustees will be interested in the results of image research, including focus group responses to image questions. People are asked to say what they think of when they hear your college or university's name. These responses may be compared with those for other colleges. Marketing messages may need to be changed when analysts discover that people are thinking only of a minor event or trivial characteristic of the college. If the image is formed around a basic truth, such as the condition of dormitories, more than the message will need to be changed.



People who love the college often have great difficulty, however, believing that every negative association is not an exaggeration or misinterpretation. Trying to “message over” a flaw seldom works. Negative aspects brought out in image research should not be brushed off as mistaken. These results may, in fact, reveal a fundamental institutional defect.

What image does this college or university wish to convey? In other words: What *should* people be thinking when they hear our name? A good response would give the elements of an image consistent with the mission that distinguishes the college from other choices. These elements build the kinds of associations that future focus groups should make, thus providing the basis for the evaluation of any future promotional campaigns. The image that the college or university wants is one that conveys its competitive advantages, its values, and its purposes—succinctly.

There are many challenging questions in this area. Can a distinguished college market its non-degree, professional, self-improvement programs with catchy ads on popular media without damaging the main enterprise’s image? Are “radio spots” inherently image-degrading for a liberal arts college? Image development requires integrity and sophistication. The contributions of board members are important.

Mission and Market

The integration of market with mission should be a concern of trustees. Many institutions were founded to serve a population in a characteristic way, and the mission communicates this purpose. Integrity requires that the college recruit those students who will benefit from these characteristic services. The questions below seek to build a picture of the college or university’s recruiting program and establish measures of success.

What are the characteristics of the people we are recruiting and serving best? In other words: What is our target market? Trustees should receive a description of current students. Many institutions can put together a description of its modal student—the “bread and butter” person. Using predominance and averages, your modal student might



be a woman whose home is 120 miles away, who intends to go to graduate school, with a university scholarship of \$1,500, and a federal loan of \$3,400. There are many characteristics that can be added to improve this description. Statistics other than averages are also needed. For example, though the average student may come from a distance of 120 miles away, 25 percent may have come from more than 500 miles away.

The target market should be those people whom the institution has historically served best and to whom it has a commitment. An analysis of graduation rates, for example, should show that those types of students who are heavily recruited graduate at a rate at least at the institution's average. Institutions that have seen a shift in service groups or that are recruiting students they are unable to retain may need to examine the integrity of mission and market.

How do the difficulties and opportunities that we face in recruiting differ from those of our competition? In other words: What's happening with market share? The college's relative enrollment position can add understanding to information on enrollment trends. Stable enrollment, when peer colleges are growing, is a warning that, in times of declining prospect pools, the college or university may face greater challenges than will competitors. If groups of potential students are approached with various strategies—if undergraduates are approached, for example, through counselors and graduate students through awareness campaigns—then the two market share trends should be analyzed separately. Other institutions that tend to receive applications from your institution's applicants should be included in the comparison group.

While many of the applicants who matriculate to this college or university get degrees, how significant is the number who do not, and how do we affect their lives? In other words: What is our product mix? Few colleges take a great deal of responsibility for having a positive impact on those students who do not complete their degree studies, yet nearly half of all entering students in the country do not earn a degree. A good answer will include an analysis of student completion rates and a description of the ways that the college assures personal growth for those who do not complete. Some colleges try to remain connected to those who choose not to complete on their first attempt. Other



colleges try to design programs that give specific skills and educational benefits to students early in their careers. There is no magic formula to ease the losses to the institution and the student when an educational career is interrupted. What can be expected, however, is that the institution seeks to learn more and intervene more successfully.

The Basics of Marketing

The questions below are standard marketing analysis questions framed for higher education. They are about product, competitive advantage, sales potential, and price resistance. These questions can be asked without using this terminology, and colleges and universities are usually well prepared to answer. A series of good answers will help trustees understand why students are choosing to attend this college or university, rather than selecting another option. Working with this knowledge, trustees can assist the institution in better controlling its fate.

What desirable services are we providing to students, the community, the state, and the nation? In other words: What is our product? Trustees must look beyond the credentialing function of a college or university to understand the extent and success of the transformations that students undergo as a result of their college or university experience. Many, many institutions, without the cachet of the Ivy League, produce impressive transformations in their students. A good answer will document the full range of added value that students can expect. It is difficult to market only the degree—there is little about the piece of paper that differentiates one college from another. Understanding the broad range of particular social, emotional, intellectual, geographical, and other changes (for which we have inadequate language in many cases) is the key to attracting the students with whom the college is having the most success.

Why are students choosing this college or university? In other words: What are our current competitive advantages? A good answer would not only present information similar to the results of focus groups among students, but comparative information about



competitors. The response should reveal the competitive advantages that students perceive as most salient. An excellent analysis will probe below the sketchy responses such as “more affordable” or “better location,” to a more precise description. “More affordable” may indicate that the college or university has a lower tuition or better scholarships or that it is simply a better value because of its quality. “Location” may mean close to home or just far enough away from home. A preference for the location may alternatively indicate, for example, a reference to the institution’s proximity to urban attractions. Only by digging deeper will a college or university discover the strengths that it must present as clearly as possible.

How successful are we in being able to choose among qualified applicants? In other words: What is our sales potential? There are many common and useful indicators of success in recruiting. Some of these indicators, however, like the acceptance ratio (the ratio of applications accepted by the college to total applications), need further analysis to give a true picture of the institution’s strength in the market. If all those who were denied acceptance were not qualified to attend (or had changed their mind and had not completed the application process), then the application pool has little depth. On the other hand, if the vast majority of those denied admission were likely to succeed, then the ratio accurately measures the pool’s depth.

How hard do we have to recruit each year as measured by the resources used to reach our new student target? In other words: Is market resistance increasing? Two responses would be very helpful to trustees. The first helps demonstrate the demands of maintaining enrollment and is the trend in the proportion of each year’s enrollment that is lost to graduation, transfers, dropouts, and stop-outs. A four-year institution with strong retention may need to recruit a number of new students equal to 30 percent of its enrollment each year. An institution with shorter programs and low retention of first and second-year students might need to recruit a pool of new students equivalent to a majority of its enrollment each year. Shifts in retention and average program length can greatly affect the effort necessary to maintain enrollment.



A second useful indicator is the trend in recruiting costs and non-need-based aid (earmarked for new students) per new student. If the total of these “attraction” expenditures per new student is approaching a sizable fraction of the stated tuition price, the institution is having difficulty attracting new students. When the expense of attracting students takes a larger and larger bite out of expected revenue, the future market and financial success may be moving out of reach.

Pricing

A college or university should not think of tuition and student aid policies entirely in terms of financial necessity. Many students and families are looking for value. Students want an education that they can afford, yes, but also one that is most beneficial to them.

What does a student’s tuition buy? In other words: Are we value-competitive? Trustees should know whether student tuition revenue exceeds instructional costs or the reverse and how this college or university compares with its competitive peers. Students may effectively be getting a discount on their purchase of instruction, or they may be paying a premium. While students grasp the cost basis of value as poorly as most consumers, sophistication among all buyers is increasing. Trustees can gain much insight into competitive position by watching trends in the instructional value purchased with each dollar of tuition.

Are more potential students sending their funds elsewhere? In other words: What are the trends in net revenue share? While enrollment market share trends are invaluable, an understanding of the net tuition revenue (tuition revenue after subtracting institutionally funded student aid) share trend adds a pricing dimension. The net tuition revenue share may be dropping, even while enrollment share climbs, if market share is being “purchased” with lower tuitions and higher discounts.



After institutional aid, what have students really been paying per credit on average? In other words: What is the trend in our discounted unit price? By asking this question, trustees cut away all the debris cluttering the true price trend. Net-revenue-per-credit-taken trends show the real price trend by the unit “sold.” Tuition price trends neglect the moderating effect of scholarships and discounts. These trends also mask the changes in credit load behavior of students faced with changes in tuition price. At some institutions students have responded to higher tuitions by taking larger loads (under a-one-price-for-full-time-attendance pricing system). The burden on the institution thus increases with no corresponding change in revenue. Before ratifying pricing decisions, trustees should be aware of the true changes in student cost burden.

In gauging the recruitment effort, trustees will want to go beyond examining new brochure designs, the institution’s outgoing online messages, and charts of inquiries from prospective students. Colleges and universities need to share with trustees all the early warning signs of recruitment trends. The first rule for presidents in this area is the tried and true principle of “no surprises.”