

How to Use Pertinent Decision Data in Your Admissions Office to Enroll the Students You Want

Introduction: 8 categories of admissions research

What data should you track, monitor, and assemble in your admissions office to make pertinent marketing and recruitment decisions that will achieve your objectives for enrollment?

This paper reviews eight categories of admissions research that have proven to be useful over time. While no two institutions are ever alike in the exact data they need to track and monitor, they hold many data needs in common. By tracking these data and derivatives that apply to each situation, we've seen literally hundreds of enrollment managers make the changes necessary to sustain a competitive edge.

Clearly, today's best enrollment managers are looking and thinking broadly, internally and externally, for data that will make a difference. They are also continually testing the utility of new data and data sources. Against this backdrop of constant change, the end goal remains the same: to bring in the best entering class possible for the institution—on time and as cost-effectively as possible.

1. Historical Trend Data

Tracking historical admissions trend data provides a solid foundation for building effective marketing and recruitment strategies. You want timely, meaningful data for comparisons, so you can stay on top of campus trends. The data should be date- and year-specific. For example:

“On this day last year we had 221 applications from Los Angeles County. This year we had 277 applications from Los Angeles County, a 26 percent increase.”

For effective benchmark comparisons, we advise campuses to store and analyze three-to-five years of comparative data. Student data should be organized in non-duplicative categories such as the following seven stages:

- prospects (purchased students you are targeting who have not yet inquired about attendance)
- inquiries
- applicants
- completed applicants
- accepts/admits
- deposits/confirmed students
- matriculants

You will also want to track students in defined target groups such as those listed below, depending on your unique enrollment goals, trends, and circumstances:

- geographic market area
- academic profile
- academic and co-curricular interest (are certain majors rising or falling within your pool?)
- racial/ethnic categories
- first-year versus transfer students
- international students
- resident/commuter
- financial aid status
- other categories critical to your enrollment goals

With this data in hand, you can easily monitor and compare each target group’s rates of movement toward enrollment and target appropriate interventions accordingly. For example, groups of students who are moving slowly from the admit to matriculant stages (the yield rate) require different interventions than those who are converting slowly from inquiry to application.

Table 1: Historical Trend Data
Tracking interest by major field of study

Major	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Business					
Inquiries	2,207	2,407	2,620	2,694	2,635
Applications	186 (8.4%)	164 (6.8%)	128 (5.2%)	146 (5.4%)	125 (4.7%)
Completed applications	129 (69.3%)	113 (69%)	108 (78%)	111 (76%)	93 (74.4%)
Deposits	43 (33.3%)	38 (33.6%)	32 (29.6%)	29 (26.1%)	31 (33.3%)
Biology					
Inquiry	763	867	1,344	1,755	2,101
Applications	79 (10.3%)	67 (7.7%)	107 (7.9%)	134 (7.6%)	133 (6.3%)
Completed applications	52 (65.8%)	47 (70.1%)	71 (66.3%)	86 (64.1%)	89 (67%)
Deposits	21 (40.3%)	14 (29.7%)	32 (45%)	37 (43%)	38 (42.6%)

This table shows how an institution tracked student interest in business and biology. It also shows the percentage of students who moved through each stage of the funnel for each major.

2. Operations Research

Operations research tracks the success of specific marketing and recruiting tactics and strategies to determine their effectiveness. By understanding the effectiveness of each approach, an institution is able to focus its limited resources on those strategies that are most likely to generate the desired enrollees.

Examples of operations research include:

- inquiry source code analysis (which source is yielding the most/best matriculants?)
- campus visit program conversion and yield rates
- types of applications submitted (online, paper, third-party, etc.)
- direct mail student search conversion and yield rates by market
- date of inquiry studies
- selected written and electronic communications (evaluated through reply cards and e-surveys)
- travel (conversion and yield rates by high schools visited, college fairs, off-campus receptions, hotel interviews, etc.)
- telecommunications program conversion and yield rates
- conversion and yield rates for ACT/SAT score reports received
- early aid estimator conversion and yield rates
- scholarship program studies
- tracking the number of student-initiated contacts by conversion and yield rate
- accuracy of inquiry and applicant qualification codes
- conversion and yield rates by socio-demographic cluster
- melt of deposits
- gender balance
- average household income
- majors



3. Cost-Benefit Studies

Cost-benefit studies determine the relative effectiveness of various tactics used in marketing and recruitment. When conducting cost-benefit analyses, enrollment managers link budget data to activities such as direct mail and travel to arrive at a specific cost-per-matriculant. As you might assume, detailed line-item budgeting is very helpful in this process.

Table 2: Cost-Benefit Studies

Evaluating admissions travel—cost-benefit of three primary travel programs based on \$30,933 in travel expenditures

Program/ Travel cost	Students seen/ Cost per student	Applicants/ Cost per applicant	Enrolled/ Cost per student
College fairs (\$6,187)	2,250 (\$2.75)	122 (\$50.71)	38 (\$162.82)
High school visits (\$18,762)	971 (\$19.32)	211 (\$88.91)	85 (\$220.73)
Off-campus receptions (\$5,984)	203 (\$29.48)	117 (\$51.15)	47 (\$127.32)
Total	3,424	450	170
Average Cost	\$9.03	\$69.74	\$181.96

Cost-benefit studies are essential to evaluating the effectiveness of your various recruitment initiatives.

4. Market Research

Market research garners data directly from student populations you are targeting and from their “key influencers” such as parents and counselors. You can use it to define your institution’s competitive position, learn how to address specific trends, and tailor specific marketing approaches to specific target groups.

Traditional target populations for admissions-oriented market research include:

- prospects
- lost inquiries
- lost applicants
- incomplete applicants
- lost admits and enrolled students
- lost deposits (melt)
- alumni
- high school counselors
- parents
- businesses/employers
- graduate schools

Common approaches include:

- mail surveys (generally effective with lost admits)
- phone surveys (are you conducting market research within your telecommunications program?)
- focus groups
- competition studies (competitor mailing lists, inventory of academic and co-curricular offerings)
- environmental scans

[Market] research should be segmented by the specific populations you are targeting such as racial/ethnic category, academic profile, income level, and geography.

Market research should be done with comparison groups whenever possible (e.g. enrolled vs. non-enrolled students). In addition, the research should be segmented by the specific populations you are targeting such as racial/ethnic category, academic profile, income level, and geography.

5. Secondary Data Sources

Secondary data sources provide valuable reports of trends among populations at large. Sources include, but are not limited to: Noel-Levitz, ACT, the College Board, governmental agencies, higher education directories and publications, the national data warehouse, and professional associations.

Among the many secondary data sources available are:

- vital demographic information for the primary, secondary, and tertiary market
- characteristics of the college-bound population (e.g. racial/ethnic diversity, willingness to travel for education)
- income distribution/ability to pay
- competition data (number of institutions, price, endowments, financial aid trends, programmatic offerings)

6. Student Price Response Data

Student price response research, historically referred to as “financial aid leveraging,” identifies the price sensitivities of specific groups of entering and returning students. Institutions typically use this research to:

- Re-focus financial aid policies and packaging parameters
- Increase the admit-to-matriculant yield rate
- Enroll the desired number of students
- Enroll students with the desired characteristics
- Achieve a targeted net revenue goal
- Control the institution’s discount rate (where applicable)

Both public and private institutions generally find significant variance in price sensitivity based on the academic ability level of the student. Some have termed this “willingness to pay.” Additional variance is found among specific population segments such as in-state versus out-of-state or commuter versus residential.

Price sensitivity studies frequently result in the altering of an institution’s financial aid policies based on the findings. Data for such studies typically come from the offices of admissions and financial aid at each institution, including historic financial aid packaging trend data on admits who did not enroll during the previous year or two.

A difficulty many institutions encounter when conducting such studies is the ability to identify, extract, and relate the types and volume of data necessary for an accurate assessment. This is why many institutions turn to outside resources for assistance with this research.

7. Institutional Self-Assessments

Institutional self-assessments are a way to garner feedback on an institution’s performance. When enrolled students provide the assessment, the results can sometimes bear fruit for marketing and recruitment efforts.

One example is the area of assessing student satisfaction. Findings of such assessments can identify institutional strengths that can be accented in marketing and inform strategic approaches to the critical issue of student retention.

Traditionally, assessments of student satisfaction have gauged students’ level of satisfaction without regard to the relative importance students may assign to the issue at hand (quality of advising, course availability, etc.). Today, institutions are increasingly finding that is important to gauge both student satisfaction and the importance students assign to various institutional characteristics.



8. Predictive Modeling

Predictive modeling identifies individual prospective students who are most likely to enroll and return. Institutions typically use this research to:

- Identify prospective students prior to the search buy, based on your enrollment profile
- Focus limited admissions staff travel, time, and resources on inquiries and applicants who are most likely to enroll
- Reduce the communications budget by focusing more expensive mailing pieces on students who are more likely to enroll
- Rank inquiries numerically from most to least likely to enroll
- Increase conversion and yield rates
- Enroll the desired number of students
- Shape enrollment of students with the desired characteristics
- Increase retention and graduation rates

Many institutions have found that predictive modeling provides the most accurate forecast of a student's likelihood to enroll.

State-of-the-art predictive models are based on the available historic data in each institution's admissions office, supplemented by socio-demographic data (based on ZIP+4), which drill down to the individual household level. The resulting models are produced using advanced statistical techniques, including logistic regression and sophisticated modeling technologies.

Many institutions have found that predictive modeling provides the most accurate forecast of a student's likelihood to enroll. Previously, many institutions identified their most likely targets using geodemography or single-variable analysis. The latter two techniques, while focused on the same end goal of identifying the most probable enrollees, overlook highly usable, available sets of historic trend data in each institution's admissions database.

Typically, geodemographic research, while valuable as a supplement, is conducted using data gathered from secondary sources such as population studies—not using the data from the previous year or two's classes and groups of prospective students, which should be readily available in the historic admissions database of the institution.

Admissions offices have long used single-variable analysis. As its name suggests, this analysis focuses on identifying single variables that predict enrollment ("If a student tells us we are his/her first choice, we know he or she is more likely to come here" or "If a student visits campus, we know he or she is more likely to matriculate").

What's missing from this approach is a calculation of the relative predictive power of the groups of variables that predict enrollment—based on a thorough analysis of the scores of potentially predictive attributes available in the admissions database. One might ask, for example, "How predictive is the first-choice listing versus the campus visit versus the other nine variables statistically identified as the most predictive for students attending our institution?" Only predictive modeling can answer this question.

Table 3: Predictive Modeling Data
Identifying probable enrollees

Score range	Inquiry	Applicant	Admit	Gross deposit	Net deposit	Applicant/ Inquiry	Admit/ Inquiry	Gross deposit/ Inquiry
0.0–0.09	27	0	0	0	0	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
0.10–0.19	572	9	5	0	0	1.6%	0.9%	0.0%
0.20–0.29	2,263	34	22	3	3	1.5%	1.0%	0.1%
0.30–0.39	2,144	51	35	9	7	2.4%	1.6%	0.4%
0.40–0.49	6,787	87	65	13	13	1.3%	1.0%	0.2%
0.50–0.59	4,664	147	111	29	27	3.2%	2.4%	0.6%
0.60–0.69	1,814	138	99	27	23	7.6%	5.5%	1.5%
0.70–0.79	1,542	166	114	39	36	10.8%	7.4%	2.5%
0.80–0.89	1,421	252	171	57	53	17.7%	12.0%	4.0%
0.90–1.0	1,087	558	375	99	92	51.3%	34.5%	9.1%
Total	22,321	1,442	997	276	254	6.5%	4.5%	1.2%

With this institution, 80 percent of the deposited students came from only 26 percent of the inquiry pool, those students scoring 0.60-1.0. Predictive modeling can help campuses save resources by focusing travel, communication flows, and telecounseling efforts more strategically on students who are more likely to enroll.

Summary

As we have seen, many sources of data are useful to admissions offices. This paper has highlighted eight data sources that have proven their worth over time as enrollment managers face the daily challenge of focusing limited resources in pursuit of the best entering and returning classes possible for their institution.

The search for meaningful data is an unending one, and can at times seem overwhelming. Yet the direction is clear. The use of data in the field of enrollment management continues to advance rapidly, and database management has moved front and center. By continually refining the processes and practices of data collection, analysis, and interpretation, enrollment teams will be at the vanguard of a future based on useful, factual, and highly pertinent information.





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About Noel-Levitz

Noel-Levitz is a nationally recognized higher education consulting firm that specializes in strategic planning for enrollment and student success. Each year, campus executives from throughout the U.S. meet regularly with Noel-Levitz to accomplish their goals for student recruitment, marketing, student retention, and strategic enrollment management.

Since 1973, Noel-Levitz has partnered with nearly 2,000 colleges and universities throughout North America. The firm offers executive consulting, custom research and benchmark data, innovative tools and technologies, side-by-side plan development and execution, and resources for professional development. Noel-Levitz has several offices across the U.S.

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