



# Recruiting the Nontraditional Student:

Building a modern-day infrastructure  
that both creates and captures demand

By Tracy Kreikemeier  
Executive Vice President, Thruline Marketing

**Key takeaways include:**

- **How a landscape that presents ever-increasing challenges to nontraditional student recruitment also presents education marketers with abundant opportunities.**
- **Why creating demand is as important as capturing it.**
- **How three building blocks, in particular, are the foundation of a solid infrastructure for today's savvy education marketer.**

**M**arketing to the nontraditional college student has rarely presented education marketers with a more complex set of challenges.

Nontraditional students today make up the largest and fastest-growing segment of the postsecondary student population. This is a diverse lot, comprised of older adults, part-time students, online learners and a host of other subsegments. Clearly, this group is immune to a one-size-fits-all marketing strategy.

Complicating the recruitment picture are overarching issues, such as flat overall enrollment growth and pressure on colleges to reverse the trajectory of tuition rates, not to mention disquieting public discussions about the practical value of higher education. Perhaps the most significant complicating factors for marketers are blinding-speed technological advances and their impact on consumer attitudes and behaviors.

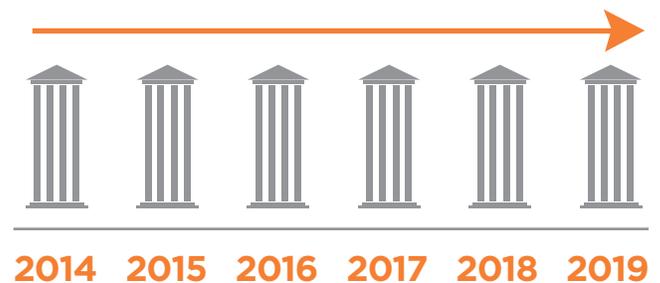
There's good news, however. The technological innovations that have shifted the power balance in favor of consumers also offer education marketers powerful tools for developing marketing strategies that can both create and capture demand – critical, interrelated capabilities for the modern environment. We will examine key building blocks for constructing such a strategy.

# An amorphous target

According to forecasts of The Parthenon Group, overall four-year, not-for-profit enrollment will be flat for the foreseeable future. Through 2019 at least, enrollment is projected to hover just above 8 million.

The nontraditional student segment is a different story. Over time, this population has blossomed into higher education's largest target audience, and it continues to expand, providing institutions with a significant opportunity for growth. National Center for Education Statistics' data have indicated that more than 70 percent of college students might be identified as "nontraditional." That is, they are not among the full-time, standard-age (17- to 22-year-old) students enrolled in four-year or nonprofit colleges.

overall four-year, not-for-profit enrollment will be flat for the foreseeable future



A largely unaddressed issue in higher education, according to the national nonprofit organization Complete College America (CCA), is the “college completion challenge.” As more students enroll unprepared and pressed by the demands of jobs, mortgages and families, graduation rates are suffering.

As more students enroll unprepared and pressed by the demands of jobs, mortgages and families, graduation rates are suffering.

“For part-timers, results are tragic ... ” says CCA. The organization reports that the completion rate is 12.2 percent for part-time students earning a one-year certificate within two years, 7.8 percent for part-timers earning a two-year Associate degree within four years, and 24.3 percent for those earning a Bachelor’s degree within eight years. By comparison, the graduation rate for full-time students pursuing four-year Bachelor’s degrees within eight years is 60.6 percent.

Broadly defined, the nontraditional population includes students matching one or more of the following descriptions:

- online and distance learners
- older adults
- single parents
- part-timers
- continuing education students
- mid-career professionals
- delayed enrollees
- occupational certification program students

Why single out this amorphous group for discussion?

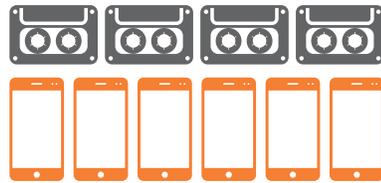
While colleges routinely acknowledge the growth – and growing campus presence – of nontraditional students as well as their importance to overall recruitment goals, our experience at Keypath Education is that many education marketers are slow to retool their strategies and campaigns to target and speak directly, rather than generally and generically, to specific nontraditional student submarkets.

More marketers, we find, are feeling frustrated rather than empowered by the digital age’s proliferation of platforms, channels and potential touch points. Some are giving short shrift to market subsegmentation and failing to customize their messaging, essentially ignoring the fact that the attitudes, objectives and behaviors of nontraditional students and the obstacles they face may differ strikingly from those of the traditional students colleges are accustomed to accommodating.

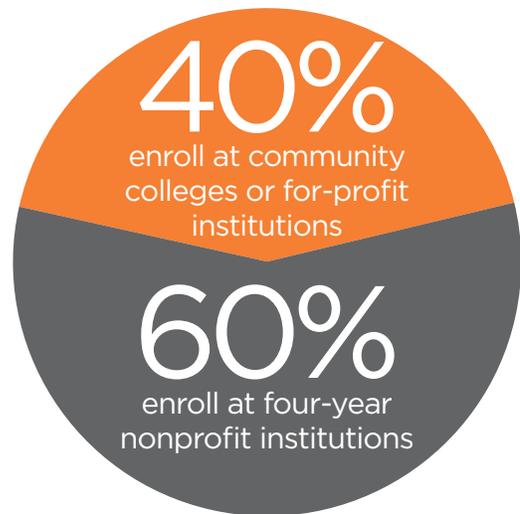
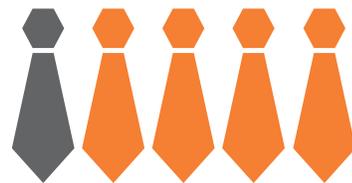
# Today's College Students:

\*Data from the U.S. Department of Education

40%  
are older than 25



Nearly 20%  
work full time



More than  
one-third  
attend school part time

The 2012 Noel-Levitz Adult Student Priorities Survey and the Noel-Levitz Priorities Survey for Online Learners found that among students in a nationwide pool of adult undergraduate and graduate students and online learners, the top factors in their enrollment decisions included convenience, work schedule, flexible pacing for completion, academic reputation, and availability of evening and weekend courses. Obviously, messaging that targets nontraditional students should prominently address these topics. Too often it does not.

Here's a reality that marketers shouldn't brush aside so readily: The winners will be the brands that distinguish themselves and excel at identifying market segments that align with their mission and program offerings and the schools whose recruitment infrastructures - generally and specifically, in regard to the nontraditional student market - best meet the imperatives of the digital age.

# Top factors in enrollment decisions included:



convenience

.....



work schedule

.....



flexible  
pacing for  
completion

.....



academic  
reputation

.....



availability  
of evening  
and  
weekend  
courses

# 1

## Evaluate and build brand equity across all platforms

Your brand is not merely an extension of marketing. It is far more strategic and encompassing. Branding is an expression of the fundamental truths about an organization, product or service as communicated not just through marketing channels but through all points of contact, from signage and promotional campaigns to policies and customer service delivery.

Marketers know all of this, intellectually. Yet marketing professionals often underestimate, ignore or fail to consider how brand experience affects their success.

Customers (prospective students) most certainly base their enrollment decisions on cold, hard facts. They are also influenced – sometimes greatly influenced – by the totality of their experiences, perceptions and emotional connections. Every point of contact with a college, from TV commercials, websites and search collaterals to campus signage and broadcast programming, makes an imprint that contributes to a prospect’s general impressions and feelings. The fruitfulness of a prospect’s email inquiry to an admissions representative, the sights and sounds that linger from a campus tour, the appearance of buildings and grounds, conversations overheard – each bears testimony. An institution’s value and story, therefore, must span time and technologies.

Conscientious education marketers are alert to the broad range of influences – including influences beyond their direct control – that can affect their success. They embrace opportunities to exercise, even expand, their role in building their institution’s brand equity across all platforms, digital and otherwise.



The whole idea is to put the institution’s best foot forward and create positive emotional responses that draw people in and thereby create demand.

Building the brand from the inside out involves strategic and tactical decisions that can create opportunities throughout the entire recruitment funnel ...



## How's my driving?

How is my brand resonating? Is my messaging aligned with my institution's mission and vision? If not, how should it be modified? How well does my messaging connect with the nontraditional student subaudiences the school is targeting? How do the perceptions of others align with how I want my institution to be perceived or positioned? By what means am I inviting, processing and responding to feedback about my brand?

These are excellent points of departure for marketers who are assessing the image and reputation of their institutions and, equally important, trying to maintain brand consistency across multiple platforms.

An experienced educational marketing agency can be invaluable to schools planning a scientific, institution-wide brand audit that thoroughly assesses the relative strengths and weaknesses of the brand and provides a detailed analysis. Yet even a simplified evaluation can help schools understand how well their brand is relating to audiences that are increasingly diverse and media-sophisticated.

Marketers should not be overly emotional about their audit results, including concerns, questions and ideas that float to the surface: Is our messaging relevant to adult learners? Should we develop materials in other languages? Audits present opportunities to weed out what's not working and embrace new inspirations. The whole idea is to put the institution's best foot forward and create positive emotional responses that draw people in and thereby create demand.

Building the brand from the inside out involves strategic and tactical decisions that can create opportunities throughout the entire recruitment funnel – opportunities that institutions otherwise might not realize.

# 2

## Measure and optimize online and offline marketing mix

As consumer search behaviors continue to evolve in response to mushrooming digital options, tracking marketing performance is becoming exponentially more difficult. That's a fact of life. But measure we must. The payoff, to borrow a popular corporate slogan: "What gets measured gets improved."

The modern multimedia landscape confronts education marketers with hard-nosed, unambiguous checkpoints: Do you have a reporting infrastructure in place for measuring the performance of your marketing channels and initiatives? Can you report with confidence that you are not overspending in certain categories while ill-advisedly neglecting others? Do you understand what to measure and how to analyze the feedback? Do you act on your results?

A thoughtful plan and up-to-date measuring tools will provide a feedback loop that continually spews data essential to creating a well-balanced marketing program: spending by channel, lead flow by channel, conversion rates, cross-channel performance and more. Cutting-edge metrics will offer a picture of how each channel is performing and also how productively the channels are interacting. Optimally, a fine-tuned, well-proportioned marketing mix will also support, with equilibrium, efforts to both create and capture demand.

### Don't think. Know.

Time and resources permitting, institutions, themselves, can establish a comprehensive process for gauging marketing program effectiveness. Those who choose to do so should follow some fundamental guidelines:

- Identify your target audiences. Don't be vague. Know exactly which subgroups of nontraditional students represent priority targets.
- Start with measurable marketing goals.
- Know what to measure - develop key performance indicators (KPIs).
- Build reporting capabilities around your established KPIs.
- Assess your analytics capabilities and decide which gaps to fill and how.

Useful, do-it-yourself tools include Google Analytics and free website tools, such as HubSpot Marketing Grader. The assessment toolbox should also include informal interviews and surveys. Asking members of targeted subgroups about their media consumption habits and preferences can yield valuable insight.

The era of haphazard research and apportioning marketing dollars based on traditional spending patterns, gut instincts and off-the-cuff strategies is fading fast. Data rules.

# Don't just know. Act.

Merely tracking search engine rankings and tabulating downloads, web page views, email opens, print ad responses, event registrants and the like is not itself the end game. Truly useful marketing assessments employ a variety of tools and techniques and measure activity across all channels, as well as the relationships between numbers. Marketing analytics can be art and science and predictive.

More is not automatically better. Less is not necessarily a negative. For example, data showing that website visitors are viewing fewer pages could mean they are finding the information they want more quickly and conveniently. Sharp assessments will also account for other factors: adjustments by competitors, changes within the institution, shifts in marketplace dynamics, and the habits and attitudes of targeted market segments.

Marketing analytics should serve as confidence builders, arming professionals to intelligently and resourcefully push forward. An email campaign that once seemed like a no-brainer may, upon keen analysis, metamorphose into an outdoor marketing push that's ideal for a certain subsegment over a prescribed time period.

Knowing which specific tactics deliver ROI and understanding where and what adjustments to make for improving conversion success are positively indispensable. The proof is in holistic marketing analytics. Smart marketers don't make decisions without it.

Marketing analytics should serve as confidence builders, arming professionals to intelligently and resourcefully push forward.



# 3

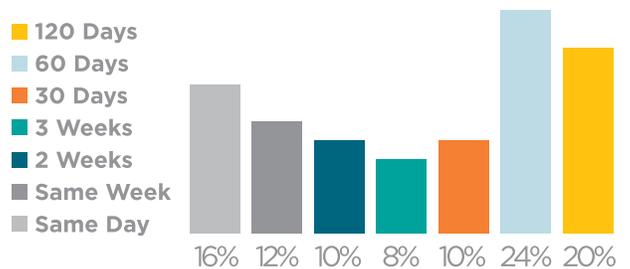
## Develop and enhance search engine marketing strategy to create demand as well as capture it

With data in hand, education marketers can – and should – intelligently shape their search engine marketing strategy to both create and capture demand.

It is understood that for some marketers, the notion of allocating appreciable resources to creating demand is a hard pill to swallow. Compared to the traditional short-term focus on capturing demand by pursuing the most obvious opportunities, the idea of creating demand may seem comparatively less worth the effort. Difficulty quantifying its value and ROI can make demand creation seem peripheral – relevant, of course, but not vital.

Here’s the truth, however: Considering the multidimensional nature of the nontraditional student market and the explosion of marketing channels, search engine marketing that is lopsidedly devoted to capturing demand has inherent shortcomings that put marketers at a clear disadvantage. This approach limits marketers to select audiences. It lacks the capacity to scale out, segment and broaden brand exposure. We know that certain channels directly influence actions taken through other media. For example, online display advertising or

### 72% of education seekers interact with a brand for 2 weeks or more before becoming a lead



Source: Google, Education Trends Through the Eyes of Your Customer, April 2012

banner ads commonly result in a significant lift in website traffic. In fact, a Google Compete P2P Clickstream study showed a 50 percent lift in search behavior and a 45 percent lift in site traffic after exposure to a display ad. In short, a capture-dominated strategy is self-limiting and inhibiting.

By contrast, a master plan that gives equal weight to creating demand is, in today's search landscape, more robust and viable. Such a strategy astutely accounts for the fact that prospective students today have more information available to them than ever. They search longer, explore broadly and evaluate all options. "Seventy-seven percent of education seekers will first visit a school's website at least two weeks – and often two months – before taking action," a recent Google Compete study found. Like never before, marketers have opportunities to expand their reach and publish messaging that connects more personally and meaningfully with their target audiences.

Earlier, we identified issues and factors that influence the enrollment decisions and success rates of nontraditional students – convenience, course availability, graduation challenges, etc. The idea, then, is to aggressively develop cross-channel marketing content that engagingly and interactively addresses these issues with targeted subaudiences.

This is a more dynamic and potentially profitable approach to marketing than simply serving as an information station for consumers who are already familiar with, and predisposed to, a brand.

**“Seventy-seven percent of education seekers will first visit a school’s website at least two weeks – and often two months – before taking action”**

Well-conceived, top-of-the-funnel marketing tactics help brands build affinity and emotional connections. They help to build trust, solve problems, promote positive experiences and establish consumer buy-in, all of which feed brand awareness and consideration.

The ability of websites to serve as communication hubs capable of connecting searchers to a smorgasbord of channels that can provide personalized content and opportunities to interact with brands puts enormous resources at marketers' disposal. In today's environment, there is simply no substitute for marketing strategies that recognize that creating demand is just as valuable as capturing it. And there is every incentive for marketing professionals to break out of the box and embrace this reality when setting and pursuing their goals.

# DID YOU KNOW?

Education seekers are adopting a multi-screen approach to research



desktop

97%



mobile

33%



tablet

21%

and are collecting information from many sources.



school's  
website

75%



search  
engine

70%



aggregators

46%



social  
networks

28%

Source: Google, Education Trends Through the Eyes of Your Customer, April 2012

# Conclusion

Rapid advances in technology and exponential growth in nontraditional student enrollment are creating complex challenges for today's education marketers.

Nontraditional students now make up more than two-thirds of the college student population. They also make up the fastest-growing market segment and are the most diverse. Students are adept, masterful even, at using technology to search broadly and explore all options. Education marketers must become equally savvy.

**Students are adept, masterful even,  
at using technology to search  
broadly and explore all options.**

First, by gaining a more complete understanding of the nontraditional student market and, second, by making effective use of digital-age tools and techniques, discerning marketing professionals can enhance their institution's attractiveness among nontraditional students and boost their own power to engage and convert prospects from this expansive market segment.

# Key takeaways for education marketing professionals:



Accept that, in the modern-day environment, it is critical to both create and capture demand, and the digital age provides extraordinary channels for you to effectively connect with nontraditional students.



Clearly identify the subgroups your institution should target.



Understand your targeted groups' unique challenges, attitudes and goals with an eye toward developing penetrating, pertinent marketing messaging and content.



Audit and invest in your brand's ability to tell a compelling story across all marketing channels and in its ability to create a cohesive brand experience and strong emotional connections with target audiences.



Develop and maintain an up-to-date infrastructure for measuring the effectiveness of marketing programs, individually and interactively, and let analytics guide your push for continual improvement.



Enhance your institution's search engine marketing strategy to fully embrace tactics that build brand awareness, affinity and trust, thus allowing you to both create and capture demand.

#### Sources

1. The Parthenon Group, Evolution of Online in Higher Ed, Reflections from the Field and Implications for Businesses, July 2013
2. National Center for Education Statistics (NCES 2009)
3. 2012 Noel-Levitz, Adult Student Priorities Survey; Noel-Levitz Priorities Survey for Online Learners
4. Complete College America, Time is the Enemy, September 2011
5. Google, Education Trends Through the Eyes of Your Customer, April 2012



913.254.6000 | 15500 W. 113th Street, Suite 200. Lenexa, KS 66219 | [thru-line.com](http://thru-line.com)

Published December 2013