

Deciding



*Using Data-Based
Decisionmaking to Support
International Enrollment
Management Efforts*

By Glenn Cook

with Data

GEORGE KACENGA IS A SELF-DESCRIBED DATA JUNKIE, the type of person who enjoys looking at information about the international students he is trying to recruit and finding ways to “make it come alive” for others.

“Data allows you to make a case for the work you want to do for your institution,” says Kacenga, the executive director of global engagement at Purdue University-Northwest. “But you have to know how to collect it, analyze it, and translate it so others can see and buy into your short-term and long-range goals.”

Higher education institutions—large and small, public and private—are increasingly tapping into data to make better informed decisions about their international recruitment efforts. Doing so, however, raises a number of questions: What types of data should be gathered? What customer relationship management (CRM) tools should be used to slice and dice the data? How can international enrollment managers take what is gleaned from their data and use it with internal and external audiences?

“With all of the data around us, the technology around us, and the preferences of students and audiences changing overnight, we are at a turning point in terms of how we are and should be marketing to prospective international students,” says Swaraj Nandan, director and cofounder of KIC UnivAssist, a firm that works with 170 universities in 35 countries to advance global engagement. “Mobility trends require us to have an internal focus, and enrollment managers are at the center of getting the information to help you to decide what comes next. That’s where data analysis comes into the picture.”

Building a Case with Data

Admissions officials say the data they collect vary widely depending on how deeply they want to drill down. “There are a few ways of peeling the onion,” says Nandan. “You have to understand there’s a preference, the ‘why’ people are collecting data a certain way. It

depends on the audience you’re polling, whether people will be open to answering questions, the validity of the information you are gaining from them, and the way you ask the questions so that you’re not biasing the data you get in return. This is all very critical.”

Commonly cited data points include information about prospective students’ academic readiness, projected majors, geographic location, socioeconomic status, and English proficiency. The data mined from student inquiries include country of residence, citizenship, where the applicant lives, information about his or her current school, and whether he or she is already in the United States.

This information is then sliced and diced into comparative time frames, e.g., year to date, by semester, month, week, and even day. External information—such as the Institute of International Education’s (IIE) *Open Doors* report and EducationUSA Global Guide—and analysis from organizations such as NAFSA are then merged to develop recommendations. The ultimate

Mining the Depths of Data

Swaraj Nandan, director and cofounder of KIC UnivAssist, recommends looking at the entire admissions funnel, “from application to confirmation to enrollment to retention to graduation rates,” he says. To draw the most helpful conclusions about students, Nandan suggests asking the questions below regarding the data that are collected:

- Where are students going, and why?
- Where did their interest originate?
- Which countries are applications coming from?
- What are the languages being used to communicate?
- Are there similarities between students’ high school programs?



goal for international admissions officers is to show the impact of the work that they do to bring in students who will add to the quality, diversity, and financial bottom line of the university.

International recruiters must justify the return on investment for travel costs, which is often the second biggest line item behind personnel in their office. Kacenga says the financial piece “gets all of the attention,” but he has historically used the information he has collected to examine the overarching role of an international office.

“Data helps you identify other areas of need and provides the spine for how to move forward,” says Kacenga. “Part of my role is to figure out what we need to know to be a step ahead as much as possible in our recruiting efforts. Another part of my job is to translate the data so that it’s more accessible and framed in a manner that different stakeholders can understand and embrace.”

Nandan says staff must be properly trained and know what they are looking for as they analyze data. The timing of the data collection and the intended audience for the research can skew results in a way that does not make it effective, he believes.

From Holistic to Granular

Sarah Noppen, director of graduation and international admissions and recruitment services at Florida International University (FIU), says she starts with “global data” about student interests and “uses that to inform the bigger decisions about how to go, where to go, and why to go” to various countries to recruit.

In the more than four years that Noppen has worked at FIU, the university has set up a centralized international admissions program that serves both undergraduate and graduate students, the majority of whom come from the Caribbean, Latin America, and South America. FIU uses Salesforce, PeopleSoft, and Plantation software

From the Field: How Data Can Help

Speak with any international admissions officials about how they use data, and they are quick to show how the data have supported a strategy or dispelled a belief that was based on anecdote rather than fact.

At the **University of Colorado-Denver**, George Kacenga was working on a cost comparison to recruit international versus U.S.-born students. The belief was that the cost would be much more for international students, but Kacenga says the data told a different story.

“It was much, much less than I expected it to be, especially once you factor the tuition costs for an overseas student because the return is so much higher. It just strengthened my case for more investment in recruiting,” says Kacenga, who now serves as the executive director of global engagement at Purdue University-Northwest.

At **Concordia College** in Minnesota, Matthew Beatty uses all types of data to illustrate “the impact we’re having on institutional revenue.” Working at a small college, where the international student body represents only 3 to 13 percent of incoming students annually, he says having an intimate knowledge of the numbers and what they mean is essential.

“In an era where resources are scarce, and we’re all facing stiff competition, you have to be able to show the impact your department is having on the bottom line, and the best way to do that is with solid data,” he says. “It takes energy and time, and people who are not as familiar with the process of gathering and analyzing data may feel a little intimidated by it, but it really is critical to what you’re trying to do.”

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—Matthew Beatty, Concordia College



At University of Colorado-Denver, data informed the institution’s investment in international student recruitment.

Photo courtesy: University of Colorado-Denver

for its data gathering and sales efforts, along with Excel spreadsheets and Tableau software to track its 3,000 international students.

Like others with such programs, Noppen uses the dashboards and historic data on enrollment and admissions that can be updated at any time, giving a “holistic, university-wide look at what we are doing.”

“It allows us to see exactly what is happening and draw conclusions from that, compared to the previous year,” Noppen says. “We also can look at where our students are coming from and pull data that shows how our recruitment efforts are making [a difference]. Are we seeing students convert contact into admissions? Are our emails effective? Are there other issues? Are there other things going on that we can’t control?”

Noppen says it was questions like these that led to the creation of a centralized international admissions department, with additional staff to improve the speed of inquiries from prospective applicants. “By knowing and understanding what this information means,” she says, “we’ve been doing a lot of little things that have made a huge impact,” she says.

The takeaway from this transitional period: “If you’re going out and spending a lot of money to recruit students, that’s great,” Noppen says. “But if you find that students can’t navigate your process and you can’t meet their needs, or be accessible to them, you’re going to be your own worst nightmare.”

A common problem Nandan sees is universities purchasing data “from the same sources and send[ing] it to the same students again and again and again.” His firm’s research shows prospective international students receive more than two dozen emails before they are even ready to apply to college—an ineffective method of communication.

“Students completely ignore emails, and they’re leaving Facebook behind,” he says, noting that the number of teens using the social networking behemoth dropped 20 percent in 2017–18. “So, the expense is less, but how effective is the communication? What are the chances that you’ll get something out of that? Someone needs to analyze that before jumping on to every low-cost communication channel that comes up. We need to be adding value to the student when they need that information and through the channel or medium they prefer.”

Dealing with Outdated Technology

Expensive CRM tools, while commonly used in admissions departments at many institutions, aren’t necessarily critical to data collection and analysis. Though useful, many CRMs can quickly outlive their shelf life.

Michigan State University, where approximately 12 percent of the undergraduate enrollment is international students, is replacing its student information management system of 25 years. Patty Croom, director of international undergraduate admissions, says the old system “did some good things,” but did not provide the breadth and depth of information needed in a competitive environment.

“You don’t need the perfect system, although it certainly can help, because we’ve built some great things around the limitations of our current CRM,” Croom says. “A lot of what you do depends on how the data you’re gathering is defined and what you want to do with it, rather than the system itself.”

Working with the old system and supplementing it with tools such as Google forms and SurveyMonkey, Croom’s department developed in-house reports that included “fairly basic” information about students’ test scores, interests, and prospective majors. Both platforms provide minimal levels of analysis, and data can be downloaded into Excel and mined further to gain insights.

“So much of our data is looking backwards or where we are currently,” Croom says. “That’s the hardest thing, especially when you’re trying to make decisions about new and emerging markets. Market intelligence is not all data-driven

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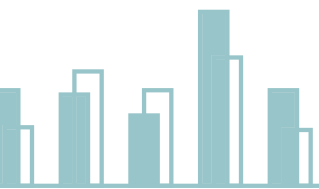
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because policies and what is happening in various countries has an effect on recruiting as well, but you need to know as much as possible in real-time as you can.”

Political and policy changes in two particular countries—Saudi Arabia and Vietnam—have caused a decline in international enrollment at South Puget Sound Community College, says Amy Van Surksum, associate dean of international student services. The two-year transfer school in Washington state serves 100 international students from 26 countries, with a focus on intensive English programs. But while overall international student enrollment has decreased, says Van Surksum, “the number of countries represented has diversified. That puts pressure on us to gather even more data, so we can backfill and bring our enrollment back up.”



South Puget Sound Community College in Olympia, Washington, uses data in a targeted way to increase international student enrollment to previous numbers.

Van Surksum uses data from a variety of sources—including IIE’s *Open Doors* annual report and higher education news sources—as well as a new CRM that is being rolled out slowly. “With the addition of the CRM, we can now select the type of data we want to collect and become more targeted in our approach,” she says.

Using Data to Change Culture

Nandan believes that any CRM can do what a university needs as long as it is “a decent tool,” but personnel constraints on recruiting and enrollment offices remains the chief reason why active data analysis is not occurring at the rate that it should.

“You’ve got a two- or three-person office responsible for engaging with markets, traveling, and analyzing data for strategy, so it’s being done at the macro level,” he says. “You can have all of the tools in the world and all these communications channels that have become inexpensive, but if you don’t have smart people doing

the work strategically, chances are you may hurt your own brand.”

Croom agrees with Nandan’s assessment. “If you are just looking at return on investment, then you go to where the numbers are, like China, where we get lots and lots of applications,” she says. “But if you want to have students from places like Africa or Central America, then the data will show you have to invest more. At that point, it becomes about your institutional culture.”

Changing that culture—both in the approach to international recruitment and the financial resources allocated to do so—remains a challenge, especially at smaller institutions where decisions have traditionally been made based on past history and gut feelings about emerging markets.

Matthew Beatty, director of international admissions at the 2,200-student Concordia College in Minnesota, worked extensively with data in his previous position at Indiana University’s Bloomington campus. At Concordia, Beatty uses data collected through Salesforce software to develop point-in-time reports about applications and student interest levels to project where his department is heading. That information is used to recruit relevant faculty and staff members to participate in the enrollment process, starting with online interviews with prospective students through to registration and orientation.

“The challenge is that most folks internally are used to talking about numbers in a certain way—the number of deposits, the discount rate, how much an international student would bring or not bring to campus,” he says. “And a lot of schools don’t have a clear target number of international students expected, or the number of dollars and cents they should ask to put toward the bottom line.”

Beatty uses the data he gathers—number of students and countries visited, amount invested in marketing, and the success of print and online advertising, among other metrics—and develops executive summaries on any new initiative he proposes.

“I believe a fair amount of education needs to happen about the type of work we do,” says Beatty. “The window of time to do accurate research and development is relatively tight, and in international recruitment and admissions it’s even tighter. The life cycle of international students is prolonged by some of the other requirements they have to come and study in the United States, so that’s why it’s so critical to have good data from the beginning.” ■

GLENN COOK is a writer and photographer based in Alexandria, Virginia.