

**NOEL-LEVITZ WHITE PAPER**

# **In Pursuit of the Secret Shopper:**

## **Effective new strategies for finding and engaging prospective students**

The traditional enrollment funnel paradigm is no longer up to the task. Few enrollment managers would dispute that today. The question is: Are they adapting to current realities by making effective use of new strategies and tools for accomplishing their institutional enrollment goals?

Not long ago, colleges bought lists of prospective students, sent them a search piece, then sat back and waited, hoping the respondents would be numerous and qualified enough to produce the desired crop of new students. That was before the enrollment landscape was reshaped dramatically by online media and new patterns of student behavior.

Today, prospective students in ever greater numbers are “secretly” exploring colleges online on their own terms, using official and unofficial sources, without completing a college’s response form. Many are withholding college entrance exam scores from colleges they might be interested in, and remaining unknown to their institutions of choice until the point of application.

To adapt, colleges are realizing that non-response to an initial contact doesn’t necessarily mean that a student isn’t interested in their institution. In addition, enrollment managers are discovering more effective ways to find the right students and continue finding them until they succeed in enrolling the targeted class of incoming students.



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## Purchasing names with perseverance and focus

For several decades, search prospecting has largely been event-driven, based on the dates that testing agencies make student names and scores available—typically late January for students who take the PLAN and PSAT tests and six weeks after testing occurs for ACT and SAT takers. Many enrollment professionals maintain this practice, allowing the availability of databases from testing agencies to drive their search timing and frequency.

The limitations of this approach are becoming more pronounced. Among the factors at work:

- With testing becoming optional for an increasing number of institutions, there is a growing subset of students who choose not to take the ACT or SAT and therefore don't present themselves to potential colleges in the traditional manner.
- Not all students take their college entrance exams during the spring of their junior year in high school, when colleges are gearing up to begin recruiting the next year's class. Currently, approximately 35 percent of college-bound students wait until the fall of their senior year to take the test.

As NRCCUA Enrollment Consultant Larry Erenberger explains, “Colleges and universities can no longer operate according to an event-driven system tied to the testing agencies, because other very well-qualified students are not in these pools, so they are losing out on communication time and relationship time with students who may be strong prospects.” Significantly, students who take the test at later dates are more likely to be males and minorities—two groups that are high-priority enrollment targets for many institutions—and colleges may be leaving these prospects untapped. With that in mind, colleges should be purchasing names from multiple sources, especially in their primary geographic region, while being aware that each of the search name sources—ACT, College Board, and NRCCUA—has strengths and limitations in terms of geographic penetration and the types of information provided.

Further, enrollment planners must view their student search not as a one-time event but rather as an ongoing *process*, remembering that students will enter the college planning process at a time and channel of their choosing. Colleges should work with their list providers to determine the availability of new names and budget for ongoing purchases, using research to guide their selections.

A key metric for analyzing list purchases is the Prospect Coverage Rate (PCR), or the percentage of an institution's enrolled population that appeared in its prospect pool—regardless of how those students eventually entered the inquiry or applicant pool. The higher that percentage, the more effectively an institution is canvassing its target market. (Ideally, an institution's PCR should be in the range of 50 to 70 percent, with schools that recruit primarily in local or regional markets approaching the higher end of that range.)\*

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\* See: *Retooling the Enrollment Funnel: Strategies and Metrics for a New Era*, 2009 Noel-Levitz. Visit [www.noellevitz.com/papers](http://www.noellevitz.com/papers)

In general, colleges use one of three methods of search name selection:

1. Traditional search by geographic area, GPA and major, emphasizing underrepresented areas such as gender or ethnic diversity;
2. Traditional approach plus post-purchase analysis of search names using predictive modeling based on previous enrolled classes to determine likelihood-to-enroll scores for prospects, and;
3. Pre-purchase predictive modeling to analyze prospects using likelihood-to-enroll scores, geodemographic data, and information about college choice preferences available through NRCCUA.

Regardless of the approach used, institutions should plan to search early and often, remembering that new students are entering the college selection process every day. This means purchasing names on an ongoing basis, using data available from list providers and other sources to evaluate prospects and guide the selection process.

### Keep communicating to draw them in

Perhaps the single-most important factor driving the need for a new enrollment paradigm is the “secret shopper” phenomenon, whereby prospective students research their college choices without making themselves known to institutions they are considering, often remaining anonymous until the moment they submit an application. A recent study indicated that more than a third of applicants to public institutions and a quarter of applicants to private colleges do not reveal themselves to their chosen institutions until they apply—percentages that have grown steadily during the last five years.

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**Percent of applicants currently submitting an application (electronic or otherwise) as their first known point of contact\***

	2-Year Public	4-Year Public	4-Year Private
2010 median response	36.5%	34.5%	25.0%
2008 median response	25.0%	30.0%	20.0%



\* See: *2010 E-Recruiting Practices and Trends at Four-Year and Two-Year Institutions*, Noel-Levitz. Visit [www.noellevitz.com/papers](http://www.noellevitz.com/papers)

As a result of this trend, colleges must shift their thinking to view student search not only as an inquiry generator, but as a critical brand awareness strategy that lays the foundation for a multi-faceted communication effort, emphasizes Sarah Coen, vice president of consulting services at Noel-Levitz. “Communication strategies once reserved for inquiries should be applied to subsets of the prospect base,” adds Coen, who says that colleges can create targeted sub-groups using any of the following tools or parameters:

- Geographic criteria such as top counties;
- Geodemographic data such as household income, ethnic diversity, or educational level;
- Likelihood-to-enroll scores identified through post-purchase predictive modeling;
- Likelihood-to-enroll scores incorporating additional data generated through pre-purchase strategies such as the Strategic Market Analysis Research Team (SMART) Approach, which scores student names in the NRCCUA database using predictive models that include a variety of college preference variables.

A well-conceived communication strategy will incorporate multiple “hits” or touch points throughout the recruitment cycle, employing a variety of formats to reach students at the increasingly diversified times and places when and where they may be searching for information. Each communication piece should be designed to serve a particular purpose, whether that be to raise awareness or to prompt action on the part of a prospect. Colleges should feel comfortable inviting a student to visit campus, apply for admission, or attend an off-campus program even if they have not yet inquired.

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In this ever-shifting landscape, some basic principles regarding communication methods remain helpful:

- Students consistently report that snail mail communication remains important to them, so colleges should invest in well-constructed letters and mailers, reinforced with aggressive e-mail campaigns that serve specific purposes in the recruitment process.
- Well-conceived Web sites—often in the form of admissions micro-sites—should ensure that students are never more than two clicks away from essential information regarding admissions and financial aid.
- Clear calls to action and convenient response mechanisms should make it easy for students to take the next step in the process—whether that means signing up for a campus visit or applying for admission—effectively drawing them into the enrollment funnel. The use of landing pages or personal URLs offers expediency for students and helps institutions track the effectiveness of the marketing and recruitment strategy.

A strong communication plan will align closely with institutional enrollment priorities, using a variety of data sources to learn what matters to targeted students and providing them with the right information—such as details about a particular academic major—at the appropriate time. Colleges should track results at every stage of the process in order to drive ongoing changes and improvements in the communications flow. A useful metric for quantifying results is the Prospect Progression Rate (PPR), which tracks the percentage of prospects who have progressed to various stages of the enrollment funnel, regardless of how and when they entered the funnel\*.

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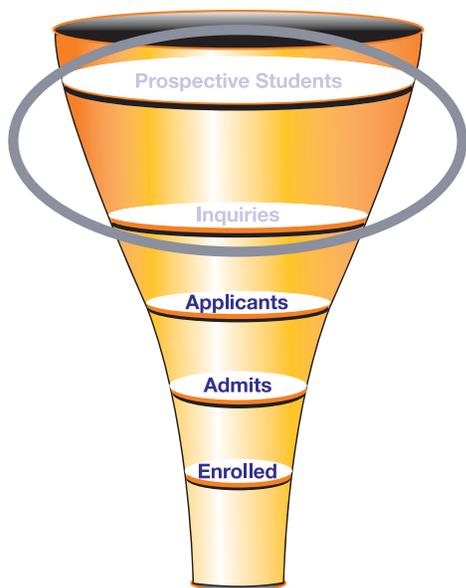


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## Seven steps to using data to manage the prospect pool more strategically

An effective strategy for using data to maximize enrollment yields and increase recruitment efficiency should incorporate the following steps:



**Many students are remaining anonymous to their institutions of choice until the point of application.**

1. *Review/refine enrollment goals and align list purchases with those goals:* Nearly every institution has a new student enrollment goal. Beyond that, every name in the prospect pool should be tied to other institutional priorities such as increasing overall GPA, entering new markets, or bolstering a given academic area.
2. *Build a statistical model to predict enrollment, scoring purchased names based on their likelihood to enroll:* Use data about recently enrolled students to build a model that indicates which prospects are predisposed to consider a particular institution.
3. *Qualify student lists with pre-purchase analysis:* Use tools such as SMART Approach to identify and focus on the students who are most likely to enroll, eliminating potential waste and improving the quality of the purchase.
4. *Use data from the model as well as appended data to segment communications with students, creating more personalized communications that will increase enrollment yield:* Sources of additional data include ACT or SAT (race, academic major), NRCCUA (campus environment preferences, interest in athletics or other activities), or other demographic resources (household educational level, income or buying habits).
5. *Continue scoring the prospect pool to focus on the highest-yield segments and to add more qualified leads as needed:* Score names using either pre-purchase analysis to rank names in the NRCCUA database or other predictive modeling tools to score names post-purchase.
6. *Make additional list purchases throughout the year (based on data) in order to constantly refresh the prospect pool and stay ahead of recruitment goals:* As new names become available throughout the recruitment cycle, continue to allow institutional priorities to guide purchases, adjusting parameters as necessary to achieve goals (for example, lowering the required GPA in a targeted major area to add more names). As needed, continue to refresh the prospect pool until 30 days before the application deadline.
7. *Use data to guide and evaluate the effectiveness of specific search strategies:* Analyze prospective search strategies annually, tracking how students were communicated with and if and when they entered the pool. If the pool is underperforming in a certain institutional priority area, change strategies by buying a larger list or changing communication efforts. Remember that if a variable is important enough to include in the search criteria, it is important enough to measure, so review every search criterion and its effect on the eventual enrollment outcome.

## Critical reminders on the road to enrollment success

- Remember that the search process is not a one-and-done event. Continually revisit institutional priorities and move back into the prospect pool with strategic mandates in mind.
- Identify high-value prospects and treat them automatically as inquiries, whether or not they respond to an initial search mailing. Don't expect to accomplish objectives using a single resource or communication technique.
- Be prepared to communicate frequently with high-value prospects tied to strategic enrollment goals – not with expensive viewbooks, but with postcards, e-mails, and social networking tools that reinforce key institutional messages.
- Add late prospects to the pool on an ongoing basis. Hone in on what is known about those who enter the pool late in the process and quickly position the institution as the best place to find what the student is seeking.
- To effect institutional change, dive back into the prospect pool repeatedly to reach those priority students that are the best fit for your institution.
- Create a detailed plan to clarify the roles of multiple vendors and ensure they are working together as partners to achieve institutional success.
- Track all points of contact with prospective students, including mailings, electronic communications, high school visits, phone contacts, college fairs, and visits to Web sites and social networking platforms, remembering that the key question is not whether students reply to search activities, but whether they enroll.

## Conclusion: Seeing it from their perspective

Dramatic changes in the enrollment environment may well have put the traditional recruitment paradigm on life support. At the same time, these momentous shifts and innovations have produced a fantastic array of new avenues for interaction and messaging, as well as new tools for refining and measuring recruitment strategies and results. Institutions that accomplish their goals in this environment will be those that develop a keen understanding of how students research and make their decisions, then find ways to support them in their quest—being present in their lives when and where they are ready to engage.





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## Questions about this paper?

We hope you have found this paper helpful and informative. To learn more about how to use SMART Approach to identify and communicate with your best prospects, visit our Web site at [www.noellevitz.com/SMART](http://www.noellevitz.com/SMART). If you have questions or would like more information, please contact Sarah Coen, Noel-Levitz vice president, at 1-800-876-1117 or [ContactUs@noellevitz.com](mailto:ContactUs@noellevitz.com).

## About Noel-Levitz

Noel-Levitz is a nationally recognized higher education consulting firm that specializes in strategic planning for enrollment and student success. Each year, campus executives from throughout the U.S. meet regularly with Noel-Levitz to accomplish their goals for student recruitment, marketing, student retention, and strategic enrollment management.

Since 1973, Noel-Levitz has partnered with nearly 2,600 colleges and universities throughout North America. The firm offers executive consulting, custom research and benchmark data, innovative tools and technologies, side-by-side plan development and execution, and resources for professional development.

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