

The Competition for Top Undergraduates by America's Colleges and Universities

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Introduction

Recruiting top quality students is a crucial factor in a university's ability to maintain its national reputation as a top quality institution. In an increasingly fierce competition to attract the limited number of choice students, colleges and universities across the country are stepping up their marketing efforts to attract these students. In this paper we will examine undergraduate competition (primarily among American research universities) by highlighting national reports that are relevant to this issue, reviewing the literature on university marketing and recruitment, and looking at the strategies used by a sample group of institutions.

The Ideal Undergraduate Experience

Several national reports on undergraduate education have appeared over the past few years that encourage universities to act in various ways to create the "ideal" undergraduate experience at their institutions, particularly in the world of the research university.

One such report was released in 1998 by a commission created by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement on Teaching, entitled "Reinventing Undergraduate Education: A Blueprint for America's Research Universities." This controversial report criticizes research universities for focusing too much on research and too little on teaching, asserting that undergraduates are missing out on the very research activities that make these institutions distinctive. Listed below are some of the report's key recommendations for re-inventing undergraduate education in research universities:

- Engage students in research in as many courses as possible
- Provide opportunities to learn effective communication (oral and written)
- Provide opportunities to explore diverse fields
- Make internships widely available
- Offer freshman seminars taught by experienced faculty
- Encourage joint projects and collaborative efforts
- Provide thoughtful and attentive advising and mentoring
- Offer interdisciplinary study options
- Offer academic majors that reflect students' needs
- Create a sense of community within the institution
- Foster association with people of diverse backgrounds, ethnicities, cultures, and beliefs

In 2000, the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) project, supported by Pew Charitable Trusts and administered by Indiana University, released a widely publicized report that includes a set of national benchmarks of effective educational practices. These benchmarks are based on findings from the project's national survey of first-year and senior students from more than 250 American colleges and universities.

The NSSE report states that many of the other commonly used sources of information on quality in higher education, such as media rankings and accreditation agencies, do not actually speak to what is important to student learning, nor do they address the actions that institutions must take to improve in this area. NSSE presents benchmarks that emphasize some of the most important dimensions of the ideal undergraduate experience according to the literature on this issue:

- Level of academic challenge
- Active and collaborative learning
- Student interactions with faculty, including working with faculty on research
- Enriching educational experiences (interaction with students of different racial/ethnic backgrounds, internships, study abroad, co-curricular activities, culminating senior experience)
- Supportive campus environment

The Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities, comprised of 25 current or former university presidents, has also published several pertinent reports on this topic. The commission was created in 1996 by the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges (NASULGC). Its purpose is to help define the future direction of public universities and to recommend actions to speed up the process of change. The group's charge is not only to define and publicize the changes that are occurring at public universities today but also to analyze necessary reforms, suggest methods to accomplish them, and monitor the results.

The commission's January 1997 report entitled "Returning to our Roots: The Student Experience," states that institutions must strive to create "healthy learning environments" which will include the following characteristics:

- Residential environments that encourage learning
- Environments that foster development of solid values and sound character
- Environments in which pluralism and different perspective are respected and encouraged

In "Returning to our Roots: The Engaged Institution" (February, 1999), the commission cites the need for institutions to bring research and engagement into the curriculum and for a commitment to the interdisciplinary approach to teaching and learning. The report also points out that to encourage student participation in engagement some institutions have utilized internships, co-op experiences, team-learning, and capstone courses.

Review of the Literature

A review of the literature on student recruitment indicates that competition among universities for the best students nationwide has increased dramatically in recent years. As they struggle to recruit top students, as well as maintain high yields (the number of admitted students who actually enroll), institutions are using a variety of strategies to enhance their marketing and recruitment efforts. Sometimes schools are even turning to consultants to improve the size and quality of their entering freshman class and to help in leveraging just the right amount of scholarship aid to attract particular students, based on historical patterns and predictive factors.

Since availability of financial aid is frequently an important factor in a university's ability to attract top-performing students (particularly among private universities), the issue of merit-based versus need-based financial aid is a topic of hot debate across the country. Merit-based aid has grown at twice the rate of need-based aid, and Princeton's January 2001 decision to replace loans with grants will likely bring competition to a new level, especially among the highly selective private universities, while possibly decreasing the amount of financial aid available for low-income students. Already, Harvard and MIT have followed suit by announcing their own financial aid increases.

One recruitment tool used by some institutions is "preferential packaging." These are packages offered to prospective students that include such perks as student stipends for research, flying the student's family to campus, dinners with the university president, and so on. Students are offered preferential packaging based on various factors, such as grade point average, class rank, and SAT scores.

In order to encourage students to make an early commitment to the institution, more schools are offering early decision and early action programs, making the regular admissions process even more competitive. In early decision plans, universities notify students of their acceptance early and require a commitment from those students to enroll, while early action does not require the student to make an early commitment to enroll. Another common practice among selective colleges is offering college credit for high scores on AP, IB, CLEP, and similar exams, in addition to offering early entrance programs for students who are younger than traditional college age applicants.

In recent years, university honors programs and honors colleges have also grown dramatically in number, presenting attractive alternatives and special privileges to entice quality students. Reportedly, some institutions that have added honors programs have experienced increases in the size and quality of their overall applicant pool as a result of these programs. Common features include challenging academic programs, smaller classes, special advising, special honors housing, honors lecture series, special events, research opportunities, community service projects, and special honors notation on the student's diploma and permanent record.

Finally, Talent Search programs, first introduced by Johns Hopkins in 1974, can now be found at several other major universities, including Duke, Northwestern, and Iowa State. Several hundred thousand students participate in these programs each year. Talent Searches attract prospective students by including summer programs, award ceremonies, campus visits, and other special events for student participants.

How Do Institutions Market to Prospective Students?

To follow up on the literature review we wanted to also take a look at the student recruitment materials of a sample of institutions to get a sense of what inducements universities are actually offering to prospective students. In an attempt to examine a broad range of schools, we considered a variety of factors including institutional control (public/private), size, institutional classification (research university/liberal arts college, etc.), and selectivity. The following ten institutions were chosen:

Institution	Median SAT	Enrollment (1999)
University of California, Los Angeles	1275	36,351
University of Florida	1245	43,382
Harvard University	1485	24,214
University of Michigan	1270	37,846
Middlebury College	1385	2,270
Reed College	1340	1,373
Rice University	1420	4,274
St. Johns College	1305	516
University of Virginia	1310	22,433
Washington University in St. Louis	1335	12,088

As evidenced by their student recruitment materials, the sample schools are responding to the tough market for top-performing students in a number of common ways. Institutions vary on their focus, depending on whether public or private as well their size and other factors, but most are incorporating some of the methods discussed in the literature review above. We also found that

public relations materials directed towards prospective students indeed tend to market the mythical ideal undergraduate experience, as described in recent national reports.

We found that for the most part what universities are selling to prospective students is not academic *content* (what the student will learn), but *context* (campus environment and experience). For example, recruitment materials include some surrogates for the content component they offer (e.g., research opportunities), but it is the inducements that are based on environment and experiences that are presented in much more specific terms. For example, institutions do not claim that every student will have a one-on-one research experience with faculty, although they do offer the opportunity to do so. On the other hand, many do claim that all freshmen that choose it are guaranteed on-campus dormitory housing.

One indication of special attention to context selling points is what appears to be a greater use of high quality, expensive brochures with beautiful color photographs of the campus as well as websites where a student can peruse a university's extensive full-color online view book. Private institutions, in particular, seem to be using this strategy, most likely because of greater available resources. Prospective students sometimes claim that if the college brochures they receive have nice pictures, then they decide to keep the school on their list to pursue. Besides sending a strong visual signal that the campus looks nice, the notion of an attractive and well-maintained campus can also signal to students that if the exterior campus packaging is high quality, then the academics must be high quality as well. We can categorize the different aspects of the context marketing component as illustrated in the table below.

The "Context" Component of Marketing

General Campus Environment/Experience

- Locale (for example, opportunities offered in a large metropolitan area)
- Small groups & organizations to promote sense of small community
- Campus safety resources (bus service, night ride services, safety escorts)
- Guaranteed on-campus housing for all first-year students
- Residence Hall libraries
- Learning Communities (small groups designed to provide close-knit supportive environment for students)

Quality & Diversity

- High test scores & grade point averages of average incoming class
- Number of countries represented in the institution's student body
- Percentages of each ethnic group represented in enrollment
- Number of research & exchange agreements with universities in different countries
- Ethnic and foreign studies programs offered
- Specialized ethnic journals
- Number of degrees granted to minorities
- Availability of international resources (foreign newspapers, journals, etc.)
- Special interest newspapers reflecting the diverse campus community

Enhancement Programs

- Undergraduate research programs (working one-on-one with faculty)
- Freshman seminar programs
- College Honors Programs
- Specialized counseling
- Preferential enrollment in some classes
- Eligibility for unique scholarships
- Special Honors housing
- Freshman cluster courses team-taught by eminent professors (in-depth, interdisciplinary courses)
- Freshman interest groups
- Internship programs
- Hands-on community service programs, civic involvement, & service-learning courses
- Residential colleges providing a living-learning environment (classrooms, faculty, and advising offices in a residence hall setting)
- International/study abroad opportunities
- Mentorship programs matching first-year students with faculty/staff mentors
- Specialized residence halls (focus on community, cross-cultural experience, etc.)

Institutions typically construct compensations to address various aspects of the ideal undergraduate experience in their efforts to create that idealized experience at their institutions. For example, large institutions such as UCLA are likely to deal with the size issue by promising a wide range of smaller group activities and organizations, as well as honors programs, to personalize the institution and give students a sense of small community. On the other hand, small universities like the University of Virginia highlight the advantages of small class sizes and require on-campus housing for all first-year students.

Universities and colleges commonly find individual marketing niches and capitalize on what they can do well that others do poorly or not at all. This is a particularly effective strategy for small, predominantly undergraduate, colleges. St. Johns College is known for its distinctive "great books" curriculum; Reed College stands out for adopting alternative ideas about coursework, stressing the classics and self-designed majors; the international focus of Middlebury College, through language-specific activities and one-year schools abroad, sets it apart from other colleges.

Finally, another interesting element to consider in examining how universities market to students is the manner in which their leaders talk about higher education and the value of the campus. A good example is a recent comment by the president of MIT, Charles M. Vest, regarding a new plan for MIT to post all its course materials on the Web, free of charge. When asked whether the availability of course materials online at no cost might discourage students from paying MIT's steep tuition to actually attend the university, he reportedly said:

"Absolutely not -- Our central value is people and the human experience of faculty working with students in classroom and laboratories, and students learning from each other, and the kind of intensive environment we create in our residential university. I don't think we are giving away the direct value, by any means, that we give to students."

In effect, he asserts that it is not the *content* that the university puts online that matters (or whether the students pay for it), but it is the environment, personal interactions among faculty and students, and so on, that are more important.

Differences in Public vs. Private Competition

A discussion of marketing strategies to recruit undergraduate students would not be complete without touching on the practice of price discounting, particularly by this country's private, prestigious, and highly competitive universities.¹ Hand-in-hand with concerted marketing efforts to attract the top students, highly selective and wealthy universities are courting these students with increasingly enticing financial aid offers. For many students and parents, net price is more important than sticker price, so financial aid offers are a key consideration in college choice when looking at private institutions. Some recent examples of this strategy are the initiatives introduced by Princeton, Harvard, and MIT to replace, or offset, loans with grants.

Private colleges and universities in general are positioned to offer much more in the way of price discounts than can public universities. Of course, prices and expenditures are much higher in private institutions in absolute terms as well as in the proportion of costs that are assumed by the student. Where tuition is low at many large public institutions, such as the University of Florida, tuition discounting is not much of an attraction to potential students. However, public institutions can and do capitalize on other selling points, especially various enhancement programs, such as opportunities for undergraduates to work closely with faculty on research projects.

Summary and Conclusions

In an increasing competition to enroll new freshmen from the rather small pool of the best and the brightest students nationwide, universities are offering more and more specialized programs such as early decision and early action, talent searches, increased merit aid, and preferential packages with a variety of perks. Some institutions are hiring consultants to help them improve the quality of their incoming freshman classes. More institutions are investing in glossy view books and brochures filled with color photos to promote an attractive and well-maintained campus.

Recruiting efforts tend to focus on inducements based on campus experiences, environment, and opportunities rather than on the academic content that is offered. The notion of the ideal undergraduate experience also influences the public relations materials directed to prospective students as schools focus on interdisciplinary study, internships, undergraduate research opportunities, co-op experiences, team-learning, opportunities for research with faculty, and an enriching and diverse campus environment.

The selling points that public and private institutions use to attract potential students are somewhat different in nature, particularly with respect to tuition discounting which is typically more important in private universities than in public ones. However, public and private universities -- large and small alike -- are finding innovative ways to compete by differentiating their institutions, capitalizing on their strengths, and finding niches to appeal to certain markets of students. The quality of an institution's students is intrinsically linked to how that institution is viewed by its constituents and others. Having top quality students enrolled in turn attracts more top quality students. Universities are working harder and harder to maintain and enhance the overall quality reputation of their institutions in order to be successful and improve, and success in the competition for top quality undergraduates is a major element of a university's overall success.

¹The literature on tuition discounting in higher education is extensive. For those who are interested in this topic, many good resources are available including some listed in the references section of this paper.

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