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ENROLLMENT STRATEGIES

Effective Communication Central to Enrollment Conversions

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In a recent study exploring why college-admitted students fail to enroll in a school, one of the key findings highlighted the breakdown in communication between the college and the applicant. This reveals the real need for a college that is seeking to increase its conversions of admitted students who enroll to consider evaluating its level of effective communication with applicants during the application and enrollment process.

One of the challenges a school may face when looking at its communication systems is properly identifying when and how the miscommunication occurred. While some students might be able to identify the point in which a communication failure occurred between them and the school, other students might be unaware that one ever existed—yet their misunderstanding contributed to their failure to enroll. In addition, communication failures can vary widely and it can be difficult to identify trends or patterns on which to focus.

However, despite the challenges that exist in properly identifying and tracking communication failures throughout the system, concentrating on establishing consistent and reliable systems of communication with college applicants, and making sure that those are firmly in place and operating as they should be, can not only reduce the instances of communication breakdowns but also establish a way of monitoring how the school interacts with applicants. Putting a system in place can ultimately ensure a more streamlined

enrollment process and make it easier to identify issues that might arise throughout the process.

Communication is essential during the enrollment process. Any indication that at some point a failure in communication arose between a participant and the university, it was considered under the emerging theme of communication. Pugh and Johnson state that it is essential for universities to create communication that is not only received but also understood by students.[1] Moreover, a university's communication with a student, relative to their financial aid package, may not always meet their personal expectations. However, they should always understand the reasons for the outcome and possible alternatives they have.

Case Studies of Communication Breakdowns

How communication was considered an emerging theme for each of the participants is outlined as follows. The first participant was an alumnus, applied to the university, was admitted, but failed to enroll. A communication breakdown occurred between the university and the first participant regarding the cost of tuition as she stated that once she was admitted and “realized how expensive” the university's tuition costs were, she decided not to move forward with her enrollment. Additionally, the first participant also expressed that she felt the university did not successfully communicate to her “more

information about scholarships to help her pay for the degree.”

The second participant applied, was admitted, but failed to enroll for a period of time in which she said was partially because she “was a bit confused about how to figure out how the financial aid process works and how to actually enroll.” Once this information was successfully communicated to her, the second participant completed her enrollment process. A communication failure existed and was partially to blame for the second participant delaying her enrollment.

Among all of the participant experiences, the third participant expressed the greatest difficulty establishing communication with the university. Several of the communication failures between the third participant and the university that the participant highlighted during the interview included: (a) “the financial aid side was confusing and difficult to set up an appointment”; (b) “I made a lot of effort, but didn’t feel the university made the same”; (c) it was a “headache trying to figure out the financial aid process”; and (d) the “staff wasn’t able to handle my questions.”

The fourth participant never realized she was admitted to the university. The communication breakdown occurred between the fourth participant and the university because she was unaware of her admission status.

A communication breakdown occurred with the fifth participant on several occasions during her enrollment process. First, the fifth participant stated that she had “many outstanding questions,” which indicated that the university did not successfully address them. Second, she made the statement that “financial aid wasn’t clearly explained” to her. And last, because the process of communicating with the university “took too long,” she decided to apply and enroll at a different university.

The sixth participant applied, and was

admitted, did enroll, but then quickly dropped her class due to a personal matter. She currently would still like to complete her degree at the university, but because she was billed for the class, has an outstanding balance and firmly disputes the charges, no resolution has yet been made by the university. A communication failure between the university and Participant 6 is still ongoing as her billing issue is still unresolved, and she remains unsatisfied with the university’s response to her billing issue.[2]

The Impact of Effective Communication

All of the participants had a positive view of the university they applied to, and it did not significantly change after their experience within the enrollment process. However, some level of communication failure between the university and each of the participants occurred at some point within the enrollment process. This finding’s interpretation aligns with Moogan’s research findings that highlight how both a university and its prospective student benefit when successful communication between the two is achieved. [3] The university benefits by improving its brand image by satisfying the needs of its valued prospective student and the prospective student is satisfied by receiving all of the answers to their questions.[4]

One of the study’s three emerging themes, communication, also aligns with Perry and Rumpf’s study that linked the likelihood of a prospective student enrolling with their experience within the admission process, such as their interactions with university representatives, and their perception of the university.[5] Several of the participants who expressed their displeasure with the university’s communication, specifically about key information, such as the cost of tuition and the financial aid process, either never enrolled or did so only after it was made more clear to them.

An opportunity exists for universities to help improve their student conversion

rates of admitted students by consistently, immediately and successfully addressing the presence of any communication failures and resolving them.

Three possible steps a university may take in order to achieve this can be:

1. Establish successful communication with each student during their admission process;
2. Remain in constant contact with each admitted student by increasing the number of interactions with each of them;
3. Learn about and attempt to resolve any student problems as early in the admission process as possible.

The results from this particular study indicate that a university’s failure to communicate successfully with its admitted students can lead to their failure to enroll.[6]

References

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