

Leverage Data-Driven Enrollment Management for Student Success



Competing for students isn't new, but artificial intelligence and data analysis now present the most efficient, effective answer to this recurring challenge. Data-driven enrollment management solutions have arisen to meet enrollment challenges that proliferated in the wake of the pandemic—and are becoming essential for colleges and universities to thrive.

Enrollment management uses structured and unstructured data not just to attract and recruit students but to accelerate institutional excellence. By embracing AI-influenced data-driven strategies, schools can improve enrollment outcomes and improve the academic experience for enrolled students.

According to Hanover Research, first-year enrollment dropped [3.6%](#) from 2022 to 2023 despite overall undergraduate enrollment [increasing](#) for higher education institutions (undergraduate enrollment growing [1.2%](#) and graduate enrollment growing 0.6%). According to Forbes, most of the first-year enrollment declines were seen in bachelor's programs at public and private nonprofit four-year institutions (-6.9% and -4.7%, respectively), posing a concern for those schools going forward.

"The number of students in college has finally turned the corner after years of decline," said Doug Shapiro, Executive Director of the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center in a [news release](#). "The small uptick this fall is a welcome change for higher education, but there are still over a million empty seats on campuses today that were filled five years ago."

Additionally, from 2015 to 2021, 585 U.S. colleges and universities shut their doors, and a whopping [125 institutions](#) closed in 2023 alone.

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UNDERSTANDING ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT

Enrollment management refers to the programs and processes a higher education institution uses to identify, recruit, and enroll students. It's a tricky, wide-ranging business. Modern enrollment management practice relies on careful planning across departments to effectively attract and retain students who align with the institution's mission—all while ensuring financial viability, serving the institution's strategy, and rising to meet broader economic or policy realities.

Key components of enrollment management include:

- Prospective student identification
- Recruitment communication
- Admissions management
- Supporting research and reporting

These various functions require participation by departments across campus, such as institutional research, marketing, financial aid, academic affairs, and student services. Only by collaborating across departments can institutes effectively navigate the complexities of student recruitment and enrollment.

Consider, for example, that 32% of high school juniors and seniors say they're not sure whether they'll attend college. An institution that has that information can call on its marketing and financial aid departments to make sure its target student audience has the tools necessary to apply and maximize funding opportunities, thereby removing an obstacle that may have kept almost a third of its prospective students from enrolling.



WHY ENROLLMENT PRESENTS SUCH A CHALLENGE: FOUR CURRENT PROBLEMS

The particular challenges of enrollment constantly shift — which presents a challenge all its own. At present, four obstacles stand between higher education institutions and robust enrollment.

1. Tuition costs have risen dramatically.

Balancing affordability with institutional financial health has become harder than ever because of the massive gap in how wages and tuition have risen. [From 1980 to 2020](#), tuition rose 169%, while wages grew only 19%. Loans are essential for many students, and the debt they'll face after graduation is understandably a barrier that leads many to look for other options, like trade schools, community colleges, or other professional training. Rising costs and debt-aversion seem to be contributing to a culture where would-be prospective students don't consider traditional higher education a viable choice.

2. Demographic factors are a moving target.

Declining birth rates, immigration changes, shifts in household income—these and other demographic characteristics affect who's looking toward higher education and who isn't—and they don't occur in isolation.

Keeping a close eye on shifting demographics that impact the pool of potential applicants requires insight and vigilance that goes far beyond manual processes.

3. There's more competition every day.

With so many available options for prospective students to choose from, communicating your unique value becomes a greater challenge—and one that's essential to get right. How can a traditional, four-year college differentiate itself in a crowded field that includes easy online options, like Coursera, SkillShare, and YouTube tutorials? Online access to Ivy League universities, community colleges, and everything in between has massively broadened traditional delivery models, and the wealth of bootcamps and self-led options further shifts the shape of education.

Without understanding the complexities behind the choices students make, finding your true differentiators and communicating them in language that will resonate is more guessing game than tailored strategy.

4. Technology evolves at a stunning pace.

What was leading-edge yesterday is in the scrap heap today, and that evolution is only going to keep happening faster. Leveraging AI and predictive technological advancements in an effective enrollment management practice takes effort—and an engaged, informed team.

High school students from affluent households are 25% more likely to enroll in colleges and universities right after high school compared to students from low-income schools. ([National Student Clearinghouse, 2019](#))



FIVE TIPS FOR SUCCESSFUL ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT

With challenges around every corner, how do you improve enrollment management in your institution? A few important considerations help take that effort from “pie in the sky” to reality.

1. Develop a comprehensive enrollment strategy.

A robust enrollment strategy should align with an institution’s brand and target audience, utilizing tactics such as targeted outreach, modern, SEO-centric social media marketing, recruitment events, and personalized communications to engage prospective students effectively. A comprehensive strategy helps you meet these potential students where they are and demonstrate how your university is the right fit, launching a new, potentially deep relationship with a new ambassador for your institution. Finding the right students also brings better retention.

2. Foster collaboration across departments.

Encourage cross-departmental collaboration to create a unified enrollment management process, ensuring all stakeholders understand their roles in achieving enrollment objectives and supporting student success. Creating a better view of each student’s entire journey for all stakeholders and staff across the institution helps stakeholders invest in the effort, which ultimately can improve and diversify enrollment.

3. Harness the power of data.

Utilize data insights to find insight from key metrics such as applicant rates and demographics . By analyzing these metrics, institutions can identify areas for improvement and tailor their strategies to meet evolving student needs. A disheartening 14% of Americans regard colleges and universities as a benefit to society. Data-driven enrollment management can help shift the perceptions that erode enrollment.

4. Emphasize personalized communication.

Engage prospective students and families through personalized communication channels, including email, social media, phone calls, and targeted advertising. Personalization builds trust and demonstrates a commitment to engage directly with each student as a unique individual, which enhances the likelihood of enrollment.

Ferris State University said website clickthrough increased 2,800% when it started delivering personalized web experiences.

5. Continuously evaluate and improve.

Even the best-laid enrollment management strategy isn’t forever. It’s intended to shift as the world shifts, which means you need to regularly solicit feedback from students, parents, staff, and faculty to identify areas for improvement and ensure the enrollment strategy continues to align with institutional goals. By continuously evaluating and refining enrollment strategies, institutions can adapt to changing market conditions and improve overall enrolled students for the institute. And you may have a long way to go. The Hanover Research Trends in Higher Education report shows that a dismal 66% of Americans think colleges are “stuck in the past” and don’t meet current needs.

HOW ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT SOLUTIONS MAKE ALL THE DIFFERENCE

With so much at stake and the constantly shifting nature of the challenges colleges and universities face, advanced data analytics have become essential. And for good reason: an AI-based data solution reaches farther into the data to support your strategy and improve enrollment. Institutions lean on enrollment management to identify prospects, provide tailored communications that help them apply and enroll, and even help ensure their success. All of that adds up to greater efficiency, improved communication with prospective students, and informed decisions based on real-time data insights.

AI-powered data-driven enrollment management holds the key to unlocking success for institutions seeking to attract, enroll, and retain students effectively.

By embracing AI-powered data analytics, institutions can position themselves for long-term viability and excellence in the ever-evolving landscape of higher education and create a positive and impactful enrollment experience that sets students on the path to success.



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