

DATA INSIGHTS HELP KANSAS STATE LAY THE FOUNDATION FOR A STRONGER FUTURE

“A lot of the challenges we faced were related to change management. That was the gift Huron brought to this project – an ability to facilitate conversations in a way that helped us get past our traditional siloed approach and suspicion of the data to deploy high-impact tactics other universities were already using.”

ETHAN ERICKSON,
CHIEF FINANCIAL
OFFICER, KANSAS
STATE UNIVERSITY

Kansas State University (K-State), the nation’s first operational land-grant university, boasts an enrollment of more than 22,000 students and employs nearly 1,500 faculty and more than 3,000 staff.

UNIVERSITY LEADERSHIP COMES TOGETHER TO ADDRESS A CRITICAL CONCERN

Like many higher education institutions, over the last decade, K-State had experienced a steady drop in enrollment, brought about by increased competition and declining college participation rates, which was impacting its financial health. The university’s deans, driven by concern for the viability of their colleges and programs, challenged administration to think differently about their approach to management. It was this spark that ignited an institutional quest for a long-term solution.

An internal team was formed to review institutional metrics around recruitment and retention processes, but discussions stalled because members could not agree upon a clear path forward. According to Provost Charles Taber, many leaders, faculty and staff were skeptical of the data and analyses that were brought forward and questioned the resulting recommendations for improvement. Without standardized processes and regular reports, there was no single “source of truth” that all leaders, faculty and staff could access, respect and understand. In addition, the university’s decentralized structure made transparent communication difficult, complicating any comprehensive transformation efforts undertaken at the institutional level.

To push past these barriers and adapt to a rapidly shifting landscape, the leadership team determined that a fresh set of eyes and additional strategic expertise were required to help them build a holistic strategy for enrollment management.

As part of a larger engagement, K-State’s administration decided to bring in Huron’s team of strategic enrollment experts and data analysts who focus on providing customized research and dynamic yield strategies for colleges and universities.

Throughout the planning stages of the project, it became clear that K-State had a desire to stabilize its in-state enrollment and grow its out-of-state admissions. The articulation of that goal led the teams to invest in the creation of a strategy that helped the university to expand in both Kansas-based and nonresident markets.

THE FOUNDATION OF K-STATE'S APPROACH: DATA CLARITY

As a first step, Huron helped the institution analyze metrics to illustrate the behavior of K-State's potential student population and benchmark it against its competition. They also helped K-State leaders better understand the nuances of price elasticity and yield.

"We wanted to be really precise in understanding how their potential student body responds to pricing."

BIJAN WARNER,

DIRECTOR, HURON CONSULTING GROUP

Once the data was documented and socialized, Huron created predictive models to help K-State's leaders understand the implications of any potential actions they might take related to tuition pricing and financial aid. In the end, there were two critical elements that were determined to be negatively impacting K-State's enrollment — out-of-state tuition and in-state financial aid.

Prior to the completion of this project, K-State was not well positioned to compete effectively in targeted out-of-state markets due to its price point, which was much higher than any of the neighboring states' in-state tuition rates. To better attract nonresidents, the project team determined that going to market with a lower price point would help the university to expand its admissible pool and increase its yield.

At the same time, too much of K-State's financial aid for in-state students was being spent on a small subset of high achievers. Changing this practice would allow the university to expand its applicant pool by making institutional aid dollars available to more students. Revision of the award criteria helped to reallocate some of these aid dollars to a broader range of well-qualified students.

Huron simultaneously deployed its change leadership team to help faculty, staff and leaders across the institution manage these shifts and come together around a unified vision for pricing and financial aid. The strong synergies between the university provost and chief financial officer empowered the leadership team to break out of legacy mindsets and embrace an innovative path forward.

Another solution involved reorganizing the institution's enrollment and financial aid infrastructures to break down organizational siloes and promote collaboration. For example, enrollment management had previously fallen under the jurisdiction of the student life department, but the project stakeholders determined that transparency and collaboration would increase if admissions, financial aid and the registrar were moved out of student life and into a newly formed division under the provost to align more closely with the schools and colleges. This also allowed student life to focus more intentionally on student engagement, health and wellness.

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Ultimately, data informed the university's decision to revamp its tuition pricing strategy to attract more out-of-state students and revise its financial aid offerings to increase access and affordability concerns for middle- and low-income families.

K-STATE APPROACHES THE NEW COVID-19 ERA ON FIRMER GROUND

In the midst of the COVID-19 global pandemic, K-State's enrollment projections for fall 2020 fell below what leaders were anticipating. Yet, both Erikson and Taber say they feel very strongly that developing the refreshed strategic enrollment strategy and plan has provided valuable insight to help them navigate the disruption.

"The project with Huron helped us to take a data-informed perspective on enrollment, modernize our practices and make the hard decisions we need to make related to financial aid."

CHARLES TABER, PROVOST,
KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY

Further, K-State's leaders say the project helped them cultivate a data-first mindset that has increased their institutional agility and effectiveness. These competencies have allowed them to "pivot to the future," a phrase coined by Provost Taber that points to their intentional focus on serving new populations of students and positioning the university for success in the years to come.



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