



# How institutional mission and market insights can drive enrollment success

Carving out a unique position in a competitive environment

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The road ahead is as complex as ever for both students and institutions. While the changing job market is complicating how students envision their future and their path from higher education to employment, it is also challenging colleges and universities to clarify *how* their core mission can stand out among competitors and offer students a valuable and unique education experience.

For many institutions, that starts with enrollment success — improving recruitment, admission, financial aid, and matriculation to enhance student success. To accomplish this, leading institutions understand their history, constituencies, and purpose, leverage their data effectively, and clarify how they fit into the evolving educational market and student demand. They also elevate enrollment as a strategic priority that requires collaboration across multiple units on campus.

## In Brief

- An evolving job market is prompting colleges and universities to improve recruitment, admissions, financial aid, and matriculation for student success by understanding their history, target demographics, and purpose.
- To carve a unique position among competitors, institutions should focus on their unique values, align offerings with societal needs, and use data to highlight features that enhance students' lives.
- To excel in enrollment, institutions must understand why students choose them, compare pricing with competitors, align academic offerings with market demands and student interests, and create a distinct identity — while also being adaptable to new opportunities.

Institutions can reflect on three questions while keeping in mind answers within the context of competitor positioning:

1. Do we know who we are and who we serve?
2. Do we know why people choose us versus competitors?
3. How do our offerings align with the market and student needs?

## Do we know who we are and who we serve?

*Understanding the identity of your college or university is the foundation for effective strategic planning.*

### **Historically, how has our institution thrived?**

To successfully evolve and adapt to the changing needs of students and their families it's important to ask, "Do we truly know who we are and who we serve?" To help answer this question, institutions can look back and see where in the past they have succeeded and how their mission, vision, and values were aligned at the time. Leveraging this data can help shed light on how well an institution supports the needs of students today.

Colleges and universities should use their success stories to help identify their values and create a vision statement that resonates with student interests and the assets of the institution. What's key here is being purposeful and diligent in clarifying mission to answer some key questions. Are you addressing the aspirations and challenges that today's students face? Are you preparing students to engage with pressing issues like climate change, social justice, AI and digital transformation? Consider how to best align your offerings with societal needs and links to career pathways so you can position your institution as a change agent for students and the causes they are passionate about.

### **Who succeeds? Who struggles? Do we know why?**

Data is a powerful tool for identifying strengths and weaknesses within your institution. Colleges and universities can use this information to uncover patterns related to student success and challenges. By examining metrics such as graduation rates, course completions, and student engagement, you can build a more accurate profile of successful students, while also pinpointing opportunities for intervention and enhancement.

Collaboration across divisions and units is also crucial for fostering student success. Consider how your institution can integrate support services to create a seamless experience for students. Whether it's academic advising, mental health resources, or career counseling, ensuring a network of support can enhance overall student outcomes.

### **What elements of our student experience do we want to highlight?**

As the culture of a campus encompasses its values, traditions, and atmosphere, a vibrant campus life can significantly impact students' decisions to choose your institution. Colleges and universities should consider the features of your campus (residential, commuter, urban, or rural) and highlight the distinctive aspects of their campus culture that contribute to a well-rounded student experience. Each setting offers unique opportunities for engagement and an angle within the market for differentiation.

Part of that equation is extracurricular and co-curricular opportunities. Institutions that offer a healthy range of clubs, sports, and resources can provide students with a social outlet that helps them get a balanced student experience outside of the classroom. Beyond academics and extracurriculars, consider other key attributes that make your institution stand out such as alumni networks, career support, research opportunities, or partnerships with local businesses. Highlighting these attributes can provide prospective students with a compelling reason to choose your institution.

## Do we know why people choose us versus competitors?

*Understanding what sets your institution apart from competitors is essential for effective positioning.*

### **Who are our competitors and why do students choose them?**

Identifying your competitors — both direct and indirect — is the first step in understanding your market position. Institutions can leverage external data sources, such as Student Clearing House data, to uncover competitors and understand enrollment trends. Additionally, external data can provide valuable insights into your competitive landscape and uncover competitor offerings in terms of programs, delivery modalities, and market needs. Understanding these factors can help you identify gaps and opportunities for differentiation.

Direct feedback from recently enrolled students can offer valuable insights into the factors influencing their decisions. Conducting surveys can help you understand what attracted students to your institution and what specific features stood out. This data can guide your marketing and recruitment strategies and build upon your knowledge base.

### **How do our competitors perceive us and how does our net price compare?**

There is a fundamental difference between how you want your institution to be perceived and how it is actually perceived. Making that distinction can help you find your unique place in the market by creating a distinct identity and then using messaging and other marketing-driven initiatives to guide how it is externally perceived.

Pricing also plays a big role in public perception and prospective students' decisions to attend a college or university. Compare your institution's net price to that of competitors and conduct a competitive analysis to determine whether your pricing is strategically aligned with the value your institution offers.

Transparent pricing can convey affordability and value to prospective students and their families.

## How do our offerings align with the market and student needs?

*Aligning your academic offerings with market demands and student interests is crucial for attracting and retaining students.*

### **How do our academic offerings match the needs and interests of students?**

Institutions should continuously evaluate whether their academic programs align with students' needs and interests. By considering the current job market, industry trends, and the skills students need to succeed, institutions can determine whether their offerings are well positioned with traditional feeder institutions such as high schools and community colleges.

Leading institutions use the job market and economy to identify career paths for students, anticipate changes in the market, and then make changes where necessary. Being adaptable helps them shift focus when new opportunities arise without sacrificing their underlying identity.

### **How are we differentiating our institution in the market?**

Differentiation is key to standing out in a crowded market. While pricing plays an important role in the story, institutions that excel are those that carve out a distinct identity. They are able to leverage their resources and offerings to reach prospective students and stand out in a market with many players. It's a balancing act between showcasing your institution's strengths and staying true to your core mission.

## Succeeding with enrollment

Enrollment success is difficult to navigate for many reasons, but more important than ever for institutions looking to excel within a more competitive environment due to demographic and college-going rate challenges. Even if an institution has a clear mission with tangible benefits for students, outside socioeconomic factors can sway students away from your institution and toward a competitor. Being in tune with the challenges facing the world today and clarifying your institution's message can help you overcome enrollment challenges, prepare for a complex road ahead, and succeed alongside your students.



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