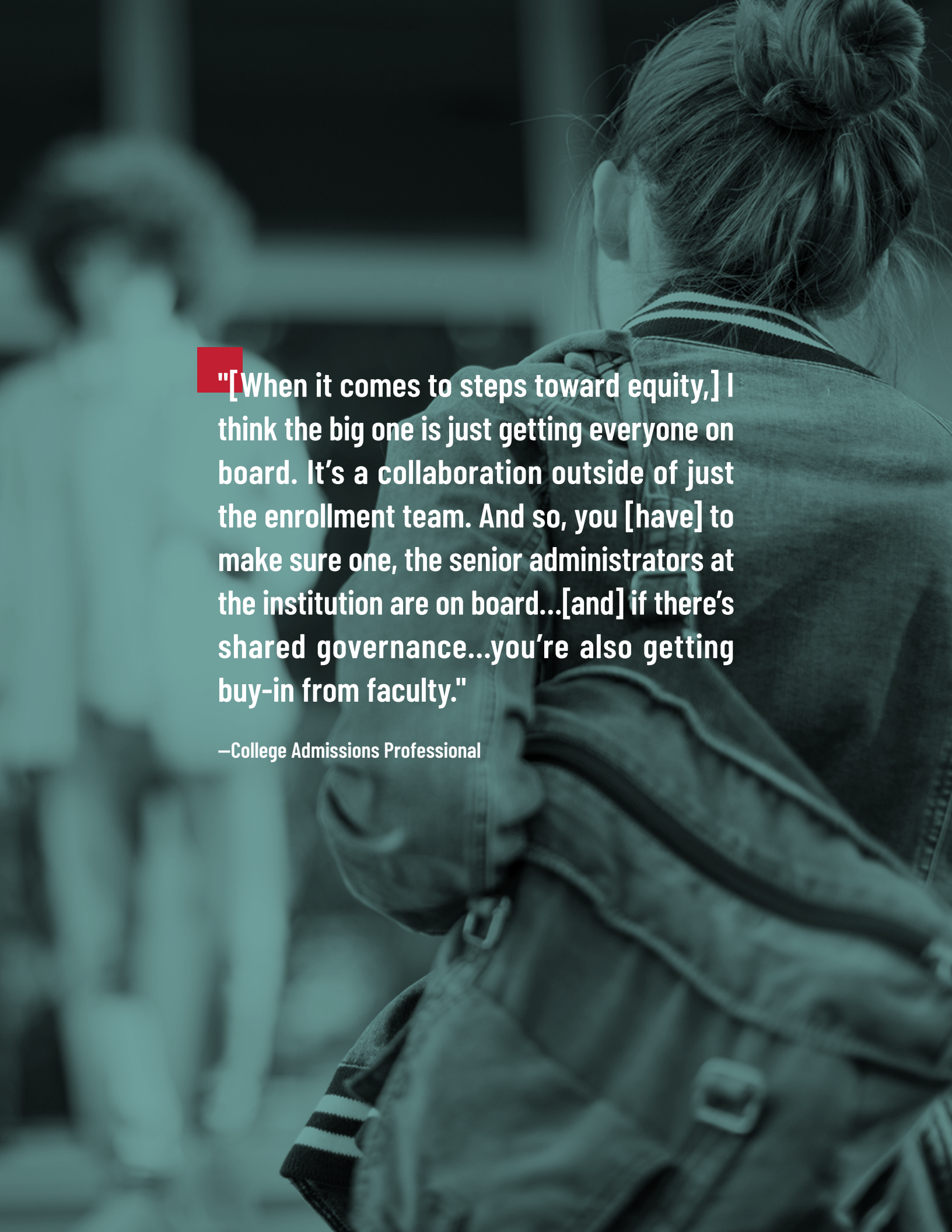


CHAPTER 1

RETHINKING RECRUITMENT POLICIES

Recruitment can be thought of as the set of policies and practices that an institution uses to introduce itself to prospective students and families. Research suggests that universities are purposeful about which students they pursue, and are intentional about the time, money, and efforts expended to recruit a student body. When done equitably, recruitment policies and practices can promote the inclusion of historically underrepresented students—Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) students or students from low-income backgrounds—in higher education. However, at many institutions, recruitment practices have the opposite effect: perpetuating privilege for White or affluent students and supporting a system in which an applicant’s zip code determines his or her future.¹

¹*"The Most Important Door That Will Ever Open": Realizing the Mission of Higher Education through Equitable Recruitment, Admissions, and Enrollment Policies*



"[When it comes to steps toward equity,] I think the big one is just getting everyone on board. It's a collaboration outside of just the enrollment team. And so, you [have] to make sure one, the senior administrators at the institution are on board...[and] if there's shared governance...you're also getting buy-in from faculty."

—College Admissions Professional

RECRUITMENT EFFORTS ARE STRATEGIC INVESTMENTS OF TIME AND MONEY THAT REVEAL INSTITUTIONAL PRIORITIES

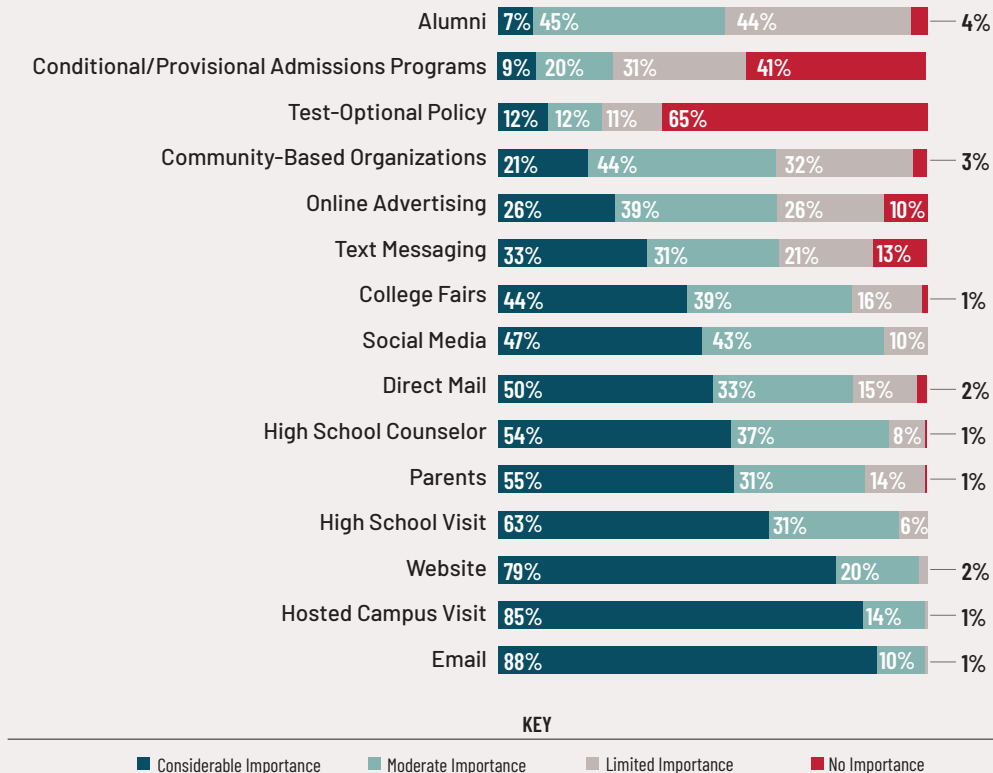
Student recruitment is not a simple tool used by enrollment managers; it is an expensive² and well-orchestrated science³ crafted to attract and engage with prospective students during the college admissions process. Recruitment strategies incorporate techniques from marketing and economics to influence the makeup of incoming classes.⁴ These strategies come at a price, with public institutions spending a median of \$536 to recruit a single undergraduate student.⁵ And these costs add up: universities spend, on average, approximately \$600,000 per year solely on vendors for enrollment management, a figure that includes spending on recruitment.⁶

Universities spend, on average, approximately \$600,000 per year solely on vendors for enrollment management, a figure that includes spending on recruitment.

Admissions offices deploy a wide variety of recruitment methods to connect with prospective students (Figure 1.1). Institutions report that the most important strategies to recruit first-time freshmen include contacting students through email, engaging with them through the college or university website, and hosting campus visits.⁷ Fifty percent or more of institutions that responded to a National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) survey indicated that high school visits, outreach to parents and high school counselors, and direct mail are also of “considerable importance” among recruitment strategies.⁸ (These survey data reflect pre-COVID-19 realities, when tactics like high school visits were more feasible.)

FIGURE 1.1

Importance of Various Recruitment Strategies at Four-Year Colleges

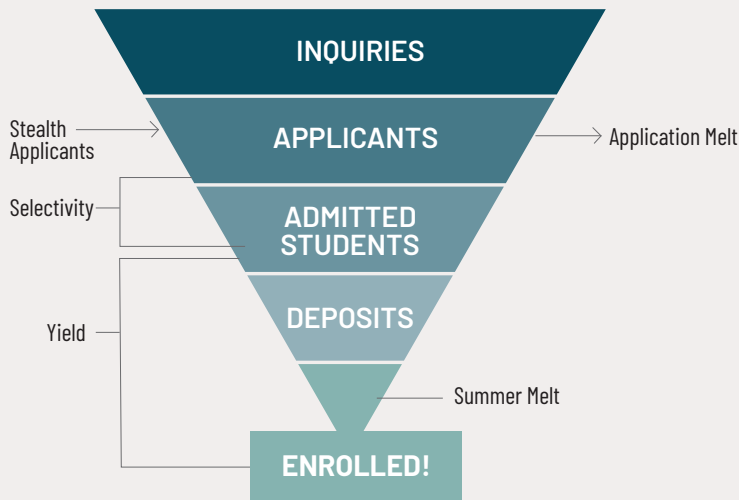


Source: Adapted from NACAC Admission Trends Survey, 2018-19. Retrieved from https://www.nacacnet.org/globalassets/documents/publications/research/2018_soca/soca2019_all.pdf

To prioritize these tactics and determine which potential students to target, colleges and universities use the “enrollment funnel”—a conceptual tool for setting enrollment yield rates and informing targeted recruitment interventions throughout the admissions process (Figure 1.2).⁹ The widely used framework answers enrollment teams’ questions about how many applicants are needed, how many students should be accepted, and how many students need to commit to attend the institution to meet their enrollment goals.¹⁰

FIGURE 1.2

Higher Education Enrollment Funnel

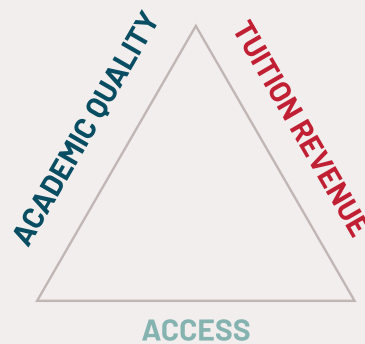


Source: Adapted from EAB. (2019). *The 5 key stages of college enrollment—and which metrics to track during each*. Retrieved from <https://eab.com/insights/daily-briefing/enrollment/the-5-key-stages-of-college-enrollment-and-which-metrics-to-track-during-each/>

Enrollment management professionals also frequently evoke the idea of an “iron triangle” (Figure 1.3) in guiding their decisions about whom to target in their recruitment with three priorities in mind: student academic profile, revenue, and access.¹¹ Who ultimately enrolls in a college or university is dictated by universities’ strategies to move prospective students through the enrollment funnel to meet institutional targets within the iron triangle.

FIGURE 1.3

Iron Triangle of Enrollment Management



Source: Adapted from Jaquette, O. & Han, C. (2020). *Follow the money recruiting and the enrollment priorities of public research universities*. Retrieved from <https://www.thirdway.org/report/follow-the-money-recruiting-and-the-enrollment-priorities-of-public-research-universities>

At the most basic level, institutions must recruit students to fill their incoming class. Enrollment managers and admissions officers are under extreme pressure to fill a target number of seats each year, and recruitment strategies, like high school visits and direct mail campaigns, are essential for achieving these goals. However, in recent years, many colleges and universities have struggled to meet their enrollment goals by the traditional May 1 target, leaving admissions directors concerned about filling their classes.¹⁴ The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these concerns for many institutions across the country, forcing colleges and universities to operate in an uncertain admissions environment (see College Enrollment During a Global Pandemic).¹⁵ With these enrollment goals and the iron triangle framework in mind, institutions develop recruitment strategies based on the following objectives:



» **Academic Profile: Improve ranking and prestige.** Many colleges prioritize their performance in well-known college rankings and consistently chase and compete for the perception of prestige that these rankings convey.¹⁶ For example, to improve on the selectivity portion of the *U.S. News & World Report* ranking, some institutions tailor recruitment practices to encourage students who have high test scores and high school class standing to apply and enroll.¹⁷



» **Revenue: Meet revenue goals.** Faced with revenue challenges caused by state budget constraints over the last decade,¹⁸ some institutions sacrifice their diversity and equity goals to balance their books. Many institutions have developed a reliance on full-pay and out-of-state or international students for tuition revenue.¹⁹ Some public institutions turn to this revenue source in the face of financial strains in an effort to provide a suitable learning environment, pay faculty and administrative salaries, and offer student services. Yet, some institutions with large budgets increase expenditures on unnecessary and luxurious campus amenities such as rock-climbing walls and lazy rivers.²⁰



» **Access: Shape the student body.** Institutions use recruitment strategies to target the students they want to apply and enroll.²¹ Recruiting practices reflect an institution's priorities, whether by targeting students who will make the institution appear more elite, focusing on revenue generated by tuition, or working to enroll students from demographic groups the institution deems important, such as more Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI, low-income, or in-state students.²²

While the shape of the iron triangle framework (Figure 1.3) suggests that each priority requires equal attention, institutions may favor one or more of the three. The stakes of these relative prioritizations for students are high because they determine which students are targeted in recruitment efforts, which ultimately influences who enrolls. Research shows that when selective colleges place too much emphasis on the academic profile and revenue points of the triangle and insufficient attention to equitable access, racial and socioeconomic gaps in access widen.²³

College Enrollment During a Global Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic has further widened equity gaps in college enrollment. Colleges and universities felt the full impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in fall 2020 as first-time undergraduate student enrollment declined by 3 percentage points compared to fall 2019.¹² Indeed, among high school graduates in the class of 2020, immediate fall enrollment declined by 7 percent compared to the class of 2019, with graduates of high-poverty, low-income, and high-minority high schools least likely to enroll.¹³ These trends are a reflection of the challenges associated with enrolling in and attending college that many students of color and students from low-income backgrounds face every year—and demonstrate the urgency with which institutions need to approach adapting their recruitment, admissions, and enrollment policies to promote equitable access.

While the shape of the iron triangle framework suggests that each priority requires equal attention, institutions may favor one or more of the three.

COLLEGE RECRUITER VISITS ARE MISSED OPPORTUNITIES TO IMPROVE EQUITY

The vast majority of administrators surveyed by NACAC indicated that high school visits and college fairs are of considerable or moderate importance in terms of recruitment strategies (94 percent and 83 percent, respectively; Figure 1.1). These strategies enable college and university staff to meet students where they are and build recruitment pipelines. As such, high school visits and college fairs also are some of the most resource-intensive recruitment tactics. In fact, public four-year universities spend nearly 20 percent of their marketing and recruiting budgets on travel to high schools and college fairs each year.²⁴ Institutions with limited budgets are forced to make difficult decisions about which high schools their admissions officers should visit, and those decisions impact who applies, is admitted, and enrolls.


Travel to high school visits and college fairs is the third-largest source of eventual enrollees at public four-year institutions, accounting for 16 percent of enrollees.²⁵

High school visits and college fairs are particularly impactful for first-generation students, for whom these experiences exert a strong influence on where they choose to apply and enroll.²⁶ Such visits also help institutions maintain relationships with feeder high schools that provide new prospects year after year.²⁷ As a result, the high schools that institutions choose to visit have a notable impact on which students ultimately enroll. The enrollment and diversity goals set by campus leaders should directly influence decisions about where to recruit and the resources to allocate to off-campus recruitment.

Research suggests that many institutions—particularly those best positioned to invest financially in underserved students’ success—prioritize recruiting White and affluent high schoolers to the detriment of students of color and low-income, first-generation, rural, adult, and community college transfer students. A 2019 study by Han, Jaquette, and Salazar examined 15 public research universities’ recruitment patterns and found that most prioritize visiting wealthy high schools where the median neighborhood income was approximately \$68,000 to \$110,000.²⁸ Institutions were less likely to send admissions officers to visit out-of-state high schools with higher proportions of Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students, where White students are in the minority.²⁹



Travel to high school visits and college fairs is the third-largest source of eventual enrollees at public four-year institutions.

A photograph of two young women sitting on stone steps in front of a building with large columns. The woman on the left is holding a tablet, and the woman on the right is pointing at a laptop. A backpack is on the ground next to them. The image has a teal color overlay.

Recruitment strategies that prioritize urban and suburban areas limit the opportunities rural students have to meet institutional representatives, learn about the application process, or boost their chances of applying and being accepted.

When students from rural areas are the first in their family to attend college, they benefit significantly from direct interactions with institutional representatives, such as through high school visits and college fairs.³⁰ Unfortunately, research indicates that institutions are less likely to visit rural high schools, prioritizing urban and suburban schools instead.³¹ The cost of traveling to rural areas with lower concentrations of high schools likely influences these patterns, along with the perception that rural students are more reluctant to leave home due to cultural and financial barriers.³²

Recruitment strategies that prioritize urban and suburban areas limit the opportunities rural students have to meet institutional representatives, learn about the application process, or boost their chances of applying and being accepted.

The COVID-19 pandemic has upended off-campus recruitment practices, leading institutions to adjust to a virtual format and offering lessons for future recruitment cycles. Recruitment during COVID-19 has included virtual campus visits and college fairs, online groups to meet other students virtually, increased communication with admissions staff, and paper mailings.³³ The pandemic has proven that institutions can adapt and should continue using these tactics to engage more prospective students, including rural students, moving forward.

Deciding which high schools to visit is difficult given the financial, time, and other constraints that institutions operate within, but choosing to disrupt historical inequities is not easy. Institutions that prioritize visits to predominately White and affluent high schools are, in practice, investing in the perpetuation of postsecondary access gaps for students of color, students from low-income backgrounds, and rural students. Furthermore, recruitment strategies that center on high school students fail to consider the needs of prospective community college transfer students, or to create opportunities to reengage the 36 million adults with some college experience but no degree.³⁴ Institutions should evaluate how their high school visits—and recruitment strategy as a whole—do or do not contribute to enrolling diverse incoming classes.

PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES TOO OFTEN DEVOTE RESOURCES TO RECRUITING WEALTHY OUT-OF-STATE STUDENTS

Out-of-state students usually pay two or three times more to attend an institution than in-state students.³⁵ For this reason, many colleges and universities recruit large numbers of out-of-state students from wealthier public and private high schools to generate revenue, especially in the face of state budget cuts.³⁶

While prioritizing out-of-state students is a choice made by institutional enrollment managers, state lawmakers can play a key role in stemming out-of-state recruitment. Research has shown that a 10 percent decline in state appropriations correlates with a 2.7 percent increase in out-of-state enrollment at public four-year institutions and a 5 percent increase at public research institutions.³⁷ As total state appropriations for higher education fell between 2001 and 2016, the share of incoming out-of-state students at the country's 63 public research universities increased from 19 percent to 26 percent.³⁸

An analysis by the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation found that 51 selective public universities (out of the 92 it studied) enroll more than one-quarter of their students from out-of-state.³⁹ At 11 of those institutions, more than half of students are out-of-state enrollees.⁴⁰ A similar study examining recruitment practices at 15 public universities found that nearly all (12 of 15) made more out-of-state recruitment visits than in-state visits, with approximately half (7 of 15) making more than twice as many out-of-state than in-state visits.⁴¹

The preoccupation with out-of-state students has resulted in some public universities sending more regional recruiters to cover out-of-state areas.⁴² For example, 17 of the 24 regional admissions counselors at the University of South Carolina work full time in states other than South Carolina.⁴³ Additionally, some institutions direct their financial aid dollars to non-need-based aid programs to attract affluent nonresident applicants, rather than spending their limited resources on tuition discounts for non-wealthy applicants.⁴⁴

EXAMPLE

OUT-OF-STATE ENROLLMENT AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA

The University of Alabama decreased in-state undergraduate student enrollment so drastically that state resident freshmen became the minority on campus. The university's share of in-state undergraduates has decreased each year since 2010, when it was 68 percent, to just 40 percent in 2019.⁴⁵



Public institutions that prioritize recruiting out-of-state students crowd out in-state students who are more likely to be Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students, or students from lower-income backgrounds than their out-of-state peers.

These investments in out-of-state students exacerbate inequities because they tend to focus on neighborhoods with high proportions of White and Asian high school students. In contrast, out-of-state communities mainly comprised of Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students, or students from low-income backgrounds receive very few visits.⁴⁶

These institutional decisions are highly consequential for students, with research showing that a 10-percentage point increase in out-of-state students at prestigious public flagships is associated with a 2.7-percentage point decline in the share of Pell Grant recipients.⁴⁷ These trends signal alarm as they crowd out in-state students and negatively impact campus diversity.



OPENING THE DOOR TO OPPORTUNITY: RETHINK RECRUITMENT POLICIES

Recruitment efforts are a significant investment of time and money for institutions, often guided by the three sides of the iron triangle. Decisions about which schools recruiters visit, which students to target, and whether to focus efforts in or out of state all have equity implications. Regardless of the reasoning, research suggests that institutions overwhelmingly devote resources to recruiting White, wealthy, out-of-state students rather than Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds or rural areas, and in-state students.

These decisions shape the makeup of incoming classes. Institutions can use recruitment policies and practices to diversify their student body and advance equity in postsecondary education. Doing so requires a commitment from the highest levels of institutional leadership.

TO DEVELOP AND IMPLEMENT A MORE EQUITABLE RECRUITMENT STRATEGY, COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES SHOULD:

RECRUIT IN DIVERSE LOCATIONS:

When institutions skip visiting high schools or participating in recruitment events in communities with high proportions of Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds, they miss an opportunity to engage with prospective students from all backgrounds. College leaders also must diversify their recruitment roadshows and offer training to ensure that recruiters are culturally competent when engaging with prospective students of various races and backgrounds.

OFFER ALTERNATIVE RECRUITMENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR STUDENTS IN RURAL AREAS:

Researchers estimate that nine million students attend high school in rural communities in the United States and have difficulty participating in recruitment opportunities.⁴⁸ A lack of high school visits or college fairs in rural areas forces many rural students to navigate the admissions process without the support of institutional representatives.⁴⁹ To improve college access for rural students, institutions should continue to develop flexible options for recruiting them, including those that have been implemented as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., virtual campus tours and visits with admissions counselors, direct prospect, mobile-friendly marketing/recruiting, etc.). They should also, when possible, conduct campus visits or attend college fairs in rural areas.⁵⁰

TO DEVELOP AND IMPLEMENT A MORE EQUITABLE RECRUITMENT STRATEGY, COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES SHOULD:

PRIORITIZE STATE RESIDENTS IN RECRUITMENT EFFORTS:

Flagship universities and other selective public colleges should ensure that state residents make up the core of their incoming classes. Public institutions have a mission to provide an excellent education to state residents, and their recruitment policies should reflect this mission.⁵¹ Institutions and states can adopt policies that place a cap on out-of-state enrollments, which may alter recruiting behavior and encourage institutions to devote more resources to in-state students, rather than out-of-state marketing and recruitment efforts.

ACTIVELY RECRUIT RETURNING ADULT AND COMMUNITY COLLEGE TRANSFER STUDENTS:

Focusing recruitment efforts on this population, who are also disproportionately Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and underrepresented AAPI students and students from low-income backgrounds,⁵² can open access to students outside of the traditional first-time freshman pathway and help returning students finish what they started. For example, IHEP’s Degrees When Due initiative⁵³ assists institutions identify students with “some college, no degree” through data mining and degree auditing in order to support degree reclamation efforts. Recruiting and enrolling community college transfer students can increase diversity on campus.⁵⁴ For more recommendations on recruiting community college transfer students, see Chapter 7.



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