



KDG and ReachBright present:

THE SHORT GUIDE TO BOOSTING ENROLLMENT

INTRODUCTION

THE NEW NORMAL IN HIGHER ED

While it may seem like students around the nation are engaged in a competition to land a spot in the country's top colleges and universities, recent statistics have shown that it may very well be the schools, not the students, battling it out.

College enrollment has been in decline since 2011. In fact, recent reports show that at least 40% of colleges in the United States enroll fewer than 1,000 students.¹ With over 5,000 colleges around the country offering everything from two-year to four-year degrees, there are more colleges than there are prospective college students. This means that colleges, especially nonprofit ones with less federal funding and more in need of tuition and donations, are fiercely trying to boost enrollment numbers.

While the number of overall prospective college students has gone down in recent years, the number of applications being submitted has gone up, making matters worse for colleges and universities. Students are turning in multiple applications to a variety of schools, causing yields, or the percentage of students who actually attend the school to which they were accepted, to decline.² Students have more of a choice and are taking advantage of this opportunity. While it used to be college applicants scrambling to stand out above the rest, the roles seem to have switched in recent years. With so much competition, how can colleges and universities convince students to commit to their campus for four years or more?

THIS GUIDE CAN HELP

At KDG, we've spent over 16 years using tech solutions to help colleges and universities around the country manage their enrollment and recruit more students to their campuses. We've used this experience, as well as our interactions with admissions counselors around the country, to compile this brief guide on the ways schools can stand out above the rest and start boosting enrollment.

We were able to squeeze a lot of the most pertinent and helpful information we could gather into several short pages. This guide can be read in only a few minutes—on breaks, between applicant interviews, while traveling to admissions fairs, etc.—but we hope that the information on its pages has much longer lasting effects.

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GET PLANNING

TAKE A LOOK AT HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATES

Colleges and universities are quickly realizing that they cannot simply wait for the enrollment landscape to change naturally. This may take years. In fact, it's possible that enrollment may never be what it once was. Schools need a strategic enrollment plan, one that takes advantage of the current environment by learning more about it, analyzing it closely, and making the most out of the numbers they are currently being given.

This starts with high school graduation rates. For example, rates in Texas have gone up, but have gone down in Pennsylvania.³ This means that colleges in Texas have a larger pool of applicants, while colleges in the Keystone State are battling it out in order to catch the attention of an ever-shrinking population. In fact, Pennsylvania, where our headquarters is located, is one of five states in the country experiencing the largest decline in enrollment, losing 18,000 students between 2015 and 2016. Neighboring New York lost the most with 30,000.⁴ These two states alone are changing the way colleges in the Northeast function and move forward. These are substantial numbers and they matter significantly. Numbers like these cause schools to cut programs, salaries, and even entire departments.

THERE IS NO SUCH THING AS A “TRADITIONAL” STUDENT

So how can colleges start to turn these numbers around, or even make the most of the low numbers currently available? First, schools have to get past the idea that enrollment only pertains to 18-year-old recent high school graduates and instead consider transfer students from two-year schools, students coming back to the classroom for the first time in ten, even twenty, years, and international students looking for an American college experience. These groups prove that high school students aren't the only segment when it comes to higher ed.



But don't stop with these markets. Break up these segments into subsegments. Look at race, ethnicity, class, religion, geographic location, potential major, and even migration (whether students are going to schools out of their home state).³ Use all of the information you can gather in order to get a fuller understanding of students and prospects both in and out of your immediate area. After all, you must know who is available and who you can market to before you can actually pique their interest.

HIGH SCHOOL COUNSELORS HAVE THE SAME GOAL AS COLLEGE ADMISSIONS

Next, make sure you ask yourself whether your institution's admissions department is establishing the right relationships. College enrollment shouldn't feel like something that sits squarely on the shoulders of your admissions directors. High school counselors play an important role in the enrollment process, too. They are the first ones teenagers usually talk to when considering colleges and careers. However, despite sharing the same goal—transitioning young students into college—the two groups of advisors sometimes behave as though they are in two separate worlds.⁵

If your institution isn't establishing a relationship with counselors in your “backyard” or around the nation, you're missing out on a valuable and highly influential opportunity to grasp prospects' attention early on, before college visits commence, before admissions fairs are held, and before the application process starts.

Make sure you keep in touch with counselors. Keep them updated on your school. Let them know what programs are being offered and what financial aid is available. Visit high schools, sit in on meetings with counselors, and hold events, like financial aid nights, where both counselors and admissions directors work together to prepare prospective students for college.⁵ Taking on an active role in the school will lead to more name recognition for your institution. In addition, statistics show that enrollment increases when admissions directors and counselors can work through the tough college planning phase of a student's life together. If high school counselors can dedicate at least 10% more time to college planning than they normally do, the number of students enrolling in college the following fall will

increase by about 4%.⁵ This increase isn't only great for public and private high schools. It's also great for colleges. Admissions directors have nothing to lose by helping out. In fact, they have everything to gain.

Current university students are also a great help in this respect. Recruit student ambassadors who can visit their old high schools and showcase how your institution has positively impacted them. No matter how many brochures you give out, nothing makes quite the impact on a young prospect as a face-to-face conversation with a current college student.

QUICK TIP

When drafting a strategic plan, start with a long view first. Where would you like enrollment to be in 20 years? What about 15? Gradually work your way backwards until you have a view of the immediate future. Where would you like enrollment to be next year? Doing this will help you set benchmarks and establish realistic goals.⁶

WHAT SHOULD GO INTO AN ENROLLMENT STRATEGIC PLAN?

On the surface, an enrollment strategic plan may not differ much from any other strategic plan in higher ed, with a mission statement, goals, etc. However, there are some specific questions your enrollment strategic plan should be answering:⁶

- Exactly how many students do you plan on enrolling? How many students can your institution realistically support in ten years? What about five?
- Would you like undergraduate enrollment to increase? Graduate enrollment? What about transfer students? Remember, there is no such thing as a traditional student anymore. How are you making sure you are targeting all of

your potential audiences?

- How will the responsibility for this goal be divided between different departments, like admissions, marketing, and communications? What will their key strategies be?
- How exactly will you measure whether your institution is successful? What if your school doesn't meet its goals?

As your school grows, it's also important to consider how your institution will make changes to accommodate these new numbers of students from varying backgrounds and with differing interests. As a result, your strategic plan should also ask:⁷

- How many students do you anticipate living on campus? How many full-time students? How many part-time?
- What new classes or courses will your institution offer as its numbers and diversity grow? What about new departments and new faculty members? Can your institution realistically support new professors and administrators on its payroll?
- Will you implement any new services on campus? Such as career services, counseling services, etc.?

FOLLOW THE RULES OF CONSUMER DEMAND

HIGH TECH INCENTIVES

Macbooks, media lounges, and iPads: colleges and universities are offering a variety of perks to incoming students. These gifts may seem like extravagant marketing ploys or gimmicks, but they're far from it. In this technical and digital age, a free laptop for every student and a free iPad for every incoming freshman are basic means of addressing consumer demand.⁸

The popularity of BYOD, or “Bring Your Own Device,” in classrooms around the country is fueling this demand. iPads, Macbooks, and other devices are costly, but high-tech classrooms are making them a necessity. Students are more

likely to choose a school that can offer them these devices, offsetting their costs by including them in the already steep tuition price. Students feel as if they are obtaining an added value, something extra for the money they're spending.



HIGHLIGHT YOUR PERKS

Technology isn't the only demand that prospects have when looking at and applying to colleges and universities. Recreational activities, on-campus living, and even furry, four-legged friends—schools are thinking up some very unique ways to capture prospects' interest. Some colleges are allowing students to keep pets in their dorms, while others offer sustainable food in dining halls. Others market their game rooms and some showcase their luxurious locations (a beach for Florida Institute of Technology and a personal ski hill for Michigan Tech).⁸

Find what makes your school unique and market it. It doesn't have to be a ski hill on campus, a saltwater aquarium in the student union, or a rock wall in the gym. It can

be as simple as free tickets to community art events, high-tech computer labs and entertainment lounges, or even free washers and dryers.

SOME OF THE THINGS STUDENTS ARE DEMANDING:

1. Technology for classrooms, like iPads and Macbooks, and technology for dorms, like high-tech media lounges, appliances, and computer labs.
2. Anything “green,” like sustainable, local food and even eco-friendly housing opportunities.
3. Job opportunities may seem like an obvious one, but students want a school with ample internship possibilities, work-study programs, and even partnerships with area businesses.



USE EVERY MEANS OF MARKETING AVAILABLE

FROM BILLBOARDS TO TEXT MESSAGES

When you've found what makes your school unique and different, it's time to market these qualities: in print, online, through social media, on billboards, etc. Use every medium you can in order to make sure that no market goes unnoticed.

Traditional mediums of marketing include social media. Facebook and Instagram are great sites to post pictures. Show off your modern dorms, high-tech labs, and "green" cafeteria. Twitter helps build a community with its hashtags, so start a conversation between prospective students. Finally, a LinkedIn account is a great place for prospects to see successful alumni in action. As mentioned previously, prospects are looking for schools that prepare them for the working world. LinkedIn makes it easier for prospects to get in touch with those who went to your school, sat in the classrooms, earned the degree, and put it to use.

Text message marketing is also a popular way of spreading the word about your school and the opportunities it has.⁹ Today, nearly every person has a cell phone glued to his or her hand or tucked into purses and back pockets. In addition, radio ads, billboards, and television commercials may seem like more traditional means of marketing, but they can have powerful effects when paired with more modern means. Use your traditional marketing campaigns to encourage prospects to pick up their phones and text you their emails, visit your web page, or scan your QR code.⁹



SOME OTHER MARKETING MEDIUMS INCLUDE:

- Podcasts hosted by professors, students, and administrators
- Blog posts about the college
- Live-chats, online Q&A sessions, and video "hangouts"
- Mobile apps with course lists, maps, and 360° views of campus.

HIGH-TECH TOOLS

New marketing technology can tell you more about your prospective students than perhaps many paper applications can. Technology has made it possible for schools to track prospects' web and email activity. It's amazing how much one can discover just by how many seconds a prospect spends on a web page, which links a prospect clicks on, and whether or not a prospect opens an email.

The power of such seemingly miniscule data is something we at KDG recently discovered with our inbound marketing tool for higher education, ReachBright. ReachBright can tell admissions directors which subjects prospects are most interested in and which they probably care very little about. It tells them whether these prospects come from families who've donated to the school. It also tells them, through daily and monthly email updates, just how successful their email marketing campaigns are—from every single open and click right down to the number of seconds a prospect spends on a webpage.

These insights help colleges and universities better market to these students. If a student seems to spend a lot of time on the math department's website, send that student emails about being a math major. If a student spends time researching your school's dining options, you have the power to send that student an email about your sustainable cafeteria and weekly farmers market. With marketing segmentation like this, no one is in danger of getting lost in the crowd.



However, technology cannot replace human interactions like face-to-face meetings, interviews, or even informal luncheons. Don't use technology as an excuse to not hit the road and meet prospects in person. Instead, use technology as a tool that will help you start a real conversation.

REFRESH YOUR WEBSITE

IT'S TIME TO GIVE YOUR WEBSITE A MAKEOVER

Finally, if you find that your school is unable to attract quality leads, it may be time to take a look at your website. Your website is your “digital front door.” It’s what your prospects will look at before they ever step foot on your campus or even think about applying to your school. If your website doesn’t answer their questions or address their needs almost immediately, they’re sure to move to the next college on their list. They don’t want to dig for information.¹⁰ Instead, they want information that is easy to find, even easier to read, and up-to-date.¹¹

WHAT PROSPECTS DON'T WANT

- **A lot of content** - Visitors will only read an estimated 28% of the content you publish on a page.
- **Stock images** - Stock photos are silly and don’t show the visitor what life is really like on your campus. Instead, use real photos of your campus and students.
- **Long forms** - Don’t make visitors jump through hoops to get the information they want. Instead, make sure all of the most important information they need is directly on your site. Live chats also give visitors fast answers to questions, as well as a more personal means of communication.

WHAT PROSPECTS DO WANT

- **Easy to navigate** - Thousands of internal landing pages are too many to have and they bury information. Make your site easy to navigate by condensing pages and content in a logical way.
- **Bulleted content** - Bulleted content lets visitors get short, memorable bursts of the info they need most.
- **Videos** - Videos of your campus and your actual students are a great replacement for stock photos and an even better way to share information in a non-textual way.

- **Social media integration** - Nearly everyone is on social media. Make it easier for visitors to keep in touch and get updates on the go by putting links to your social media accounts directly on your home page.
- **Academic programs and employment rates** - This information should be front and center. Showing what your school can do for prospects is much better than listing the history of your school or the awards it's won.

QUICK TIP

Every single higher ed site should be optimized for mobile and should be responsive to any web browser your visitors may use. Not doing so will cause you to miss leads and conversions.

HOW REACHBRIGHT AND KDG CAN HELP

“They [KDG] were right there with us providing advice and perspective every step of the way.”

-MUHLENBERG COLLEGE

[ReachBright](#) is the first and only tool that combines both marketing data with operational data to facilitate greater engagement for prospective students, current students, and alumni. By combining data from campus visits, donations, email engagement, event attendance, and social media interactivity, ReachBright helps leading institutions market more effectively and drive better engagement through the use of big data. Whether you want your institution to increase its enrollment efforts, engage more of its current students, or develop stronger alumni relations, ReachBright has the tools you will need.

REACHBRIGHT CAN:

- **Track** users' interests based on web-browsing and engagement activity and automatically market to them based on those interests.
- **Identify** key areas of your website that foster greater engagement for prospective students and alumni alike.
- **Record** donor history and always know who your most generous alums are.
- **Assign** tags to get a better idea of prospects' interests.
- **Create** customized reports on engagement, email activity, and web activity.

To see the power of ReachBright for yourself, we invite you to take a [self-guided demo](#) of the application.

Developed by KDG, a company that has over 15 years of experience helping higher educational institutions improve their engagement through innovative web development and design, ReachBright is the only marketing tool of its kind. Learn more at: <http://kyledavidgroup.com/> 

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