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## *An Occasional Paper*

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# Wise Moves... Strategies to Increase Adult Student Enrollment, NOW!

While tough economic times have impacted traditional age enrollment and net tuition, this may be an ideal time to expand your adult recruiting efforts. While everyone in higher education recognizes that there is no one clear answer, or silver bullet, many schools already have in place an option that may be able to help them close the gap on this year's lagging enrollment and better position themselves for the next several years of downward trend in high school graduation rates.

If your institution is like most in the country, you probably serve a secondary population, a population of adult students. For some, this is captured within a program that serves adults wanting to complete their undergraduate degrees; for others this population is restricted to their graduate programs; but for many it is an element of the institution that has been in place for years but is rarely talked about because the primary focus of the institution is about recruiting and educating traditional age students. While I am not suggesting that institutions change their primary focus away from traditional age students, I am suggesting that perhaps in the urgency of now, this may be a good time to make some adjustments to your adult student program that may help your institution overall in this challenging time.

There is, however, one thing I want to be remarkably clear about from the onset. If your intent in reading this document is to look to the adult student enrollment team and simply say "get more numbers" but do absolutely nothing different as an institution, I will ask you kindly not to read on. That is an injustice that I have seen happen at too many institutions, too way too many good adult student programs at both the undergraduate and graduate levels, and I in no way am I encouraging that strategy.

That being said, if you are sincerely interested in lessening the pain of a difficult financial year by considering a more intentional adult student strategy and are willing to put some effort into doing it, I believe part of the solution for your institution can be found in these 10 tactics to help you enroll more adult students. These will require some effort, perhaps even a challenging conversation or two, but in the end, implementing even a few of these suggestions could significantly impact your institutional bottom line.

### **1. EVALUATE YOUR ADULT STUDENT PROGRAM MARKETING BUDGET.**

Before we delve into how to measure effectiveness, we need to understand the basic model for integrated marketing communication because each component of the model is measured differently.

Integrated marketing communication (IMC) has three basic components: brand marketing, direct marketing, and internal communication. Brand marketing has one goal: the creation of awareness. Brand marketing is all about top-of-mind. Direct marketing has a different goal: the generation of response. Direct marketing will equip and motivate the customer to apply, call, enroll, or donate. The third element of IMC, internal communication, is designed to keep internal audiences abreast of key issues.

### **2. SHAKE YOUR INQUIRY TREE.**

While the idea of increasing resources in any area of the institution may be a challenge, it is an absolute necessary first step. At Stamats' 2009 Adult Student Marketing Conference I asked participants about their marketing budgets and found that more than half of the over 100 participants were spending less than \$100,000, and some as little as \$10,000. This is the right time to evaluate the resources that are being spent to recruit this population. Many of the suggestions that will be made within the context of this paper will be low dollar. Others will require the reallocation of existing dollars. But some will require significant funding. The final point is this: If you want greater success you must be prepared to invest the necessary dollars.

### **3. GET YOUR MESSAGE RIGHT.**

It is not enough to simply talk about YOUR flexible schedule, YOUR affordable cost, YOUR experienced faculty; you must talk about THEM. Case in point, if you are a 37-year-old single mom sitting in your apartment living paycheck to paycheck and suddenly XYZ University is telling you about all they have to offer... now if the message to that same 37-year-old single mom is based more along the lines of demonstrating an understanding of her current situation and offering an opportunity to change it, then you may have a chance to be heard. Take a look at your message; are you talking AT people or WITH people?

#### **4. TRACK, TRACK, TRACK.**

Now, more so than ever before, keeping track of your communication with prospective adult students is absolutely essential. If your system for tracking contact with your prospective student pool involves note cards, ink pens, and sticky notes, you are more than likely not maximizing your own ability to recruit. Now, before you dismiss this suggestion and move on to the next tactic I am going to ask you to pause and be sure you know how data is being collected on your adult students. I challenge you; find out how you are tracking your prospective students and your communications with them. I think you will be surprised and find an area where you can do better.

#### **5. BUILD A RELATIONSHIP.**

At the end of the day in the world of adult student recruitment, this is what it is all about. It is that simple. And, at the same time it is remarkably complex. I recently invited a director of admissions from a for-profit institution to speak to a group of marketing and admissions professionals and asked her to give away her secret to the great success that she has had with enrollment growth at three different proprietary institutions. Her secret...relationships. She shared with us the process that her recruiters work through with lists of purchased names. The first thing they do when they connect with someone by phone is talk to them about them. They focus on student goals, plans, lives, families, and aspirations. Her recruiters are instructed to not speak of the institution's online offerings, flexible schedules, or great financial aid. Instead, they are directed to listen and learn about the prospective student. It is from that relationship that the prospective student turns into a current student, it is all built on that. How are your current recruiters talking with prospective students, what types of things are they focused on while on the phone or in a meeting? Take a look, you may be surprised.

#### **6. RATCHET UP YOUR RESPONSIVENESS.**

In preparation for writing this paper, a week ago, I telephoned five institutions on a Sunday afternoon and requested that someone call me back to speak with me about their offerings and my interests. I left my cell phone number so I would have the ability to do a bit of tracking of the return calls that I anticipated receiving. It has officially been seven days and I have only heard back from two schools. Because I wanted a call back I didn't leave an address, only a phone number. I was acting as a prospective student and requesting information on my terms. I also realize that many inquiries come in via the Web, and perhaps my simple phone call created more of a challenge than I had anticipated but I think it illustrates my point well. While I have never talked to a school who thought they were lax in their responsiveness to prospective students, I have also never worked with a school that did not have room for improvement. Not convinced? Ask a neighbor to make an inquiry like mine and track the response.

#### **7. GENERATE BUZZ.**

What would happen if you took a few dollars and created a new scholarship to give an adult student? Make it your own stimulus package. The beauty is that it doesn't need to be a huge scholarship. The goal is to give your recruiters another reason to contact past inquiries with some new information. In addition, it demonstrates your responsiveness and gives you something to talk about on that postcard you are going to send out. And it may, depending on the size of the community you live in, earn you some local press if you go to the effort to make others aware of the ways you are responding to the loss of jobs in your community. Sometimes an opportunity to reach out to a prospective adult student can go a long way to saying that, as a school, you recognize that times are challenging, but that you believe enough in the power of education to help make returning to school a reality for one student.

#### **8. EVALUATE THE HOW.**

When was the last time you refined the way you deliver your adult student program? What may have been cutting edge 20 years ago when you developed the format may not be the right package adults in your area are looking for now. I realize switching from face-to-face to online delivery or hybrid courses will take some time, and any decision must be founded in research, but consider it an investment in the future. I would love to believe that once higher education gets through this one tough year it will be easy to fill every bed, or every seat from here on out; but that is not the future ahead of us. It will always be competitive. Begin this conversation now so that you are well positioned in the next year or two to maximize your enrollments. And, I am willing to bet that your traditional students will appreciate having these options as well.

#### **9. EVALUATE THE WHAT.**

I am a firm believer in shelf life, nearly everything – including higher education – has one. At the risk of stepping on an academic toe or two, I want to challenge institutions across the country to try something different as it relates to academic programming. Do a reasonable amount of research and develop a new program. Invest in an academic program marketability study so you can feel confident in your decision. Something bad might happen, but something good might happen as well. I recognize that this is an investment of time and resources, and I recognize that for many of you this will mean taking an uncomfortable look at your institution's process for program development, but I truly believe that now may be the time. It is amazing how agreeable people can become when they are experiencing a bit of discomfort, and nobody in higher education today is without discomfort. It is a new day, it is a new conversation, do not shy away from doing the one thing that may truly make a difference in the livelihood of your institution. Evaluate your current offerings, research new program offerings, take a look inside.

#### **10. DO SOMETHING ABOUT YOUR WEB SITE! I AM PASSIONATE ABOUT STRONG WEB STRATEGIES AND I AM NOT ALONE.**

Our research indicates 96% of adult undergraduates and 97% of graduate students will go to your institutional site first to find information. There is no single more powerful tool for communicating with this audience so it is critically important that you make the necessary investment. Do an audit of your Web site, do some usability testing with adults, ask a friend who does not work in or around higher education to find the adult student program course delivery options, price to attend, and how to contact someone if you need to go a less expensive route, but please take a look. Even if you just redesigned your institutional Web site, confirm via Web analytics that adults can find their way to what they are looking for.

It is always hard to feel in a position of having to be reactionary to a difficult situation, but unfortunately that is the position many schools are in as they move forward into the next year. None of what has been suggested here is easy. In fact, several of these tactics will actually be quite challenging and ask institutions to examine the way things have always been. Institutions who rise to the occasion and strive to intentionally impact their adult student enrollment through the implementation of these tactics, position themselves to significantly impact their institutional bottom line and find themselves in a significantly more comfortable position in years to come.

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#### **ABOUT STAMATS, INC.**

Stamats, Inc. is the nation's leading provider of integrated marketing solutions for higher education institutions.