Ten Enrollment Roadblocks for Graduate and Professional Programs  

by Craig Engel

To enroll graduate and professional students more effectively and efficiently, institutions must adopt measures that have worked for undergraduate enrollment.

As I travel around the country consulting with campuses, more and more institutions ask for my recommendations for recruiting graduate and professional students. For graduate programs at comprehensive/research institutions, this tends to reflect a shift in thinking toward a more unified recruitment approach, as marketing and recruitment efforts have traditionally been decentralized and driven by individual schools or campus departments. For other graduate programs, such as stand-alone business schools, chiropractic schools, seminaries, and graduate/professional programs that are not part of a university, the desire to strengthen recruiting reflects an increased push on campuses to apply the more forceful levels of undergraduate recruitment to the art and science of enrollment management at the graduate level.

For both types of institutions, my observation is that graduate recruitment is often not handled with an optimal level of direction, efficiency, and precision, making it a much more uneven process than undergraduate admissions. The problems I see fall into ten issues that affect everything from planning to marketing to financial aid. I’ll examine the first five in this post and the other five in a follow-up post.

**Issue 1: There is little influence from “the top”**

First, there is a cultural difference between undergraduate and graduate recruitment that leads to a hands-off approach to goal setting for graduate programs. Unlike undergraduate recruitment, where enrollment goals are set by the campus executive leadership, graduate recruitment is often seen as the territory of individual academic programs and their faculty members, if goals are set at all. This is due in part because graduate programs and their faculty often associate enrollment goals as counter to their educational mission. In addition, growth goals must be tied to student-faculty ratios and capacity, and in these volatile budget times, deans and vice presidents are very careful not to hire new faculty in the hope that the department will achieve growth—a bit of a catch 22. The result is passive or no overall direction, and consequently little pressure to set goals or establish accountability—both of which are enormously important to recruitment planning.

In addition, without the active involvement and strong support of executive leaders in graduate recruitment, it is difficult to secure the level of resources needed to build a strong graduate recruitment program. For example, several years ago I was working with a large flagship research institution where I was asked to teach the 100+ graduate programs how to develop a recruitment plan. At the introductory meeting attended by all of the deans, department heads, and graduate program directors, the vice president for academic affairs addressed the group and indicated that he had earmarked well over one million dollars for the implementation of the individual plans. The money was contingent on each program having a completed plan, complete with goals, on his desk in three months.

**Issue 2: Graduate recruitment is decentralized**

With the exception of stand-alone graduate programs, the first issue I raised above naturally makes graduate recruitment a decentralized effort. Graduate program directors who are charged with working with prospective students are typically faculty members whose primary purpose is to teach, conduct scholarly research, and advise students; they tend to have no training or experience in the fundamentals of recruitment. As a result, follow-up and faculty commitments are inconsistent, communications and Web content are uneven, and database management virtually non-existent. This leads to a process that lacks focus and dilutes your recruitment resources.

**Issue 3: A desire to shape the class, not grow it—creating a disconnect between the two**

Shaping is of course very important, but at the graduate level, it sometimes is seen as a separate or more desirable goal than growing enrollment. The two do not have to be mutually exclusive. Growth can bring significant benefits to graduate programs such as more qualified students, increased revenue, and a wider diversity of students.

**Issue 4: Ignoring the top end of the funnel**

Most graduate recruitment efforts do not focus as much as they should on prospects and inquiries, instead starting the process at the applicant stage. This is a reactive way to conduct graduate admissions and robs programs of the opportunity to be more strategic in their efforts.

Graduate and professional programs need to take a lesson from undergraduate admissions and proactively build their inquiry pools through travel, solicitation, referral, and self-initiated avenues. They also need to understand how to use conversion theory to grow and shape enrollments. While this theory involves various combinations of increasing the applicant pool and increasing or decreasing the acceptance rates, the key is focusing on inquiry pool development and the conversion of inquiries to applications in order to achieve the desired enrollment results.
**Issue 5: An inadequate database to track all funnel activities**

Given the number of departments involved in graduate/professional recruitment and the larger number of entry points for inquiries throughout the institution, having a robust, organized data process is crucial. This encompasses four key points:

- Having a centralized database that is accessible to all relevant parties and capable of handling the data those parties need to track;
- Training for staff on proper data entry and tracking, as well as establishing a commitment to strong data management;
- The ability to account for different program start dates, data fields, and other items that may vary from program to program; and
- Creation of management reports that allow the program directors to compare and project new student enrollment.

I made a reference earlier to the “art and science” of recruitment. Simply put, there is no science component to the process without a strong functional database to support the plan.

**Issue 6: Lack of a strong annual plan**

Does your campus have a graduate recruitment plan? If it does, is it a macro plan developed by a centralized office, a smattering of individual decentralized plans developed by individual programs, or a combination of the two? Unfortunately, most campuses I have worked with lack any type of plan, or do not like the plan(s) they have.

How can you build a strong graduate recruitment plan? It needs to have these elements:

- A situation analysis—an annual review of the mission, historical data, driving and restraining forces, and environment;
- Goal setting—cumulatively, by the individual program, and by market segment within the program (e.g., domestic, international);
- Strategies for goal achievement—every goal must have at least one key strategy and every stage of the funnel should have at least one strategy;
- Action plans—the implementation schedule for the initiatives that support the goals.

There should also be one master plan that is in synch with the plans for individual programs—the whole equals the sum of its parts.

**Issue 7: Little personal relationship building with prospective students**

To get the graduate and professional students you want, you have to let them know they are wanted. Building relationships early is the best way to engage prospective students and move them toward applying and enrolling. In addition, you have to keep making those connections as they move through the funnel until you have secured their enrollment.

For many graduate and professional programs, this may seem daunting because of the size of the inquiry, applicant, and admit pools, but it is important to take this step with your most promising leads at least. Some ways you can build those personal connections include:

- E-mails, phone calls, and social media contacts;
- Personal notes to key inquiries and admitted students;
- On-campus visits for inquiries and admits;
- Interviews and meetings with faculty.

In addition, you should segment your communications to speak to the dominant buying motives of the students.

**Issue 8: Communication management**

Of course, personal relationship building requires well-organized communications. You need to have a communication plan that is coordinated with various programs and departments and touches students at each key stage in their enrollment decision process. Build a communication flow that provides students with information that is most relevant to each stage—resist the temptation to overwhelm students with everything all at once.

The number of communications is also critical. Often a graduate communication flow may be bottom-heavy, sending a variety of messages once the student applies, but not reaching students often enough early in the admissions cycle. When designing
your communications, ask yourself two questions: 1) What is it a student needs to know in order to make a decision as to whether your institution is a good fit? 2) What is it that you want students to know that they may not ask? The answers to these two questions will make up the bulk of your message content throughout the funnel.

**Issue 9: Scholarships and financial aid**

Do graduate and professional students need to be fully funded to enroll? At the master’s degree level, the answer to that is a resounding no, yet many programs operate under that assumption.

Recent data from The College Board shows that loans account for nearly 70 percent of graduate student financial aid, with grants, work study, employer benefits, etc. accounting for 30 percent (see page 11 of *Trends in Student Aid 2011*). As employer benefits decline, institutions will need to discuss providing more merit and need-based assistance, but at this time, most master’s degree students exhibit a willingness to pay for the majority of their graduate education. At the same time, graduate and professional students have different needs and expectations than undergraduates, requiring a different level of expertise and sensitivity by the financial aid office.

**Issue 10: Not enough coordination among faculty/graduate directors**

Simply put, all of your efforts can be for naught if your graduate directors and faculty do not coordinate their efforts, especially if there is a centralized office for graduate enrollment. Coordination and communication prevent duplication of effort, decrease oversights, and unify campus colleges, schools, and departments in the graduate recruitment process. Graduate directors and faculty need to come together to:

- Develop individual and a master graduate/professional recruitment plan;
- Identify the responsibilities of the graduate admissions office and the individual departments/programs;
- Create the print and online communication flows and also establish standards for communication, content, and follow-up efforts;
- Commit to the use of data so that efforts can be managed, tracked, and evaluated;
- Support and coordinate campus visit efforts.

These 10 issues provide an overview of the most common challenges to recruiting graduate and professional students. Addressing these can help you manage graduate enrollment much more efficiently and effectively, and can be the difference between getting the graduate students you have and the graduate students you want.