

Reaching for the stars: Four strategies for boosting enrollment

An interview with David Worley

David Worley, by his own admission, is not a rocket scientist. He and his enrollment team, however, have achieved stellar results in enrollment management over the past five years at Iliff School of Theology in Denver, Colorado. Despite enrollment declines in theological education generally, at the end of the 2008–09 recruitment season, Iliff reported that inquiries were up 16 percent, campus visits up 79 percent, and applications up 46 percent over the prior year. In fact, the incoming class of September 2009 is the school's largest since 1996, and new master's degree students are up 36 percent over the prior year, making this the best year on record. In reflecting on the school's recent successes, Worley offers four strategies for boosting enrollment.

Iliff's program for enrollment management has shifted over the past two years from the routines of a passive admissions office to an actively engaged enrollment management strategy derived from "common sense built on market data," according to David Worley, who served in the admissions office for two years before becoming its director three years ago. More specifically, four new approaches have proven to make a difference:

1 Advocate for programs, delivery systems, and student programs that students need.

Theological schools tend to focus attention on the needs and interests of existing students. Worley suggests that they also try to learn from the people who **don't come** to their schools. The admissions office offers a unique perspective that tells administrators, "Here's what we're hearing from prospects about what they **don't like** about us." Each year, Iliff surveys students who expressed interest in the school but did not ultimately apply, inquiring as to what

elements—including financial aid, programs, schedule, and location—might have factored into their decisions. For several years, the enrollment team heard from prospects a consistent desire for online classes and programs. In response, the school has worked hard to implement online offerings. Additionally, it has tried to help students with very complicated schedules by implementing block scheduling and providing more student services online.

In addition, Worley advises schools to give serious consideration to students who wouldn't traditionally think about seminary but for whom theological education might, in fact, be a good fit. This approach offers a broader market pool

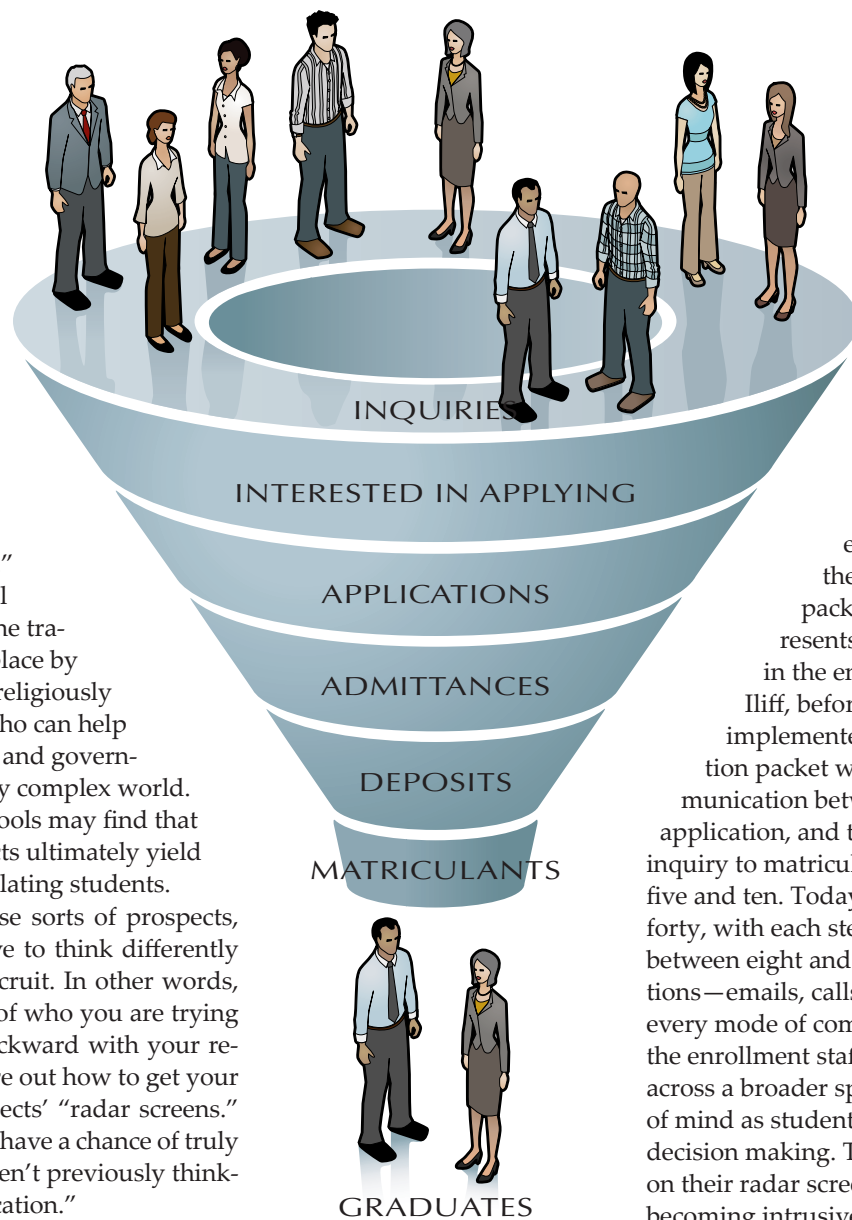
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of prospective students with interests in fields like sociology and social work, psychology and counseling, community development, corporate responsibility, diversity and human resources, and virtually any field tied to ethics. He suggests, for instance, that “some MDiv students could be just International Development students who are more aware of the cultural and religious traditions that influence almost any field.” In other words, theological schools can add value to the traditionally secular marketplace by producing culturally and religiously sophisticated graduates who can help organizations, businesses, and government navigate a religiously complex world. In casting a wider net, schools may find that larger numbers of prospects ultimately yield larger numbers of matriculating students.

In order to reach those sorts of prospects, Worley advises, “you have to think differently about where you go to recruit. In other words, you have to have an idea of who you are trying to appeal to and work backward with your recruitment strategy to figure out how to get your institution on these prospects’ “radar screens.” From there, he adds, “you have a chance of truly gaining students who weren’t previously thinking about theological education.”

2 Pay close attention to the data derived from the enrollment funnel.

Worley and his staff monitor the progress of individuals through a funnel that tracks them from initial inquiries through the application and admissions process and records the number who make it from one stage to the next. This sort of monitoring determined, for example, that the percentage of individuals who move from the initial inquiry to actually submitting an application had been dropping between 10 and 12 percent per year for the past five years. Armed with that data, the staff has been able to develop a plan to improve the retention rate through the admissions process. This year they were able to stop the decline and in fact improve the conversion rate by 27 percent over the prior year.



3 Use every mode of communication to keep the conversation active from inquiry through matriculation.

Iliff’s solution has been targeted communications—and lots of them—from the initial inquiry through matriculation and beyond. Most schools tend to spend a great deal of energy—and money—on their printed marketing packet, which generally represents one of the earliest steps in the enrollment courtship. At Iliff, before the new strategy was implemented, the school’s information packet was in fact the **only** communication between the inquiry and the application, and total communications from inquiry to matriculation numbered between five and ten. Today, that number is closer to forty, with each step in the process involving between eight and fourteen communications—emails, calls, and letters. By using every mode of communication available, the enrollment staff is able to reach students across a broader spectrum and remain top of mind as students progress through their decision making. The challenge is to stay on their radar screens consistently without becoming intrusive or bothersome.

Worley’s team has met this challenge with a strong reliance on technology. He explains, “Every admissions officer in our office has a daily to-do list of communications to perform. This list is generally produced by our database software based on our communications plan. The list gets relationally augmented by our senior admissions team and personalized for each individual student. This enables us to keep up with hundreds of students simultaneously. Getting to this point required an enormous amount of energy and time in learning our database system, and still today we have to continually stay well versed with our database platform.”

This approach also requires enrollment staff to “get personal” with interested students, but the effort pays off. According to Worley, for instance, no two visits to Iliff are exactly the same. Each is tailored to meet the particular interests of each individual visitor and introduce faculty and students who might resonate with those interests. The result: after the visit, Iliff typically moves up significantly on the student’s list of preferred schools, another indicator that enrollment staff monitors.

4 Articulate clearly what distinguishes your school from other ATS member schools.

Stepping back and looking at the entire ATS membership of schools, Worley advises to remember that graduate schools of theology represent a fairly small subgroup of graduate schools that will appeal to a commensurately narrow group of prospective students. Within that small subgroup, ATS schools must distinguish themselves from one another. It is not enough to boast, “We have a great . . . faculty” or “. . . library” or “. . . program.” Instead, schools need to be specific in articulating what is different about them and to articulate that difference with confidence and conviction. In the case of Iliff, the school boldly announces that it is (1) committed to social change, (2) serious about engaging diversity in all its forms, and (3) blessed with a great location in the scenic mountains of Colorado.

And since most schools serve a variety of student types, enrollment managers should also remember to speak to a range that includes both residents and commuters, both newly minted college graduates and second career students. Communications should articulate how the school and its programs fits within the lifestyle

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interests of each student type by answering the question, “How is [school name] right for you?”

All of these strategies rely more on diligence than on dollars. Historically, initial inquiries have been generated by referrals by alumni/ae and friends, according to student surveys and personal statements. More recently, electronic research and communications have begun to challenge word-of-mouth as the primary entry point. Improvements to Web sites and using them to keep in touch with alumni/ae are therefore probably the best use of a school’s limited marketing and recruitment resources. ♦

David Worley is director of student services at Iliff School of Theology in Denver, Colorado.



Editor’s Note: For more recruiting hints gleaned from the Entering Student Questionnaire, see the Spring 2009 issue of Colloquy, p. 26.

RESOURCE

- I think I want to go to seminary, but is seminary right for me?
- What is seminary like?
- How do I figure out which schools to apply to?

If you counsel someone who is asking these questions, this book may be able to help. Derek Cooper, visiting professor at Biblical Theological Seminary, answers the questions of those considering or just starting seminary—as well as questions they may not have considered.

