



Majors Matter More Than Ever: Creating an Academic Journey for Prospective Students

Why it's time to move beyond traditional marketing to fill your academic programs



ENROLLMENT



WHY SHOULD A STUDENT STUDY AT *YOUR* INSTITUTION?

It's a simple question, but it is the cornerstone of student search. Academics plays a pivotal role—*do you have my major?* is one of the first questions students have when they start their search. But students today also require more than seeing if you have the major they want or reading descriptions of academic offerings. They want to know if they are a good fit for your academic program, and if your academic program and your institution will fit their needs.

In addition, the competition for students has grown more fierce in recent years. Your campus is certainly not alone in trying to fill specific programs with the students you want. Students now can find information on institutions across the country and the world with a simple search. How do you stand out from the competition and engage the students who will make your academic programs shine?

The key is to create a targeted, personalized journey for prospective students, one that engages them the first time they learn about your institution and the programs you offer. This generation of students has grown up in the era of personalization and content tailored just for them. These students expect the same kind of customized experience during their college searches that they encounter when shopping online, browsing websites, and using social media. That personalization—the feeling that your institution not only has the major a student wants but is the place for them to pursue their academic dreams—is how you will outmaneuver your competitors and shape enrollment in your programs.

IT GOES WAY BEYOND FILLING SEATS

Beyond meeting the enrollment targets for your programs, ensuring prospective students are well-informed about—and find themselves a good fit for—specific majors means they will make more informed enrollment decisions. Those decisions are about more than where they go; what they choose to do is just as important. With a carefully created, personalized plan building early awareness, you can do better in connecting students early to the right major—and then in exceeding their expectations as they pursue their opportunities at your institution.

THE IMPACT OF ACADEMIC PROGRAM SELECTION

SMART BORROWING

Students who change their majors multiple times spend more time in college earning their degree and incur more financial debt.¹ Educating students on the requirements, expectations, and opportunities for a specific major can help them assess their fit for a major and choose wisely at the start of their college search process.

STUDENT SATISFACTION

Contrary to popular belief, being undecided is not necessarily a risk factor for attrition.² Identifying with a major, however, may help students feel more connected to an institution.

When you build earlier and stronger awareness of a program, you create more opportunity for a student to find a meaningful connection.

CAREER READINESS

Employer appreciation of liberal arts may be resurgent³ though liberal arts grads are more likely to say a different major would have better prepared them for their career.⁴ More education on the value of, and pathways for, liberal arts majors better serves students.

ALUMNI AFFINITY

Student satisfaction in academic advising and instruction are highly correlated with alumni giving.⁵ Students who feel they chose the right major and who received quality support and instruction are more likely to become satisfied alumni.

YOUR AUDIENCE HAS CHANGED. A LOT.



THEIR QUESTIONS ARE DIFFERENT.

Each year, the percentage of students who rate a college's academic reputation, graduates' admission to graduate school, and graduates getting good jobs as "very important" has risen.⁶



IT'S A FAMILY CONVERSATION.

As students weigh their options and consider their choices alongside their parents, families are particularly focused on "...clear paths to employment success, knowledge, and skills that are relevant to the job market, and experiential learning outside the classroom."⁷



THEY SEEK AN EXPERIENCE, NOT A TRANSACTION.

Of course, a major listed on a test form isn't necessarily what a student is interested in by the time you start communicating (or later on). It's critical to know where they are every step of the way—Gen Z expects to receive personalized information about their interests from the start.



THEY CONTROL THE PROCESS.

Over three-quarters of juniors and seniors consider college and university websites—at-their-finger-tips access to information on every facet of the institution—their top resource in their search, and more than two in five seek schools via online searches by school and program.⁸



Colleges know more than ever before about why students succeed in certain classes and majors on their campuses. They also know from surveys like the Gallup-Purdue Index why some graduates have better job outcomes than others. To increase the efficiency of their admissions funnel, colleges need to make use of that data in marketing and throughout the admissions process—even in evaluating applicants.⁹



—As explained in The Chronicle of Higher Education's *The Future of Enrollment* report

SUCCESSFULLY SHAPING ACADEMIC PROGRAM ENROLLMENT MEANS LETTING GO OF THE OLD PLAN

In this era of increased competition and the expectation of personalization, it is critical to make your academic programs relevant to students. This cannot be done effectively through linear or static communication streams that highlight aspects of the majors you are targeting.

Instead, students are looking for an academic journey for choosing the right academic program. Students want to be empowered and drive the experience, finding information and making decisions at their own pace and in the order they prefer. They find their way to their enrollment decision and want to access the information they want when *they* need it.

Think of it in the context of a conversation with a prospective student. Rather than providing a flow of information at planned stages—which may not meet a student’s expectations or needs for their college search—each exchange and each piece of information or interest the student shares will tailor that conversation and increase their engagement. The benefit is, in giving students more freedom to shape their exploration of your institution’s academic programs, you increase your opportunities to steer them toward a decision to apply.



 **20%**

Austin College (Texas) looked to grow their biology program. By using an academic journey approach with students, they engaged more candidates for their program and have been on pace to increase program enrollment by nearly 20%.

“

When we engage students that we meet personally, we don't greet them with a demand that they enroll immediately—that's disingenuous. We greet them by getting to know their passions and then work to connect those passions to our institution. ”

— Baylee Kowert, Executive Director of Admissions, Austin College



HOW DO YOU BUILD AN ACADEMIC JOURNEY?

An engaging, fully customized student academic journey rests on three critical components: who you are reaching, how they can build their path, and qualifying which students are most engaged and are ideal candidates for follow up.



1 WHO? IDENTIFY PERSONAS

The audience is the heart of the academic journey process. You need to know the types of students—the personas—who are the right fit. A student who might want to study medicine will react and respond much differently than a student who wants to study music. They will have different journeys to enrollment.


After pinpointing the personas of the types of students who will be good fits for the programs you wish to target, you invite them to engage and start along the pathway most relevant to them.

2

WHAT & WHEN?
CRAFT RELEVANT PATHS

Students have multiple choices to help them discover their academic future. They may want to jump from topics or content about an institution or program of study in a way that doesn't fit with a standard communication flow. Enabling that freedom will make their exploration feel more personalized and increase their engagement.

However, that also means that an institution must be able to facilitate those content needs and decision points so students can find what they need, as well as provide information for parents who may play a role in the enrollment decision. While an institution may have this information in various places on their website, it is far more effective to use informational "hubs" that combine relevant information with student engagement so they have what they want when they want it without having to hunt around a website for it.



ASSESSING "FIT" ALONG THE JOURNEY

As students direct their path, enrollment officers must craft their experience. They choose where they go while you respond and guide as they explore.

It is important to think about these paths from a student perspective and facilitate choice. For example, an interactive "fit quiz" that assesses student interest in specific fields of study (such as sciences, business, humanities, etc.) can both engage and empower a student while also building a pool of students who could be a good fit for your program.

3

HOW? OPTIMIZE EACH STUDENT'S EXPERIENCE WITH ENGAGEMENT SCORING

The final piece and the key for your institution is to assess the students on the journey. Who is engaged? How engaged are they? Which students should command your greatest attention and resources immediately?

Any student-directed academic journey needs to provide you with actionable information throughout the process. Scoring the levels of student engagement, for instance, identifies who might benefit from a conversation with a professor, an email from the dean of the college for their academic area, or a communication for parents. Students who are less engaged but still potentially good fits may benefit from interacting with an admissions counselor. The point is that, in an era when campuses have fewer resources and more demands on time, this type of qualification can be the difference between landing the students who are the perfect fit for a program versus losing their interest or not following up in the most relevant, timely fashion.

STUDENTS HAVE CHANGED HOW THEY SEARCH FOR ACADEMIC PROGRAMS. YOUR MARKETING OF YOUR PROGRAMS NEEDS TO ADAPT.

The bottom line is that the changes in student behavior are already here. There is no going back to the old, rigid communication plan. Successful campuses will be the ones that create relevant paths for students to explore at their own pace. Campuses that do not will be less successful and have a harder time enrolling the students they want who are good fits for their academic programs.

However, creating a personalized academic journey is not easy. It requires the right blend of enrollment strategy, content expertise, and new technologies such as marketing automation to pull off an experience that will feel authentic, natural, and complete to the student. Trying to build such a system on campus will challenge even the most advanced institutions, which is why RNL has built a solution for them.

THE RNL ACADEMIC PROGRAM STUDENT JOURNEY

RNL Academic Program Student Journey engages students in the specific majors you want to grow so they can explore your offerings and realize why they are a good fit for your program and campus. **It is:**



PERSONA-DRIVEN

Target the right students so they receive the most relevant information they want and need in regard to their program of interest.



INCLUSIVE OF PARENTS

Students can invite their parents to explore along their journey when they are ready—encouraging the family discussion that’s critical in their decision process.



ENGAGING AND HIGHLY PERSONAL

A self-directed, interactive “fit finder” quiz helps the student connect with a program and the institution, and sets up their exploration.



EMPOWERING STUDENTS TO EXPLORE

The hub students access to start their path puts them in the driver’s seat. From here, they choose where they want to go, how, and when.

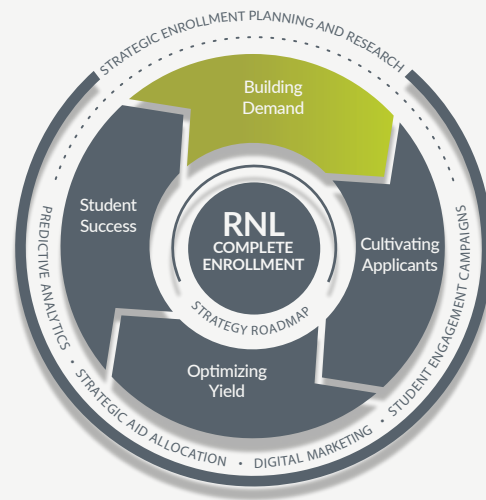
SEE HOW YOU CAN ENGAGE AND ENROLL MORE STUDENTS FOR YOUR ACADEMIC PROGRAMS

Speak to our enrollment experts and ask for a guided tour of RNL Academic Program Student Journey. You will learn how you can be more efficient with your resources while also engaging more students who are the right fit for your campus.

Visit RuffaloNL.com/AcademicJourney | Email ContactUs@RuffaloNL.com | Call 800.876.1117

ABOUT RUFFALO NOEL LEVITZ

Ruffalo Noel Levitz is the leading provider of higher education enrollment, student success, and fundraising solutions. More than 1,900 colleges, universities, and nonprofit organizations rely on RNL for advanced analytics, personalized engagement, and industry-leading insights to achieve their missions. The firm is distinguished by its powerful portfolio of solutions focused on the entire lifecycle of enrollment and fundraising, assuring students find the right college or university, graduate on time, secure their first job, and give back to support the next generation. Ruffalo Noel Levitz conferences, research reports, papers, and articles help clients stay on top of current trends.



References

- Vitale, D. (2016). Education and career navigation: Critical for student progress and success. ACT Research & Policy Issue Brief. <http://www.act.org>
- Cuseo, J. (2005). "Decided," "undecided," and "in transition": Implications for academic advisement, career counseling & student retention. In R.S. Feldman (Ed.). *Improving the first year of college: Research and practice*. (pp.27-48). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
- Arnett, A. (2017, March 12). 4 trends poised to transform the future of higher education. Education Dive. <http://www.educationdive.com/news/4-trends-poised-to-transform-the-future-of-higher-education/437923/>
- Pew Research Center. (2014, February 11). Chapter 2: Public views of the value of education. *The rising cost of not going to college*. <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2014/02/11/chapter-2-public-views-on-the-value-of-education/>
- Ruffalo Noel Levitz (2015). The correlation between college student satisfaction and alumni giving. http://learn.ruffalonl.com/WEB2015SatisfactionAlumniGivingReport_LandingPage.html
- Eagan, K., Stolzenberg, E.B., Bates, A., Aragon, M., Suchard, M.R., & Rios-Aguilar, C. (2015). The American freshman: National norms 2015. Cooperative Institutional Research Program at the Higher Education Research Institute at UCLA. <http://www.heru.ucla.edu>
- Lawlor Group. (2017) Trends for 2017. <https://thelawlorgroup.com/trends2017/>
- Ruffalo Noel Levitz. (2017) 2017 E-Expectations Trend Report. http://learn.ruffalonl.com/WEB2017E-ExpectationsReport_LandingPage.html
- Selingo, J. (2017). *The future of college enrollment: Where colleges will find their next students*. Washington, DC: The Chronicle of Higher Education.