

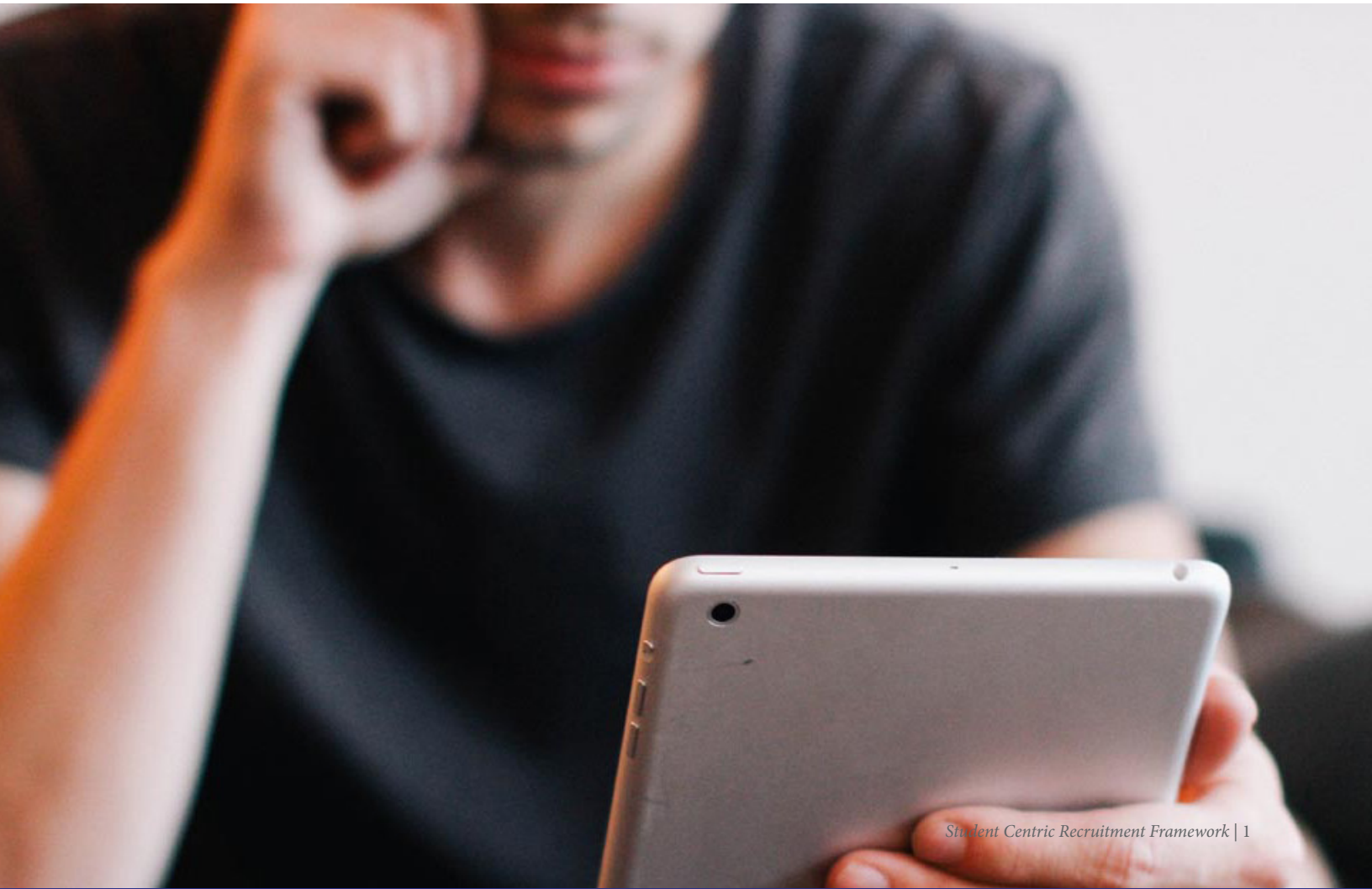


The Student-Centric Recruitment Framework

*Six Principles To Help Institutions Navigate
The Future Of Recruitment*

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Introduction

Higher education faces unprecedented challenges in student recruitment. Campus leaders are seeking effective solutions—especially admission officers working to build future classes of students. Multiple forces are driving dramatic shifts in this industry, including a 12% decline in college-going students,¹ changes in the National Association for College Admission Counseling's (NACAC) Code of Ethics, and most notably, the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic's disruption to the enrollment process. Institutions must act now to mitigate short- and long-term impacts of the current obstacles they face.

To support the ever-changing needs of today's students and to build a solid foundation for the future, institutions must implement student-centric recruitment practices. That starts with asking questions such as:

- What does it mean to be student-centric?
- Why is it essential to the success of higher education?
- How can institutions implement student-centric practices?

What Does Student-Centric Mean and Why Is It Important?

Student-centric means starting with the student in mind and working backward. Institutions cannot simply duplicate competitors' actions or continue certain practices just because "it's always been done that way." Instead, it is critical for institutions to shift recruitment practices to consider the student's best interests - adapting to support their needs, ensuring equity of access and opportunity, and understanding the impact actions have on individual students.

Students are and always will be at the core of higher education. The mission of every college and university focuses on providing students the highest quality education and supporting their career and life aspirations. Admission offices likewise need to align their efforts with their institution's mission. If student needs are not the central focus of every admission office, the future of higher education will continue to be in jeopardy.



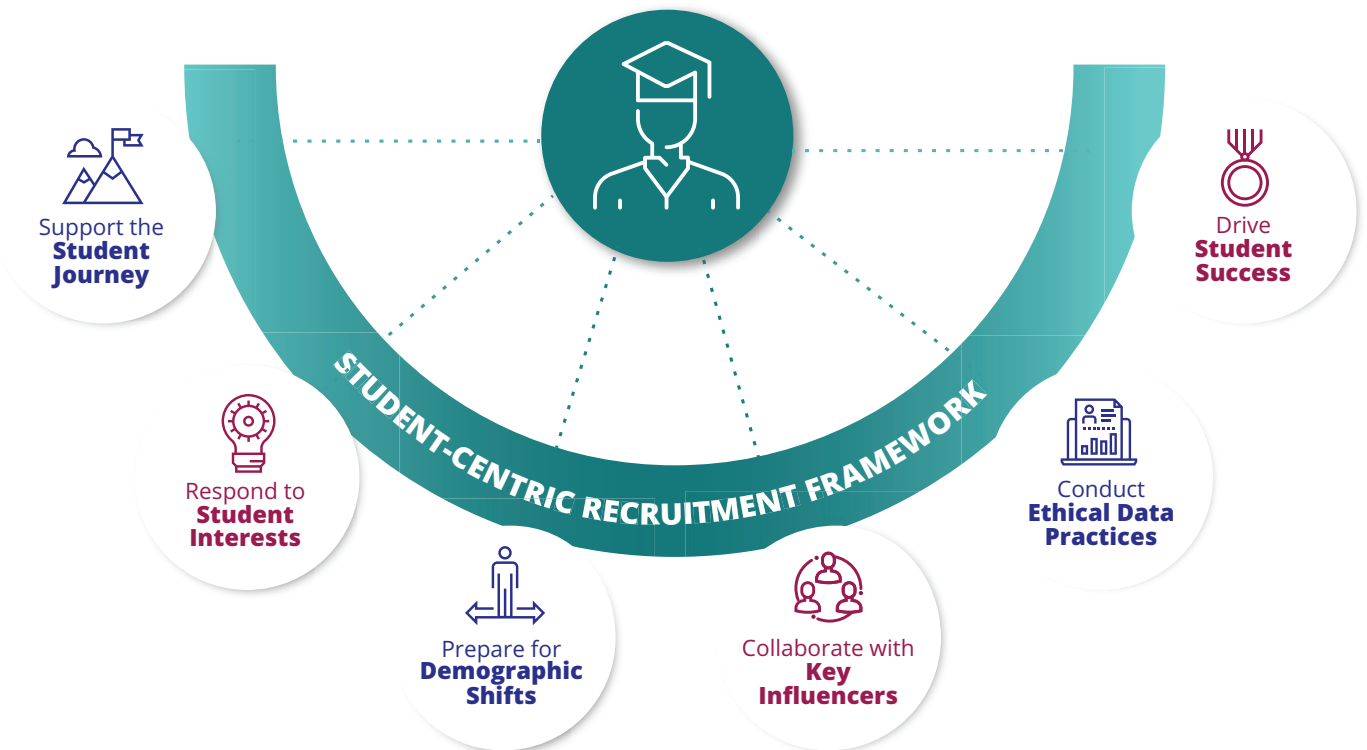
How Can the Student-Centric Recruitment Framework Support My Recruitment Practices?

Admission and counseling leaders are in tune with student needs, and that focus has intensified exponentially due to the COVID-19 outbreak. The test-optional decision that many institutions have made in their admission criteria is a very good example of having a student-centric mindset.

Today, one in every four students do not persist after their first year.² While there are plenty of theories about why this is happening, lack of institutional match and fit is one of the top driving factors. Independent research shows that when match and fit are considered as part of the college search, a student is more likely to complete a degree within four years at the same institution.³ As “gatekeepers,” admission professionals play a pivotal role in ensuring that students are the best fit for their institution and that students’ best interests are top of mind.

To transform to a student-centric model, enrollment leaders must adopt a data-informed approach. The Student-Centric Recruitment Framework, developed by Hobsons, encompasses six key principles:

- Support the student journey
- Respond to student interests
- Prepare for demographic shifts
- Collaborate with key influencers
- Conduct ethical data practices
- Drive student success





Support the Student Journey

Every student's journey to college is different. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to providing support throughout the process. Institutions must meet students where they are in their search and personalize recruitment to fit their priorities.

Understand individual student needs

The first step institutions must take is to understand individual student needs. Some questions to ask include:

- When do students begin their college search?
- What channels do they turn to for information?
- What criteria are important to them?

These questions should be asked frequently to keep communications relevant to students. This research can be done in various ways, starting with the many published studies and student surveys available in the market. Institutional staff can conduct their own testing using their internal resources to analyze student behavior. Data points such as email opens, clicks, social media engagement, and day and time of engagement can be used to create student personas. Metrics such as personal and academic interests, however, are not as commonly tracked.

The college search process can be extremely unique and difficult for institutions to identify trends. For example, there are millions of unique search criteria combinations that can occur throughout the process. Gathering and synthesizing this information is a formidable task for most admission offices, but many utilize tools to assist with this. When search criteria are understood on an individual student level, institutions can tailor recruitment efforts to stand out among the competition.

Personalize the recruitment experience

Once admission staff understand a student's needs, they should personalize every aspect of the recruitment experience using real-time data to ensure relevancy. The ability to segment audiences appropriately provides a more personalized approach that will look different from institution to institution. This change will not come overnight, but it is important that teams set small, achievable goals along the way.

Students want to feel valued, and it is the institution's responsibility to curate a tailored experience. Generic, "batch and blast" emails will not capture a student's attention given the flood of information they are already receiving. By adding a personal touch to every correspondence, colleges can distinguish their efforts, forming connections as students begin to trust that campus staff truly know what they are looking for and are willing to help them succeed.

In a study conducted by MDRC at 10 Ohio community colleges, 31.5% of students enrolled in summer courses in 2017 and 2018 after receiving personalized emails and letters. When students received emails with generic information, only 26.2% of students enrolled in summer courses. Those students who received the personalized messages along with information about tuition assistance enrolled at an even higher rate -- 38.4%.⁴

Maintain an open dialogue

As admission staff identify priorities and personalize the experience for students and their families, they need to maintain open dialogue. For students, the feeling of being supported throughout the college search journey is equally as important as receiving personalized communications. Institutions should create more opportunities for one-on-one or small group student interactions to build stronger connections. As the enrollment landscape continues to shift, students and families will become more uneasy. Proactive and personal communication from the institution will help students and their families feel supported.



Every student's needs are different. To truly support students throughout the college search process, institutions must:

- *Understand their priorities*
- *Personalize interactions based on those priorities*
- *Maintain open dialogue with students' support networks*

Putting students at the center of communication efforts will make them feel like they are one in a million, rather than one of a million.





Respond to Student Interests

While supporting students throughout their college search journey is important, institutions also must ensure that their offerings meet expectations of today's students. The innovative major established 10 years ago may no longer be relevant. To become student-centric, institutions must regularly assess their academic and extracurricular offerings. That requires gathering quantitative and qualitative insights from students and implementing changes where gaps are identified.



Almost half of college academic programs turn out 10 or fewer graduates per year and account for less than 10% of all degrees.⁶

Assess your offerings

Institutional leaders can access a variety of data points to assess relevant options for students. Schools could use their own internal data, for example, to gauge the popularity of different majors as indicated by the number of applications to those academic areas and how many graduates each program produces. External data from sources like student surveys, new job reports and the National Student Clearinghouse can help evaluate student satisfaction and success, as well as identify up-and-coming careers to watch. For example, LinkedIn's *Emerging Jobs Report* is a great resource to stay abreast of new jobs that are gaining traction. The 2020 report shows the fields of data science and artificial intelligence maintaining popularity, but sales and health care jobs also took top spots in the rankings.⁵ Institutions should not use the external data alone to completely make decisions, but this information can be a valuable complement to insights gathered internally.

While most institutions rely on research to determine what programs to offer, some add new academic majors based on perception and campus politics. Almost half of college academic programs turn out 10 or fewer graduates per year and account for less than 10% of all degrees.⁶ Almost half of colleges and universities have started new academic programs out of perceived demand in the past 5 years.⁷ This may be a result of the crisis that enrollment leaders face today. Declining enrollment numbers often force a knee-jerk reaction, where institutions act quickly to add programs that turn out to be unsuccessful. Institutions must assess their offerings regularly and use data to adjust as needed.

Simply adding new programs without sunseting older, underperforming ones will not solve the problem. In fact, this may compound challenges by displacing students from other programs. Before adding a new program or removing an existing one, institutions must fully understand the impact of such actions on multiple levels. This requires a process of gathering insights from students.

Garner insights from students

Student demand can be hard to predict, but an effective way to do so is to analyze their college planning process to better understand the majors and programs they are searching for. Tap into one of the many resources that students use to plan out their college searches to access the data. With this information, campus leaders and faculty can engage in data-informed conversations to pinpoint gaps in their offerings.

Find gaps and implement change

Once gaps are identified, change must follow. Instead of rushing to add new programs based on student interest, institutions should start by mapping out small milestones as part of a long-term plan. Many times, admission offices do not have decision-making power to establish the programs their institution offers. However, admission leaders should leverage the program assessments and insights from students to help influence decisions made by administrators within academic affairs. These are not easy decisions to make, but using hard data and insights collected from students engaged in the college search process can help drive those conversations with stakeholders.

Moving too quickly can have consequences. For example, when legalized gambling was expanded throughout the country in the early 2010s, 15 institutions responded by rushing to add programs in casino management. Those colleges produced 34 graduates in 2016, or about two graduates per program.⁸ This rush did not net the initial results expected by these institutions. To ensure long-term success, institutions must engage stakeholders along the way and receive buy-in rather than reacting impulsively.



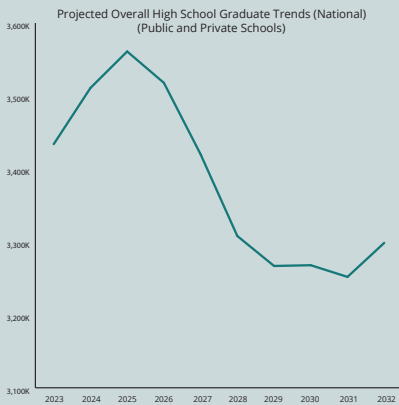
Aligning programs and offerings to meet ever-changing student needs is not easy, but it is necessary. To mitigate these shifting interests, institutions must:

- *Assess their offerings on a regular cadence*
- *Garner insights from students and compare to their current offerings*
- *Find gaps and implement change*



Prepare for Demographic Shifts

One of the primary challenges enrollment leaders face today is the projected decline in the number of high school graduates. Projections offered by researchers like Nathan D. Grawe, author of *Demographics and the Demand for Higher Education*, and the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) show a bleak outlook for the future. According to the WICHE report, *Knocking at the College Door*, the number of new high school graduates will drop by nearly 300,000 from 2024-25 to 2028-29, a loss of more than 8%.⁹



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Discuss recruitment realities on campus

The shift in demographics is one of many new recruitment realities that enrollment leaders must incorporate into their annual and multi-year strategies. Stakeholders across campus should be brought into these conversations to ensure that everyone understands the impact this issue will have on the institution. By referencing data projections, enrollment leaders can guide strategic discussions about how their institutions can weather the imminent storm and achieve enrollment goals. Once these projections are addressed, institutions can begin to analyze the effectiveness of recruitment tools and resources, create a plan that accounts for the smaller pool of prospective students, and initiate a review of performance against goals.

Analyze recruitment tools and resources

Enrollment leaders use multiple recruitment tools to achieve their goals. Their effectiveness should be analyzed frequently. Is the tool achieving its intended outcome? Does it contribute to the broader institutional goal? Is it achieving a healthy return on investment (ROI)? On a holistic level, enrollment leaders should ask how each tool fits in with the institution's values and priorities. As institutions look to be more student-centric, they should evaluate whether these tools put students' best interests at the core and ensure access and equity.

For example, a common student search strategy involves purchasing names of standardized test-takers. Colleges should analyze the cost to move these students through the recruitment process, keeping in mind the saturation of information as other schools collect the same names from vendors. For a holistic perspective, institutions should assess whether this method fits their values. It would not fit well with a student-centered approach since students cannot choose specific schools from which they receive information.



For example, students who submit an inquiry to a college are 54% more likely to apply, 82% more likely to admit and 91% more likely to enroll than those found through traditional list buying (Naviance Connection Data, 2020).

Create a long-term plan

Once campus leaders have discussed demographic trends and analyzed recruitment tools, they can create a plan to reach enrollment goals, despite a smaller student audience in the future. With a decreasing number of prospective students, enrollment strategies should focus on those who are more likely to convert. For example, students who submit an inquiry to a college are 54% more likely to apply, 82% more likely to admit and 91% more likely to enroll than those found through traditional list buying (Naviance Connection Data, 2020).

Review performance and pivot as needed

The long-term plan must leave plenty of room for adjustments along the way. Document the conversations, analysis and planning so that key stakeholders can hold regular reviews and pivot before it is too late to impact outcomes. By setting key milestones along the way, institutions can easily adjust, even if the first couple of small steps miss their target.



Every U.S. institution is dealing with dramatic demographic shifts. To persevere, campus leaders need to:

- Frequently discuss the long-term impact of demographic shifts*
- Analyze the effectiveness of recruitment tools*
- Establish a long-term plan to reach enrollment goals with a smaller pool of prospective students*
- Review performance and include room for adjustments along the way*



Collaborate with Key Influencers

As students prepare for college, they value guidance from their family, teachers and counselors. In the *2020 Naviance Student Survey*, students were asked how they researched colleges. Results showed that 12th graders listed family and teachers/counselors as two of the top four resources used in their college searches.

Evaluate current engagement with influencers

Building connections with influencers is vital. Campus leaders should evaluate how they engage this group and how they share up-to-date information about the institution such as the launch of new majors or significant campus changes.

Admission offices can start with questions such as:

- Do we have frequent discussions with parents of prospective students?
- What channels are we using to reach out to counselors and teachers? How often are we communicating with them?
- How are we building advocacy with parents, teachers and counselors?

Initiate frequent discussion

Campus leaders must take action to build partnerships, initiating frequent communication with key influencers. For example, it is not enough to claim that high school counselors are part of an institution's network. Admission staff must stay in touch with counselors to ensure that both parties are up to speed on available initiatives to support students throughout their transition to college. The high school visit, for example, is a valuable interaction that allows the student to learn more about the institution, as well as the admission counselor. Access to a visit scheduling tool allows stakeholders on both sides of the desk to collaborate on these visits to ensure that students get the information they need. Other activities like workshops, mock admission committees and informal meetups at conferences also can serve a valuable purpose.

The same concept applies to parents. There is no denying the important role parents play in a student's college search process. Many parents are highly involved in the student's search and even log-in to their child's accounts on college search websites from time to time. Institutions should ensure that they are present on these sites for opportunities to further engage parents. Other efforts such as dedicated parent and family pages on institution websites, newsletters, webinars and online chats can also set the foundation for strong partnerships. Some institutions offer a "Parents as Ambassadors" program, engaging parents of current students as resources for prospective students and parents.

Assess the effectiveness of engagement regularly

Once communication is initiated, institutional leaders can talk about key topics and act on trends that come up in discussions with parents, counselors, teachers and others. Interactions and engagement with influencers must be evaluated regularly to identify areas that could be improved. By establishing strong partnerships with the groups who have the most influence on a student's search and application process, institutions can stay relevant and maintain focus on supporting student needs.



To collaborate with key influencers:

- *Identify influencers and evaluate current engagement*
- *Initiate frequent discussions to improve partnership*
- *Assess the effectiveness of engagement regularly*





Conduct Ethical Data Practices

Student's best interests should always be top-of-mind, especially when working with admission data. Many times, admission leaders can find themselves in a quagmire related to data when the situation is not clear-cut. Enrollment leaders should ask: *Does what I am doing benefit the student?* If the answer is yes, then it is acceptable to proceed.

However, if the answer reveals that an institution's efforts put students at a disadvantage, then it is time to re-think strategies. This section highlights the ways institutions can use data to make decisions that keep student interest at the center.

Evaluate data sources and usage through a student lens

In today's college admission landscape, there is no shortage of data to inform recruitment decisions. Predictive models, website behavior tracking and name buys from organizations offering standardized tests are some examples. To align these data-gathering practices with a student-centric mindset, evaluate current data sources and usage by asking questions such as:

- Is this data source used in a way that considers the student's best interest?
- Can we articulate to students and parents how we use this information to benefit student?
- At the end of the day, does this information put the student at a disadvantage?

Take student name buys from testing organizations and other vendors, for example. This age-old practice provides hundreds of thousands of student names to fill the top of institutions' recruitment funnels. According to a 2017 article in *The Atlantic*, a private institution in the Midwest at one point was purchasing upwards of 250,000 names annually.¹⁰ These were names of students who simply took a standardized test; they had not necessarily shown interest in the institution.

There are potentially hundreds of other institutions across the United States purchasing the same student names from these vendors. According to *The Wall Street Journal*, 1,900 schools and scholarship programs buy combinations from among 2 to 2.5 million student names each year. At \$0.47 per name sold, institutions are spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on a pool of saturated and potentially uninterested students.¹¹

Name buys are not straightforward from an ethical and student-centric perspective. However, admission officers must ask themselves: *Is this data source used in a way that is the student's best advantage?* The key word here is *best*. Is it used in the student's *best* advantage? Probably not. Yes, it exposes students to schools they might not otherwise have known about, but institutions should put that decision in students' hands and let them reach out to campuses that interest them.

Next, enrollment leaders should ask: *Can the institution articulate to students and parents how it is to the student's best advantage?* Probably not. At the end of the day, *does this practice put the student at a disadvantage?* Most likely, the flood of information students receive from schools they're not interested in overwhelms them. That can result in students becoming disengaged from the search process.

If campus leaders ask these questions and evaluate honestly, they would likely determine that this is not a student-centric data source.



This methodology should be ingrained into the DNA of an admission office, with consistent reviews of data gathering and usage practices from an ethical and student-centric perspective.

Adapt decision-making processes

Once institutions have evaluated their data sources, they must adapt decision-making processes to keep students top-of-mind. Examine the language used in every piece of communication. Will students understand what it means, or is it full of insider verbiage? Make sure that the message includes information to help students make the best decisions possible. Take the time to understand what students want and need. This information should guide recruitment practice decisions.

Make ethical, data-informed decisions and establish consistent review of data

The ethical, data-informed decision analysis kicks off student-centric recruiting strategies. But the process does not stop with one decision. This methodology should be ingrained into the DNA of an admission office, with consistent reviews of data gathering and usage practices from an ethical and student-centric perspective.



To conduct ethical data practices:

- *Evaluate current data sources and usage through a student lens*
- *Adapt decision-informing processes to ensure students are top-of-mind*
- *Make ethical, data-informed decisions*
- *Establish consistent review of data*



Drive Student Success

The higher education landscape is extremely competitive. Multiple institutions are competing against each other to fill their classes and enroll students. While achieving enrollment goals is essential for institutions to survive, retaining students after they have matriculated is just as important for long-term institutional viability. Even more, helping students persist to achieve the end goal of earning a college degree is critical for their future success.

Developing a student-centric mentality means cultivating a culture of student success that is woven into the fabric of the institution. That aspiration should be promoted throughout a student's journey, which starts with the college search and the work of the admission office.



According to Hobsons research, students with access to Naviance have a 3-percentage point higher fall-to-fall retention rate compared to those who do not have access to Naviance. And the admission offices that effectively reach and connect with these college-ready Naviance students were 32.3% more likely to increase their retention rates than those who did not.

Recruit with a student's success in focus

Recruiting must begin with student success in mind. Understanding student interests and priorities is challenging. Once admission staff have gathered this information from individual students, the next step is connecting those aspirations to success at the institution. Some guiding questions include:

- What does success mean for students?
- Based on their interests, can my institution offer them resources to be successful with their aspirations?
- How do we make sure that students are defining their own success?

The topic of best fit is inherently linked to the concept of student success, and these considerations go beyond strictly academics. For admission staff, these are important considerations when it comes to reaching out to prospective students. As mentioned in Hobsons's *Holistic Student Success Framework*, the dimensions of student success include academic goals, career aspirations and life preparedness. While many campuses rely on student success and academic affairs professionals to support these realms, the admission office also plays a role through student recruitment.

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Placing success at the center of admission recruitment practices sets the foundation for keeping students enrolled to degree completion.

Align enrollment goals with retention goals

To continue driving student success, campus stakeholders must work together to align enrollment targets with student retention goals. All too often, the staff responsible for these separate areas work in siloes, missing out on opportunities to support each other's objectives and benefit the institution as a whole. It is a unique balance that department leaders must juggle. In a survey by the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, one enrollment officer mentions that, "Every institution will need to find a balance of recruitment and retention as we enter the next 10 years. Not all institutions can grow. Some will find greater success flattening new student enrollment and focusing on retention and graduation."⁷

Yes, admission offices must shape each class and meet certain tuition revenue goals, but sharing responsibility across the institution for attracting best-fit students and enabling their success allows the entire campus community to thrive. This shift in thinking does not happen overnight. The best way to move towards alignment is adopting a phased approach that involves setting shared goals for a certain program or specific student population before starting with a full class. This allows for the change to gain gradual traction across campus as the results from these efforts are analyzed.

Connect students with appropriate campus resources

Admission teams must be able to connect prospective students with appropriate campus resources. If a student asks about a specific program or activity, simply telling them that it is available is unacceptable. Instead, the admission counselor could facilitate a one-on-one meeting with a department chair, a coach or other representative of the department pertaining to the student's request.

The recruitment funnel includes multiple stages in which taking this step would be appropriate. For example, it could make sense to connect students with specific resources in the prospect stage to spark or deepen their interest in the institution. In many cases, waiting until the yield stage might be too late. Finding that balance is crucial to effectively connect students with helpful resources.

Some guiding questions for this strategy include:

- When do we introduce campus resources into the recruitment cycle?
- If we were students, when would we want to know how a school is going to support us in reaching our aspirations?
- Do we share the information with students or directly connect them with the resource?
- What does the hand-off process to campus partners look like?



To drive student success, institutions must:

- *Recruit with a student's success in focus*
- *Align enrollment goals with retention goals*
- *Connect students with appropriate campus resources*

Conclusion

American higher education is at a crossroads in its long and distinguished history. The challenges presented here offer an opportunity to reinvent the recruitment process. It is important to stay grounded in the industry's evergreen purpose: supporting students. Colleges and universities have always supported students and should continue down that path. The Student-Centric Recruitment Framework is intended to serve as a practical guide for higher education institutions as they work to keep students at the center of everything they do.

To transform to a student-centric model, enrollment leaders must ensure that their recruitment efforts:

- Support the student journey
- Respond to student interests
- Prepare for demographic shifts
- Collaborate with key influencers
- Conduct ethical data practices
- Drive student success

Working Toward Student-Centric Recruitment: Next Steps

Implementing the Student-Centric Recruitment Framework will not come overnight. There are plenty of steps along the way, but once an institution shifts recruitment practices to center around the student, they will create a supportive experience in the transition from high school to college.



1. Assess Your Readiness

In each principle of the framework, there are guiding questions that can uncover areas for admission offices to shift to practices focused on students first. In the future, Hobsons will launch a self-assessment that provides a holistic view on an institution's progress toward student-centric recruitment efforts.



2. Convene Stakeholders

Expand student-centric recruitment teams by looking beyond enrollment management and the institution including:

- Faculty
- Advising and student affairs
- High school counselors
- Parents of current and prospective students



3. Create an Action Plan

Once institutions have assessed their current recruitment processes and practices, they should create an action plan that is focused initially on the areas identified as most in need of improvement. Gradually, strategies can be expanded to include all dimensions as highlighted in the Student-Centric Recruitment Framework. The purpose of the action plan is to develop, coordinate and implement strategies that shift recruitment practices to center around the student in a holistic manner. Once the plan has been initiated, institutions should reassess their plan with the guiding questions every fall, spring and summer.

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ABOUT HOBSONS

Hobsons helps students identify their strengths, explore careers, create academic plans, match to best-fit educational opportunities, and reach their education and life goals. Through our solutions, we enable thousands of educational institutions to improve college and career planning, admissions and enrollment management, and student success and advising for millions of students around the globe.

ABOUT INTERSECT

Intersect by Hobsons is a best-fit recruitment platform offering a comprehensive set of solutions for colleges and universities to strategically reach best-fit students, those most likely to both apply and succeed at your institution.

Intersect connects with Naviance, the nation's most widely-adopted college, career and life readiness platform, used by over 10 million students nationwide. It enables colleges and universities to better connect with high school students actively engaged in the college prep process. Intersect also makes it easier to collaborate and create connections with high school counselors to support a successful student journey.

Learn more at [Hobsons.com](https://www.hobsons.com)

