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19 Assessing the Effectiveness of International Student Recruitment

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The profession of international student recruitment has changed considerably since the earlier editions of this book were published. One of the most significant differences is the increasing pressure to recruit international students to address budgetary challenges. The combined effect of the 2008 recession and the population dip among those born in the early 2000s, now high school age, has made it tougher for institutions to meet their enrollment goals. In a survey conducted by the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 71 percent of the respondents from public institutions and 64 percent of respondents from private institutions "made efforts to increase international student enrollment" to mitigate shifts in demographics (Selingo 2014).

This increasing pressure to recruit students is coming at a time of funding constraints, growth challenges, and lack of pricing power, or limited prospects of raising tuition, for universities. According to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, between 2008 and 2016, state spending on higher education nationwide is down an average of 18 percent and funding for public institutions is nearly $10 billion below what it was just prior to the recession (Mitchell, Leachman, and Masterson 2016). Another report from Moody's noted that higher education institutions in the United States are expected to experience the slowest net tuition revenue growth in more than a decade (Douglas-Gabriel 2015).

Pressures to increase revenue and reduce cost are driving momentum for *doing more with less* in higher education. If these pressures were not strong enough, the emergence of new services offered by a range of third-party providers has made it even more difficult to assess, implement, and evaluate the outcomes of the services. For example, commissioned-based agents, customer relationship management (CRM) tools, and social media marketing all had very limited scope in recruitment strategies before 2008.

Measuring the effectiveness of international student recruitment has its origins in these pressures to justify the outcomes, impact, results, or return on investment from scarce resources (Choudaha and Contreras 2014). However, approaches to allocating the resources for recruitment strategies are often flawed, which further complicates measuring the effectiveness of the outcomes (Choudaha and Streitwieser 2014).

In addition to demographic shifts in the market, the changing needs and expectations of international students call for continuously assessing and adapting recruiting strategies. Developing and delivering effective strategy is about making informed choices that are grounded in data and insights.

The majority of the recruitment strategies at higher education institutions are driven by one of three approaches. First is the "best practice" approach, which means that if it worked for someone else then it should work for another. Second is the "trial and error" approach, which is to try a new strategy to see if it works. Finally, there is the "gut feeling" approach, which relies on experience and feeling as a predictor of success.

None of the above approaches are effective. Consider the case of Western Kentucky University (WKU), which dismissed as many as 36 Indian graduate students for failing to meet academic requirements as a result of "an aggressive recruitment campaign last summer and fall in which contracted recruiters offered easy admission and tuition discounts," as reported by *Bowling Green Daily News*. James Gary, chair of the computer science department at WKU, described it as a "learning process."

Lacking the ability to measure the effectiveness of recruitment strategies can have another unintended consequence in the form of poor retention of international students. NAFSA-commissioned research (Choudaha and Schulmann 2014) identified that "Poor retention is symptomatic of the mismatch between expectations of students prior to enrollment and their actual experience once they are on campus."

In sum, it is becoming integral to build international recruitment strategies with a keen eye to measuring outcomes. This chapter provides an overview as to how to assess the effectiveness of international student recruitment with an overarching objective of achieving strategic goals.

Challenges With Return on Investment

Oxford Dictionaries defines effectiveness as "the degree to which something is successful in producing a desired result; success." Given the financial pressures, return on investment, or ROI, with its origins in the accounting and for-profit sector, has been gaining traction in higher education. In its simplest terms, ROI is about measuring how much profit is made as a percentage of the original investment. It is a measure of how efficiently each dollar invested in an initiative is producing a profit.

However, the term has its limitations. Bendle and Bagga (2016) in their article published in *MIT Sloan Management Review*, "The Metrics That Marketers Muddle," argue "that the biggest challenge with ROI isn't a technical deficiency but confusion over how it is used." They continue that "A critical requirement for calculating ROI is knowing the net profit generated by a specific investment decision.…[T]o calculate ROI accurately, you need to be able to estimate the fraction of profits attributable to the investment."

There are several challenges in applying ROI in the context of international student recruitment. First, recruiters are not marketers or financial accountants. Second, the majority of the institutions are driven by not-for-profit missions and hence it is difficult to isolate "profit" and "investment." Some strategic goals are hard to quantify—for example, diversification by source country. Also, the lack of technology and data to track the prospective student journey in a clear and transparent manner is often a challenge.

The Assessment Framework Approach

Given the challenges many institutions face in applying ROI, an alternative tool for measuring the effectiveness of international student recruitment is **assessment**—a measurement that is already deeply embedded in institutions from the lens of accreditation and learning outcomes. At its core, assessment helps inform stakeholders how well their strategies are working with an intention of improving the outcomes.

According to a report by the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (2014), while compliance with accreditation expectations is the prime reason for using assessment, increasingly assessment approaches and results are becoming useful for institutional improvement and resource allocation.

The W.K. Kellogg Foundation (2004) defines the Logic Model as "a systematic and visual way to present and share your understanding of the relationships among the resources you have to operate your program, the activities you plan, and the changes or results you hope to achieve."

The Logic Model involves five different stages—input, process, output, outcome, and impact. Below is a discussion of four of the five key elements applicable in the context of international recruitment. The fifth element, "impact," is the fundamental change occurring at an institution as a result of international recruitment activities in a longer time frame of 7 to 10 years. While very important, it is more complex to measure impact. For the purposes of this chapter, we focus on the first four elements.

1. **Input:** includes human, financial, organizational, and institutional resources that an office has available to direct toward recruitment strategies.
2. **Activities:** the processes, tools, events, technology, and actions that are used within an implementation strategy to achieve intended results.
3. **Outputs:** the direct, short-term results of activities in terms of meeting international enrollment goals in a particular year.
4. **Outcomes:** the medium-term, 3-5-year strategic goals for achieving international enrollment mix.

This approach is more practical and applicable in the context of international student recruitment for at least three reasons. First, it recognizes the relationship between various resources and activities with an intention of achieving specific strategic outcomes. Second, it allows for both quantifiable and nonquantifiable outcomes, which go beyond financial metrics of profit. Finally, it aligns medium-term strategic goals with immediate activities and results and encourages a more strategic approach.

Table 1. Sample Plan: Applying the Assessment Framework to International Student Recruitment

Input	Process	Output	Outcome
Your Planned Work		**Your Intended Results**	
What resources are needed?	**What activities are performed?**	**What short-term results are delivered?**	**What strategic goals are achieved?**
Financial Human Organizational Other	Advertising Agents Alumni E-mail Lists Education Fair Social Media Other	Awareness Inquiries Applications Acceptances Enrollments	Growth Diversity Quality
Part-time social media intern (U.S. $5,000/ year)	Engage prospective students from Vietnam with faculty and alumni on social media	Generate awareness among prospective students from Vietnam	To diversify enrollment pool by enrolling a total of 5 students in 2017 and 50 students by 2020 from Vietnam
Travel budget (U.S. $5,000/ year)	Participating in education fair in Vietnam	Receive at least 20 applications and 2 enrolled students in 2017 from Vietnam	
Scholarship (U.S. $4,000/year)	Offering scholarship to increase interest among students from Vietnam	Ensure the yield of at least 2 students from Vietnam	

The Logic Model is not free of limitations. For example, it may be difficult to linearly connect different stages without adequate expertise in collecting, organizing, and analyzing primary and secondary data across student lifecycle. With the increasing pressure on some institutions to meet immediate term enrollment, it may also seem impractical to plan for longer-term outcomes.

A couple of alternatives to the Logic Model are the CIPP (Context/Input/Process/Product) model and Theories of Change framework. Both are more complex in evaluating the outcomes, and hence become impractical to apply in the context of international student recruitment.

Recommendations

While measuring effectiveness may sound daunting, it is important to initiate and implement the process to deliver outcomes that align with institutional mission. Here are five recommendations for measuring and building more effective international recruitment strategies.

1. **Adopt an assessment mindset:** Often, assessment can raise some uncomfortable questions as the data may expose results that are counterintuitive or less than desirable. However, embracing a degree of comfort with data and assessment will help in improving the outcomes of the strategies and asking for additional resources based on the evidence.
2. **Align outcomes with inputs:** A systematic and strategic approach for measuring effectiveness starts with a deeper understanding of strategic goals, process, activities, and resources. This will help in better aligning different components of the institution's recruitment strategic plan with the institutional mission.
3. **Build coalitions:** Given the disparate technology systems on campuses and challenges related to the integration of the systems, it may be difficult to get a complete picture of international student data and the corresponding outcomes. It will require many pieces of information residing in different systems; therefore, building partnerships for updated data will be important in order to measure effectiveness.
4. **Define metrics:** Metrics should be practical to use and understandable by various stakeholders. They should include both qualitative (tangible) and quantitative (intangible) measures based on a set of assumptions relevant to the campus context. Some of the metrics such as number of applications are easy to define, but other

metrics such as awareness are more difficult to measure and require a reasonable set of assumptions.

5. **Create baseline:** Once the framework to measure the effectiveness is ready and data is collected, it is important to continue to leverage the baseline for shaping future strategic choices. This will aid in moving toward informed decisionmaking, which is grounded in data and results.

Conclusion

In a postrecession environment, the pressure for overcoming budgetary and demographic challenges will continue to demand more from international enrollment professionals.

Measuring the effectiveness of international student recruitment is integral to sustainable strategies, and the use of financial metrics will become increasingly important in defining the outcomes. A report by the American Council on Education asserts that "[t]he next era of higher education finance can and should be concerned with the internal management accounting practices that empower decision makers within colleges and universities to make choices that improve the economic performance of their institutions, and evaluate the ways in which choices relate to institutional mission, especially student success" (Soares, Steele, and Wayt 2016, 24).

Unless there is a way to systematically and periodically assess the effectiveness of strategies, institutions risk reusing unproductive methods and dissipating resources.

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