

Graduate admissions disruption and diplomacy

The graduate admissions-graduate school partnership in the age of SEOs, digital recruitment, and funnel expansion

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Case: 2018 Graduate Admissions change at SU

- Spalding: 1800 students (800+ graduate students in 27 programs; 16 grad degrees); private, urban, Catholic R3 doctoral teaching institution; diverse (22% of UG and 22% of Grad students are persons of color—most diverse private institution in KY); metro of 1.2m people
- 2015-2017: Director of Graduate Admissions in Office of Enrollment Management (former Dean of Admissions, 2005-2015)—worked on graduate on-the-ground/in-person student fairs and some back-end admissions computer in-puts (modeled off older UG admissions model)
- Early 2018: Move new Director of Graduate Admissions into the Office of Graduate Education
- Logistical Outcomes (2018): a) move two graduate admissions leaders into the OGE; b) convert job description of both to MTNOTT—focus on funnel expansion and SEO working closer with Marketing Office—look at sales model, targeted outcomes for each program, etc; c) begin to build a data culture in admissions (and other areas—several inter-office data councils started); and d) start targeting programs for growth and conversion to some programs from in-seat to hybrid/fully online

Positives

- More up-to-date graduate admissions process
- Aligning right jobs with right talent (ending UG-centric admissions process)
- Answering GPDs questions and wants
- About the “Process” not initially about “Outcomes” (takes a while and Grad Admissions leaders may not see this)
- Starts to build a new leadership culture (end the pyramidal model and flatten the admissions structure)
- Takes focus off individuals and onto “team” to leverage brain-power, ideas, and wisdom; more people in on the process not just a few Admissions personnel

Negatives

- Politics/egos: Sold as an experiment to increase graduate numbers (leaders from Admissions and senior executives skeptical—but Provost supportive to get Admissions system to be equally focused on grad enrollment—took diplomacy, tact, and patience)
- Resources—required pay increase for one employee (may seem minor but at an R3, a big deal)
- Required collaborative approach from multiple parties (from Enrollment Management/Admissions, HR, others)—not easy in a siloed university
- Took place in the middle of shifting landscapes on campus and higher ed—“a transition within a transition within a transition”

Questions: 10/15 minutes

Break into groups of two or three and discuss 2 of the following:

- What roles do you play in regard to graduate admissions and do you foresee any needed changes regarding funnel management or connections to graduate admissions?
- How might these changes be facilitated and is the sales model a good approach to higher ed grad admissions?
- What are the advantages to having a more centralized graduate admissions operation? What are the disadvantages?
- If your institution is highly decentralized and each unit controls admissions, what ways are you leveraging data collaboration with overall university/college admissions, finance office, and others?

Discussion



Data teams

- Institutional Research Council: Group of 25 or so that reviews new systems and processes that help with institutional research and effectiveness questions/issues—driven by IT/CIO
- Graduate and Online Data Council: Graduate Education and Online Education are in the Graduate Office/School. A group of six meets monthly to assess online student data and graduate student data and how to deal with issues falling through cracks—it hopes to get to graduate admissions process information at some point
- Strategic University enrollment Council: Comprised of Admissions Dean, Undergraduate Dean, Graduate Dean, CIO, Director of UG Education, Graduate Admissions Director to review and create strategy for enrollment growth—2017 to 2019 (now defunct and subsumed under Office of Enrollment Management)

A few keys to graduate admissions

- Build “university-wide process” and get units to abide by “university standards” (Diminnie, 2012, 6)
- Understand the nature of program(s): traditional graduate (full-time/part-time); non-traditional graduate (part-time, cohort based); role and importance of the modality (e.g. online, hybrid, in-seat, weekends, etc.)
- Role of Admissions personnel and partnership with Graduate School and graduate programs in recruitment of students
- Triangular role of Admissions, Graduate School, and Marketing in recruitment of school
- Role of the CFO/VP for Finance and Finance Office in recruitment, growth, and expansion or contraction of graduate programs (affects admissions process)
- Role of OAA and the Provost in triangulating with Graduate School/Office and CFO/VP for Finance in setting tuition prices and budgeting

Blended graduate admissions model

- January 2018: Move from a decentralized (only) model of graduate admissions occurring in each academic unit (with little assistance from the Admissions area) to a more centralized model
- Mid-to-late 2018: Beginning to operationalize funnel management in the Graduate Admissions area (now in the Graduate Office/School)
- Almost all messaging from inquiry to matriculation coordinated by Graduate Admissions Director (working with GPDs)
- Tracking of students via Customer Relationship Management (CRM) software and other outsourced systems
- Slow build on changing culture (“transition within a transition within a transition”—at some point the “transition” must end)

Graduate student enrollment management today: Funnel expansion

- Changes in admissions approach—historically on the programs to find their students
- Cohort building, partnerships, and use of savvy marketing to attract new students (e.g. increased social media presence, Search Engine Optimization, etc.)
- Creation of Data Councils to study the following (we had 3 councils at Spalding that shared responsibility for studying and tinkering with):
 - Data from inquiries, beginning of the application process, completion of the application process, admission, and matriculation. From both total students in the pipeline all the way through the “funnel” to admission
 - Data from total number of students matriculated and studying at any point in time to total credit hours and what the tuition/financial yield is from those credit hours at any point in time

Cons of move toward digital funnel management model

- Cons:
- Took 12-13 months to see growth at sustained levels in many areas (in terms of applications and process)—by February 2019, overall growth of graduate student numbers was slight (+50 students)
- Not enough people working on the transformation of the grad admissions area—Grad Admissions Director and team are overworked
- Finances are always an issue (as they are at small/medium-sized institutions)
- Technology will be a blessing and a curse
- New normal in higher ed appears to be quickening of admissions, financial, technological, and information cycles—what one could wait on for a year now is half of that or less (e.g. recruitment cycles are year round in many programs with multiple entry points every 6-8 weeks—Spalding’s MSBC program having gone fully online and SU’s DNP program). See how these might become pros in a VUCA higher education (next frame)



It's harder to stay on top than it is to
make the climb, Continue to seek
new goals.

— *Pat Summitt* —

AZ QUOTES

Pros of move toward more digital funnel management: **process** building is key

- Put first things first: All eyes on the admissions funnel **PROCESS** (Provost, Dean of Admissions, Grad Dean, CFO, GPDs, etc.) and messaging to prospective students and then onto marketing
- Built the **process** (partially) then in July 2019 sent Grad Admissions team back, out of Grad Office/School, to Enrollment Management area under new Dean of Admissions—by then the process was built and moving—still has tweaks to be worked out (but a lesson in goodwill for success of Admissions Dean)—improved communication
- Ultimately led to increased numbers in most—not all—programs and collaboration in areas that were not anticipated (Grad Admissions weighing in on next set of new Grad programs based on where the market is) and multiple stakeholders meeting weekly now to build the **process**
- Attempting to “simplify” **processes** (to avoid too much complexity) (Clearfield & Tilcsik, 2018)
- Kutz (2017) says to “[embrace] complexity, [reframe] experience, and [leverage] learning” in understanding how areas of the university learn from each other and work together to develop these types of **processes**, systems, and models in the VUCA [volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity] context. See Johansen, 2017, as well.

It's the little details
that are vital. Little
things make big
things happen

COACH JOHN WOODEN



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