



Going to College without Going to Campus: A Case Study of Online Student Recruitment

Justin C. Ortagus¹ · Melvin J. Tanner¹

Published online: 20 October 2018
© Springer Nature B.V. 2018

Abstract

Despite the financial benefits generally associated with expanding student enrollment through online education, many institutions may not know *how* to recruit online students. This case study drew upon interviews with 27 administrators from four public research universities in order to better understand how to recruit students for exclusively online degree programs. Findings revealed that administrators identify the characteristics and needs of prospective online students, outline which non-academic services can be outsourced to alleviate cost burdens, identify ways to leverage the institutional brand as indistinguishable from the individual online program, and prioritize personalized student interactions throughout the online student recruitment process.

Keywords Online education · Student recruitment · Exclusively online degree programs · Higher education administration

The flexibility of online education allows colleges and universities to recruit and enroll students who may not have been able to attend college otherwise (Geith & Vignare, 2008). Although face-to-face courses are limited to students who can physically attend classes on campus at specific times, online education removes time- and geography-based constraints and increases the available pool of potential students. By opening new doors to higher education, online education has become the primary source of enrollment growth in American higher

Justin C. Ortagus is an Assistant Professor of Higher Education Administration & Policy and Director of the Institute of Higher Education at the University of Florida. He received his Ph.D. in Higher Education from Pennsylvania State University. His research typically examines the growing impact of online education and technology in higher education. Email: jortagus@coe.ufl.edu

Melvin J. Tanner is currently a Ph.D. candidate in the Higher Education Administration & Policy program at the University of Florida. He received his Master of Public Administration degree from Florida International University. His research interests include P-20 policy issues, non-traditional student pathways, and organizational decision-making.

✉ Justin C. Ortagus
jortagus@coe.ufl.edu

¹ Higher Education Administration and Policy, University of Florida, Gainesville, FL 32611, USA

education (Sener, 2012) and an important revenue stream for institutions (Cheslock, Ortagus, Umbricht, & Wymore, 2016). Given these dynamics, senior administrators have identified online education as a critical component of the long-term strategy at the majority of colleges and universities (Allen & Seaman, 2014).

Previous researchers have suggested that offering online courses and exclusively online degree programs can create a variety of cost efficiencies (Cheslock et al., 2016; Meyer, 2006) because colleges and universities are able to expand online enrollment without building the physical campus infrastructure required for enrollment growth in face-to-face courses. The financial advantages associated with online education can explain, at least in part, why numerous higher education institutions have outlined public plans to substantially increase their online enrollment. For example, the chancellor of the State University of New York (SUNY) announced in 2014 that SUNY would increase its enrollment by 100,000 students by adding to the number of students enrolled in its exclusively online degree programs (Bakeman, 2014).

Indeed, efforts to increase enrollment through online programs can increase tuition revenue as long as that revenue exceeds the costs associated with developing and delivering the new online programs (Deming, Goldin, Katz, & Yuchtman, 2015). The cost structure of online education, which is related to high fixed costs, low variable costs, and economies of scale, suggests that the financial advantage associated with offering online education is primarily available at larger enrollment levels (Cheslock et al., 2016; Morris, 2008). Online education can be leveraged to increase enrollment numbers while cutting costs by merging many low-enrollment face-to-face courses into fewer high-enrollment online courses (Cheslock et al., 2016; Miller, 2010). Several researchers have provided empirical evidence to show that online education can be offered at a lower cost than similar face-to-face courses (Bowen, Chingos, Lack, & Nygren, 2014; Miller, 2010), but additional work has suggested that centering quality when offering online courses may eliminate many of the cost efficiencies perceived to be associated with the provision of online education (Cheslock et al., 2016).

Despite the benefits associated with expanding student enrollment through online education, many colleges and universities may not know *how* to recruit online students. Because online students require different types of support and services than face-to-face students, institutions may need to employ different strategies and practices to grow enrollment through online education. Historically, the majority of students enrolled in online courses were already enrolled in other face-to-face courses on campus (Palloff & Pratt, 2003; Phipps & Merisotis, 1999), but the notion of expanding enrollment through online education relies upon recruiting students who would not have attended a given institution without enrolling in one of its exclusively online degree programs. The goal of this study was to examine the practices of administrators in order to better understand the strategies associated with student recruitment for exclusively online degree programs. Our research question explored *how* university administrators develop and implement strategies and practices to recruit students for such programs.

Conceptual Framework

The proportion of postsecondary online students has grown steadily over the past decade, with nearly one out of ten college students now enrolling solely in online courses (Ortagus, 2017). Much of the growth in online enrollment appears to be concentrated within public four-year

universities. Roughly 44% of online students in higher education are enrolled at public four-year institutions, and the number of these online students at public four-year institutions is greater than the number of online students within any other sector of higher education (Seaman, Allen, & Seaman, 2018). Public research universities, in particular, have responded to decreases in state funding by diversifying their revenue sources and increasing their commitment to online education (Ortagus & Yang, 2017).

Online students have a different profile of background characteristics than face-to-face students on campus. Specifically, online students enrolled at a given college or university are more likely to be parents, part-time students, married, older, and full-time employees when compared to their face-to-face peers (Jaggars, 2012; Ortagus, 2017). Online students also have different academic needs when compared to face-to-face students who are able to access on-campus services and may not face the same level of time- or location-based constraints as the types of students enrolled in exclusively online degree programs (LeBlanc, 2013).

Rovai and Downey (2010) examined key factors related to the success or failure of exclusively online degree programs and identified effective marketing and recruitment strategies as paramount to the growth and sustainability of any online program. Previous researchers have noted that online student recruitment strategies should align with the institution's strategic vision and be distinctive from competitors in order to stand out in an increasingly crowded marketplace (Bates, 2000; Burnette, 2015). In addition, colleges and universities with a larger share of online students typically charge lower tuition prices than their peer institutions with a lower level of commitment to online education, suggesting that online programs may be lowering their tuition prices as a way to recruit online students (Deming et al., 2015).

Numerous studies have examined recruitment strategies within higher education, but these studies typically focus on face-to-face students. Earlier work examining the student recruitment process in higher education showed that a host of institutional factors play a prominent role in a prospective student's decision to apply to a particular university (DesJardins, Dundar, & Hendel, 1999; Lindsay & Sessoms, 2006; Paulsen, 1990). Reynolds (2007) found that on-campus facilities, such as libraries, were important considerations for students in deciding where to attend college. In addition, Elliott and Healy (2001) examined key factors influencing student recruitment and found that campus climate, campus life, and safety and security were critical to students' decision-making during the recruitment process. Although traditional recruitment methods highlight the on-campus amenities and experiences of students, these methods do not appear to be relevant to the recruitment of online students.

The conceptual framework of this study was guided by Slaughter and Rhoades' (2004) theory of academic capitalism, which focuses on the mechanisms driving higher education institutions to privatize knowledge as a way to generate revenue or engage in entrepreneurial activities rather than serve the public good. The theory of academic capitalism can be applied to explain why institutions respond to external forces by seeking to expand their revenue through market-like behaviors. One specific manifestation of academic capitalism is the development and delivery of online education initiatives. Although revenue may not be the sole motivator for increasing online enrollment, it can be one factor for decisions to recruit online students and expand an institution's relative market share through online education. More specifically, institutions can leverage online offerings to expand the size of their student body and increase the number of degrees offered, creating new revenue streams for academic departments competing with other units on campus for limited funding (Cheslock et al., 2016).

Online education also has the potential to enhance educational outreach and student flexibility by removing time and geography constraints associated with face-to-face education.

This flexibility in how students pursue higher education represents what previous researchers have described as the neoliberal value of individual choice (e.g., Walker, 2014). The notion of revenue-generating or entrepreneurial behavior is not a new development within higher education given that institutions have long embraced initiatives designed to make them become more entrepreneurial by engaging in market-like behaviors (Clark, 2004). Mars and Metcalfe (2009) identified entrepreneurial behaviors within higher education as activities that rely upon a combination of risk, innovation, and opportunity in response to periods of financial uncertainty.

For institutions seeking to diversify their revenue sources through entrepreneurial behaviors, online education “offers the promise of new student markets, increased tuition revenues, revenues from educational products, and enhanced efficiencies in the delivery of education services” (Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004, p. 317). Given the financial promise of online education, the competition for online students has never been greater. This study draws upon the theory of academic capitalism and 27 one-on-one interviews with administrators from four public research universities in order to better understand *how* to navigate an increasingly crowded marketplace for the recruitment of exclusively online students.

The Study

Research Design

For a research question asking *how* an event occurs, a case study methodology is appropriate (Merriam, 2009) because it allows researchers to examine a current phenomenon within its real-life context when “the boundaries between the phenomenon and the context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 1994, p. 13). We used a comparative inquiry involving multiple universities in order to identify the extent to which online recruitment strategies are institutionally situated. In addition, we sought to identify and link recurring patterns and themes within the data to make meaning of our findings and ultimately undergo a process to construct and explain that meaning (Merriam, 2009).

We used an embedded, single-case design with a multi-institution sample, which is analogous to a single experiment with more than one unit of analysis (Yin, 2003). One purpose of this exploratory design approach is to identify potential research questions or procedures to be used in subsequent research (Yin, 2014). We did not seek to describe the process of each site in great detail or attempt to explain a phenomenon in a causal way. Using a constructionist methodology, we acknowledge the value of each administrator’s viewpoint and individual context, regardless of their position in the organizational hierarchy (Charmaz, 2006; Crotty, 1998).

Sample – Institutions and Participants

We focused solely on public research universities for two primary reasons. First, we sought to identify institutions with reputations as leaders in online education, and the vast majority of institutions listed among the “Best Online Programs” in the 2016 edition of *U.S. News & World Report* were public research universities. Second, many public universities face financial pressures to generate alternative revenue sources (Cheslock & Gianneschi, 2008; Cheslock et al., 2016; Jaquette & Curs, 2015; Ortagus & Yang, 2017), and previous researchers have suggested that online instruction can offer financial relief to higher education institutions (Bowen, 2013; Cheslock et al., 2016; Meyer, 2006; Miller, 2010). Although this qualitative

inquiry is not generalizable across higher education institution types, the practices and policies described by our participants may be applicable to similar institutions seeking to increase their enrollment by recruiting and enrolling additional students in their exclusively online degree programs.

Our sample was constructed to allow for the triangulation of data sources. This method encourages researchers to collect information from multiple sources to corroborate themes (Patton, 2002; Yin, 2014). We selected two universities as our primary comparison base, engaging a greater number of those participants through in-depth, exploratory interviews so as to better understand the phenomenon being researched. Using the constant comparison method described below (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), we refined our interview protocol with Pelican University and Sandpiper University so as to corroborate the findings from Canary University and Crane State University.

We selected the persons to be interviewed via purposeful sampling of publicly available documents to identify administrators with key roles related to online education at their individual institutions. Purposeful sampling is a technique that allows for the identification and selection of information-rich cases according to the judgment of the researchers (Patton, 2002). All participants were administrators involved in some capacity with online programs and online student recruitment due to their professional positions. Between February 2017 and May 2017, we interviewed 27 participants from four public research universities, including directors, college deans, associate provosts, a chief information officer, and a former university president. Table 1 provides a complete overview of the sample, including the pseudonyms and professional role for each participant.

We pursued a maximum variation sampling method of administrators to provide a cross-section of perspectives related to our research question (Marshall & Rossman, 2014; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Maximum variation is a heterogeneous sampling method in which a wide range of individuals is purposively selected to exemplify the complexity of the topic area (Creswell, 2002; Sandelowski, 1995). This study explored various administrative contexts while restricting the sample to administrators who were directly involved with strategic initiatives related to online education and the recruitment of online students. For example, program coordinators may draw from their experiences communicating directly with prospective online students, while associate provosts may draw from their experiences making strategic decisions together with other senior leaders. After receiving IRB approval from each university, we contacted administrators through a form email that was personalized for name and title.

Data Collection

We conducted one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with administrators as the main source of data collection. The interviews were conducted via phone, video conferencing, and in-person meetings. Interviews lasted between 30 and 90 minutes and were subsequently transcribed verbatim. The variation in interview length allowed for several prolonged interviews in which key participants acted as informants to provide additional contextualization to our study (Yin, 2014). Case studies typically include observation and document analysis. Prior to the interviews, we had reviewed online program websites, yearly progress reports, and marketing materials published by the universities in order to inform the interview script and ultimately triangulate the interview findings. The interview protocol we used was designed to yield relevant information about *how* participants developed and implemented institutional approaches to recruit students for exclusively online degree programs. To allow the data to

Table 1 Pseudonyms and professional roles of participants

Name (Pseudonym)	Professional Role	Institution (Pseudonym)
Carol	Associate Provost	Canary University
Cassie	Director of Online Programs	Canary University
Ellie	Director of Enrollment Management	Canary University
Esther	Director of Online Admissions	Canary University
Frank	College Dean	Canary University
Hunter	Director of Online Programs	Canary University
Jeff	College Dean	Canary University
Kevin	Program Coordinator	Canary University
Mike	Director of Online Education	Canary University
Oscar	Program Coordinator	Canary University
Sandra	Director of Student Services	Canary University
Timothy	College Dean	Canary University
Walter	College Dean	Canary University
Will	College Dean	Canary University
Audrey	Director of Student Affairs	Crane State University
Laura	Director of Marketing	Crane State University
Bob	Associate Dean	Crane State University
Chris	Director of Online Programs	Crane State University
Ivan	Former University President	Crane State University
Lucas	Director of Online Programs	Crane State University
Marcus	Vice Provost	Crane State University
Patty	Assistant Vice Provost	Crane State University
Cliff	Associate Vice President	Pelican University
Hugo	Chief Information Officer	Pelican University
Carl	Director of Student Services	Sandpiper University
Larry	College Dean	Sandpiper University
Paula	College Dean	Sandpiper University

drive the conversation, the interviews were intentionally conversational in that follow-up questions varied according to the role and responses of the participants.

Each stage of data analysis was informed by the constant comparative method, which allows researchers to make comparisons between data in similar categories as each new interview is added to the data set until the study reaches theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The first stage of analysis involved the review of interview memos and transcripts to reflect on the effectiveness of the interview script. The second and third stage of analysis was a process of open coding and axial coding, respectively (Saldaña, 2009). Each researcher completed open coding independently before collaborating during the axial coding stage.

Trustworthiness

Strategies for ensuring rigor were built into the research process to ensure reliability and validity. By using the constant comparative method, we moved back and forth between data collection and data analysis. This method ensures that researchers remain responsive to the data and maintain congruence with research design (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson, & Spiers, 2002). By reviewing online materials and using a multi-site design, we used several sources of information to develop converging lines of inquiry and create a triangulation of data so as to increase the accuracy and validity of our findings (Patton, 2002; Yin, 2014). In addition, we ensured trustworthiness through member checks with key personnel with contextual knowledge of online student recruitment and the individual institution.

Limitations

This study is subject to several limitations. Similar to the experiences of other researchers when interviewing higher education administrators describing their own institution, our participants may have given us answers they thought we wanted to hear rather than what they truly believed (McClure, 2016; Renn, 2017). In addition, our sample was imbalanced with the majority of university administrators working at either Canary University or Crane State University. This was due partly to design, as the remaining two universities were chosen primarily for triangulation purposes. Finally, consistent with qualitative research, our findings are not intended to be generalizable and therefore cannot be applied to all types of higher education institutions seeking to expand enrollment by recruiting online students.

Results

We asked the administrators who participated in this case study to outline and explain *how* their institutions recruited exclusively online students. The themes that emerged from our data were expressed across a variety of administrative levels at public research universities currently investing and engaging in student recruitment for exclusively online degree programs. Specifically, the data revealed four primary categories of findings related to how to recruit online students: (1) identify the profile and characteristics of online students, (2) determine when and whether to outsource non-academic services, (3) recognize the role and influence of institutional brand, and (4) prioritize personalized student interactions during the recruitment process.

The Profile and Characteristics of Online Students

The first step in strategically and successfully recruiting students for exclusively online degree programs is to clearly identify whom to recruit. University administrators construct a profile of prospective online students and identify recruitment strategies after their baseline analysis of student demand. Several administrators noted working directly with institutional research professionals in order to gain a clearer, data-driven picture of the type of student who enrolls in online programs at their institution and peer institutions. They also suggested that misperceptions related to student demand could lead to wasted resources and thereby decrease the net revenue generated from the provision of online programs. Walter, a dean, provided an apt description of the profile and characteristics of online students at Canary University:

The nature of the students for an on-campus and an online program are radically different [at Canary University]. And there is almost no overlap. It's not that we're after the same person at all. We do not have a single international student in our online programs. Almost every person enrolled in our online programs has a full-time job, and they go to school part time. Many of them have families and jobs they just can't leave. It's not practical to move to a small college town and walk away from your life.

Descriptions of the profile of online students appeared to align with the extant literature, which suggests that online students are more likely to be older, U.S. citizens, employed full-time, geographically restricted, attend school part-time, and parents (e.g., Ortagus, 2017). Although participants acknowledged that these characteristics do not convey the background characteristics of all online students, the administrators within our study

acknowledged that a disproportionate number of their online students are what they described as “non-traditional” students. As Will, a college dean, stated, “Generally speaking, nobody has really figured out how to get the first-time-in-college [students], the 18-year olds...if they can get into [a flagship university] or something like [a flagship university], why would they want to do it online?”

By targeting non-traditional students, exclusively online degree programs avoid competing with their institution’s on-campus programs. Mike, a director of online education at Canary University, suggested that exclusively online degree programs should make every effort to avoid “cannibalizing” similar on-campus programs. Administrators at each university in this study offered some variation of that belief system pertaining to student recruitment for exclusively online degree programs. Online education, intended to be complementary and not competitive with the home institution, must therefore target a different student population. Laura, a director of marketing, said that online programs at Crane State University were designed “to bring in incremental adult learners...that [sic] would not otherwise attend the institution.”

Administrators interviewed for this study acknowledged that adult students may face pressures associated with external factors, such as working full time or having children, and it is incumbent upon the institution to offer support and services after recruitment in order to promote success in a given online program. Others referenced additional factors that may preclude face-to-face enrollment but not online enrollment. Larry, a college dean, noted that exclusively online degree programs within his college purposefully recruit students facing geographic constraints, as they “can’t just go down the street for a degree if [they] are living too far away from a major metropolitan area or campus.”

Administrators from Sandpiper University and Crane State University prioritized the recruitment of non-traditional students for their online programs. One college dean from Sandpiper University noted that traditionally aged, first-time-in-college students were not a priority in their online student recruitment efforts: “If they’re a freshman and more traditionally aged, going to community college is probably an easier starting point than doing a fully online degree.” Administrators at Crane State University also noted that traditionally aged, first-time-in-college students may be better suited for the face-to-face experience on campus, suggesting that older, non-traditional students were a better fit for their exclusively online degree programs.

However, administrators at Canary University and Pelican University described traditionally aged, first-time-in-college students as a critical subgroup of prospective online students. Although administrators from Canary University and Pelican University prioritized the recruitment of traditionally aged, first-time-in-college students, the students recruited to enroll in their exclusively online degree programs typically have slightly lower academic profile characteristics, such as standardized test scores and high school grade point averages, than face-to-face students at the same institution. By recruiting exclusively online students with lower academic credentials, Canary University and Pelican University appear to be able to expand access to underserved student populations and increase enrollment numbers through their exclusively online degree programs. For traditionally aged students who may not be able to gain admission to a flagship university if they applied as a face-to-face student, online education can be viewed as a viable alternative during the recruitment process. Cassie, a director of online programs at Canary University, noted the following:

To get into the on-campus program, you basically need a very high GPA and A’s in all of your pre-professional courses. It’s highly competitive. Our online program is a little bit more open access. The admissions requirements for the online program are lower than

the residential program. How you did in your previous coursework might...determine [for] which program you are eligible.

The decision to lower admissions standards for exclusively online degree programs appeared to be a direct response to institutional aims to increase student enrollment. Hugo, a chief information officer at Pelican University, said, “Online education becomes our way of meeting student demand beyond our physical capacity. We’re able to accommodate thousands more students than our brick-and-mortar campus.” Expansion through the recruitment of traditionally aged students who would not be admitted to the university otherwise can also create some challenges because this subgroup of students may be more likely to seek a traditional co-curricular experience. In response to this possibility, several interviewees noted that their university now advertises equal access to campus amenities and co-curricular activities for any online students who choose to live near campus.

Outsourcing Non-Academic Services

According to our participants, a third party is used to recruit online students when the online program does not have the infrastructure, capacity, or willingness to offer the service themselves. The outsourcing of services through third parties typically allows programs or institutions to bridge technological or infrastructure gaps, especially pertaining to data analytics as a way to optimize enrollment or evaluative practices. Will, a college dean, described an increase in enrollment for one of his college’s programs as directly related to their decision to outsource the recruitment of online students: “A program with fair numbers just exploded. They’ve added...200 people almost immediately.” However, other administrators could not look past the high expense associated with outsourcing student recruitment or other academic services. Walter, another college dean, noted: “[Program leaders] brought in different vendors...I would say it was shortsighted; it’s hard to give up half your revenue.” Outsourcing was an essential service to get many of their programs initiated because of the significant start-up costs associated with launching an online degree program, but some administrators viewed the outsourcing of services as less essential after university personnel gained the necessary experience to deliver those services in-house.

Multiple administrators acknowledged that the outsourcing of services related to marketing and recruitment for online degree programs can be mutually beneficial. Larry, a college dean, said, “If there is a partner or a company already doing this work well, reinventing the wheel doesn’t make a lot of sense.” Carl, a director of student services, suggested that his university is in constant communication with third-party vendors to ensure their combined success. “We partner closely with them to make sure they are well-informed of the admissions requirements, all of the internal processes, quality assurances, and evaluations to make sure they are representing us in a positive light.” However, some administrators expressed skepticism, and even discontent, regarding third-party vendors. Walter, a college dean, noted a lack of transparency between third-party vendors and the university, suggesting that third-party vendors “felt that their specific tactics were kind of their business and that they were only accountable for the results they produced. I think that’s fair if the results are spectacular, but they weren’t. If the results aren’t spectacular, then I start to feel like I need to know what you’re doing and how you’re spending the money.”

Outsourcing tasks associated with online student recruitment can allow online degree programs to focus on curricular services as opposed to the logistics associated with marketing

and recruiting prospective students in a competitive marketplace. Cliff, an associate vice president at Pelican University, described the thought process of key decision-makers before deciding whether to hire a third-party vendor to handle marketing and recruitment for their online program.

We looked at [outsourcing], and we evaluated it, but at the end of the day we decided that we've been doing this for many years. We feel like we're experienced, and we've got capacity. We thought that, if we invested in ourselves, as opposed to paying a third party 50% of tuition for 7-10 years...it would have a better long-term payoff. We may not launch as quickly, but the long-term payoff would be much higher than sharing that revenue with somebody else and getting locked into a contract, so we made the internal decision to do it ourselves.

One component of outsourcing that was mentioned repeatedly in the interviews was the use of data analytics. Hunter, a director of online programs, described the importance of allocating resources to make sure each online degree program has online visibility.

In terms of marketing dollars, we have really shifted everything to analytics. Probably over 90% of our marketing budget is spent on analytics because the reality is, in our opinion, if someone, wherever they are, Iowa or wherever, wants to take an online program, they're just going to go to Google and type in 'online program' or 'accredited online program.' For us, [marketing] is just an arms race to stay on the first page of Google.

The level of commitment to partnerships with third-party vendors was not consistent across the universities. For example, administrators at Sandpiper University described some variation of not needing to “reinvent the wheel,” while Canary University administrators noted that using third-party vendors involved cost burdens that were not necessary given the infrastructure already in place at the university. The decision regarding whether or not to outsource online student recruitment services depends largely on the stage of development of the online program. Carl, a director of student services at Sandpiper University, said, “When we started our online program, we did not have the resources or expertise to recruit students on our own. We were not at that stage coming out of the gate.” However, administrators at Canary University noted that the decision to outsource services was not a permanent one given that the financial advantage related to outsourcing may diminish as the online degree programs become more established.

The Role and Influence of Institutional Brand

The construct of “institutional brand” was referenced by administrators when describing the value associated with the tradition, reach, scale, and reputation of their university. For the purpose of this study, we define institutional brand as an abstract symbol of quality or value that differentiates a given institution from its peer (or competitor) institutions. Administrators across universities suggested that their institution's brand represented a significant tool that can be leveraged when recruiting online students, noting that the reputation of their university is larger than the reputation of any individual academic program. The institutional brand signals legitimacy and quality assurance for online programs seeking to attract students. According to Hunter, a director of online programs, the institutional brand of Canary University includes exclusive access to the larger alumni network that will enable students to leverage the connections and resources gained during and after the completion of their online program:

One of the things we really try to sell is that, through the admissions process, we are going to treat you like an individual, but at the same time, you're getting networked into...I think it's silly to say the [Mascot] nation...What it comes down to, like in public health, eventually someone is going to say I want to work in HIV or diabetes or tobacco, and we can leverage our resources to partner you with someone who has that specialty.

In a competitive environment, administrators stressed the importance of identifying any advantage during the online student recruitment process, particularly if the advantage is not associated with any additional costs, such as their already-existing institutional brand. Online programs housed within a highly regarded public research university have the advantage of leveraging the institution's reputation without paying a premium for the affiliation. The importance of institutional brand was repeatedly stressed by administrators in this study, who noted that online students would gain access to the same credential and quality of services offered to face-to-face students. Mike, a director of online education, said, "The longer I do this, the more I realize the value of our brand." Paula, a college dean, suggested that institutional brand can offer some built-in advantages for highly regarded public universities in competition with for-profits and other institutions because "recruitment is self-driven by our rankings and reputation in terms of the quality that we provide."

Numerous administrators identified challenges associated with attempting to increase enrollment by the thousands without diluting their institutional brand. Marcus, a vice provost at Crane State University, said, "There's a real tension between growth and protecting the brand. We want to grow to 45,000 students, but we're not willing to sacrifice the academic core to do so." One way to avoid the appearance of brand dilution is to utilize the same faculty for face-to-face and online programs. Multiple administrators highlighted the importance of this point. Chris, a director of online programs, stated the following:

You can't have one set of faculty teach face-to-face and the other set teaching online. If it turns out that those who teach face-to-face have greater credentials [than those teaching online], there's a symbolic importance to that, even if those credentials don't necessarily reflect higher-quality instruction.

To avoid these complications, administrators prioritize delivering a clear message regarding the quality of instruction to be expected from any prospective online student at their institution. According to Mike, a director of online education, "One of the things that makes [Canary University] successful compared to some other institutions is that we are doing this with the same faculty, the same departments, and the same infrastructure as we do with our residential programs."

Personalized Student Interactions

Interviewees described the importance of personalized interactions during each point of contact when recruiting online students. While references to web pages, automated messages, and form letters may generate cost savings for the university, efforts to engage students on a more personal level make the program seem more inclusive and accessible, which may assuage the prospective student's concerns regarding being "just another number" within a large online degree program. One college dean offered some examples of how high-touch, personalized interactions can improve online student recruitment:

I think it requires personal contact. When admission offers go out, we send handwritten cards from our college welcoming them. I think programs have to reach out [beyond the

form letter]. We've got a student services coordinator or advisor in each of these programs to be the point of contact. I think the successful [online] programs make sure they follow up as fast as they can and hope like hell that the applicant doesn't get too frustrated with the application process.

According to Hunter, a director of online programs, this commitment to personalized responsiveness can allow online programs to distinguish themselves in a crowded and competitive environment:

We haven't found anything that is more effective than just rolling up our sleeves, going old school, and making everything personalized: contacting them, calling them, sending them handwritten letters, and mostly just working on getting to know them and getting to know what they want out of the program....I think personalization has been the thing that we have found to be most effective for conversion rates.

Another director of online programs suggested that the increasingly competitive environment of online education has caused a paradigmatic shift in the online admissions process:

I think the old process was what we would call admissions. Admissions, to me, is where people just send in applications, we review them, and we say yes or no. We have changed that whole mindset now to recruiting...No different than what the athletic programs are doing.

Several administrators noted a similar shift from passive admissions processes to increasingly active online student recruitment strategies that prioritize personalized student interactions at various stages. Walter, a college dean, noted that it's important not to get lost in the details of personalization when recruiting online students, suggesting that the primary task is fairly straightforward: "Online educational programs have to tell a story. And they have to tell a story about why somebody, for whom place is not important anymore, should choose them."

Discussion and Conclusions

This study examined how university administrators develop and implement strategies and practices to recruit exclusively online students. Specifically, we found that administrators identify the characteristics and needs of prospective online students, outline which non-academic services can be outsourced to alleviate cost burdens, identify ways to leverage the institutional brand as indistinguishable from the individual online program, and prioritize personalized student interactions throughout the online student recruitment process. Although Rovai and Downey (2010) provided some insights regarding the role of marketing and recruitment in relation to the success or failure of online programs, the authors offered little context to understand the nuances of how university administrators recruit online students in order to increase their enrollment numbers. Through this study, we offer two primary contributions to scholarship.

First, we showed that one must view the recruitment of online students as distinct from the recruitment of face-to-face students because student recruitment strategies based on campus life and on-campus amenities are largely ineffective for the online student population. Our findings also revealed that institutions seek to increase access and enrollment numbers through exclusively online degree programs by recruiting student populations different from those of similar degree programs offered on campus. Second, we identified and articulated four

emergent themes to demonstrate how administrators can take a proactive approach to online student recruitment as opposed to the relatively passive approaches generally associated with face-to-face student recruitment.

A central finding of this study is the extent to which universities prioritize and promote the value of institutional brand during the online student recruitment process. According to numerous university administrators, their institutional brand is a critical criterion for prospective online students because the legitimacy and quality associated with their university can be leveraged as a tool when recruiting students for exclusively online degree programs. Future research should move beyond institutional factors related to online student recruitment, such as brand, and further explore students' motivations related to the decision to enroll in exclusively online degree programs, particularly among students not facing time or location constraints who have the option to enroll in face-to-face or online degree programs.

The financial advantage of online instruction will be most prevalent at extremely large enrollment levels (Morris, 2008), but large enrollment numbers may come at the expense of high-quality and student-centered pedagogies. Universities seeking to better understand how to recruit online students will need to determine whether increasing their commitment to online education can lower costs without unduly harming the quality of students' learning experiences (Cheslock et al., 2016). Unfortunately, previous studies related to the merit of online education (e.g., Ortagus, 2018; Xu & Jaggars, 2014) have not simultaneously considered the cost and quality of online courses to provide institutions with evidence-based recommendations (Bowen, 2013). For example, higher education institutions can reduce the instructional costs of online education by changing the composition of their faculty to allow tenure-track or tenured faculty to comprise a smaller share of instructional personnel; but the administrators interviewed in this study suggested that such reductions in instructional costs may have detrimental effects on the institutional brand of the university and, as a consequence, their ability to recruit online students. Further research is needed to better understand the extent to which efforts to reduce instructional costs impact the academic outcomes of online students.

The theory of academic capitalism provided us with a lens through which to view and understand the complexities of online student recruitment. The administrators interviewed for this study repeatedly referenced the need to be responsive to market forces when developing their institutional strategies and practices related to online student recruitment. In other words, this multi-institutional case study demonstrates that universities appear to engage in market-like behaviors by identifying their target clientele, outsourcing some tasks that can be completed more efficiently elsewhere, centering the importance of brand affiliation, and personalizing the consumer experience for students. These specific strategies show that online student recruitment as a mechanism to commercialize knowledge and generate additional funding streams is both highly competitive and tightly coupled to external market forces.

For administrators seeking insights regarding how to recruit online students, this case study offers considerable insights, such as the need to center their commitment to high-quality online instruction during the recruitment process. As an example, universities that use the same faculty with the same credentials for their online programs as they do for their face-to-face programs should communicate that information to prospective online students. When one considers the plummeting enrollment numbers of for-profits institutions offering exclusively online degree programs, such as the University of Phoenix (Wiles, 2017), alongside the insights gleaned from university administrators interviewed in this study, the perception of high-quality online offerings appears to be a critical criterion for prospective online students that should be prioritized by any institution seeking to increase enrollment through online education.

References

- Allen, E., & Seaman, J. (2014). Grade change: Tracking online education in the United States. *The Sloan Consortium*. Babson Park, MA: Babson Research Group.
- Bakeman, J. (2014, January 14). SUNY wants to add 100,000 students—All online. *Politico*. Retrieved from <http://www.politico.com/states/new-york/albany/story/2014/01/suny-wants-to-add-100-000-students-all-online-010442>
- Bates, A. W. (2000). *Managing technological change: Strategies for college and university leaders*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Bowen, W. (2013). *Higher education in the digital age*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Bowen, W. G., Chingos, M. M., Lack, K. A., & Nygren, T. I. (2014). Interactive learning online at public universities: Evidence from a six-campus randomized trial. *Journal of Policy Analysis and Management*, 33, 94–111.
- Burnette, D. M. (2015). Negotiating the mine field: Strategies for effective online education administrative leadership in higher education institutions. *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 16(3), 13–25.
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Cheslock, J., & Gianneschi, M. (2008). Replacing state appropriations with alternative revenue sources: The case of voluntary support. *Journal of Higher Education*, 79, 208–229.
- Cheslock, J., Ortagus, J., Umbricht, M., & Wymore, J. (2016). The cost of producing higher education: An exploration of theory, evidence, and institutional policy. In J. Smart (Ed.), *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*, Vol. 31 (pp.349–392). Dordrecht, Netherlands: Springer.
- Clark, B. R. (2004). Delineating the character of the entrepreneurial university. *Higher Education Policy*, 17, 355–370.
- Creswell, J. W. (2002). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.
- Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research: Meaning and perspective in the research process*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Deming, D. J., Goldin, C., Katz, L. F., & Yuchtman, N. (2015). Can online learning bend the higher education cost curve? *The American Economic Review*, 105, 496–501.
- DesJardins, S. L., Dundar, H., & Hendel, D. D. (1999). Modeling the college application decision process in a land-grant university. *Economics of Education Review*, 18(1), 117–132.
- Elliott, K. M., & Healy, M. A. (2001). Key factors influencing student satisfaction related to recruitment and retention. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*, 10(4), 1–11.
- Geith, C., & Vignare, K. (2008). Access to education with online learning and open educational resources: Can they close the gap? *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, 12(1), 105–126.
- Glaser, B. G., & Strauss, A. L. (1967). *The discovery of grounded theory: Strategies for qualitative theory*. Chicago, IL: Aldine.
- Jaggars, S. (2012). Online learning in community colleges. In M. G. Moore (Ed.), *Handbook of distance education* (pp. 594–608). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Jaquette, O., & Curs, B. (2015). Creating the out-of-state university: Do public universities increase nonresident freshman enrollment in response to declining state appropriations? *Research in Higher Education*, 56, 535–565.
- LeBlanc, P. (2013). Disruptive technologies and higher education: Toward the next generation of delivery models. In A. P. Kelly & K. Carey (Eds.), *Stretching the higher education dollar: How innovation can improve access, equity, and affordability* (pp. 163–182). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press.
- Lindsay, R., & Sessoms, E. (2006). Assessment of campus recreation program on student recruitment, retention, and frequency of participation across certain demographic variables. *Recreational Sports Journal*, 30(1), 30–39.
- Mars, M. M., & Metcalfe, A. S. (2009). *The entrepreneurial domains of US higher education (ASHE higher education report, Vol. 34, No. 5)*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Marshall, C., & Rossman, G. B. (2014). *Designing qualitative research* (6th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- McClure, K. R. (2016). Building the innovative and entrepreneurial university: An institutional case study of administrative academic capitalism. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 87, 516–543.
- Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Meyer, K. A. (2006). *Cost-efficiencies of online learning (ASHE higher education report, Vol. 32, no. 1)*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, A. M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Miller, B. (2010). *The course of innovation: Using technology to transform higher education*. Washington DC: Education Sector.
- Morris, D. (2008). Economies of scale and scope in e-learning. *Studies in Higher Education*, 33, 331–343.
- Morse, J. M., Barrett, M., Mayan, M., Olson, K., & Spiers, J. (2002). Verification strategies for establishing reliability and validity in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 1(2), 13–22.

- Ortagus, J. C. (2017). From the periphery to prominence: An examination of the changing profile of online students in American higher education. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 32, 47–57.
- Ortagus, J. C. (2018). National evidence of the impact of first-year online enrollment on postsecondary students' long-term academic outcomes. *Research in Higher Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-018-9495-1>
- Ortagus, J. C., & Yang, L. (2017). An examination of the influence of decreases in state appropriations on online enrollment at public universities. *Research in Higher Education*, 59, 847–865. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11162-017-9490-y>
- Palloff, R. M., & Pratt, K. (2003). *The virtual student: A profile and guide to working with online learners*. San Francisco, CA: John Wiley & Sons.
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Paulsen, M. B. (1990). *College choice: Understanding student enrollment behavior (ASHE-ERIC higher education report, No. 6)*. Washington, DC: The George Washington University.
- Phipps, R., & Merisotis, J. (1999). *What's the difference? A review of contemporary research on the effectiveness of distance learning in higher education*. Washington, DC: Institute for Higher Education Policy.
- Renn, K. A. (2017). The role of women's colleges and universities in providing access to postsecondary education. *The Review of Higher Education*, 41, 91–112.
- Reynolds, G. L. (2007). The impact of facilities on recruitment and retention of students. *New Directions for Institutional Research*, 2007(135), 63–80.
- Rovai, A. P., & Downey, J. R. (2010). Why some distance education programs fail while others succeed in a global environment. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 13(3), 141–147.
- Saldaña, J. (2009). *The coding manual for qualitative researchers*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Sandelowski, M. (1995). Focus on qualitative methods: Sample sizes in qualitative research. *Research in Nursing & Health*, 18, 179–183.
- Seaman, J.E., Allen, E., & Seaman, J. (2018). *Grade increase: Tracking distance education in the United States*. Babson Park, MA: Babson Survey Research Group.
- Sener, J. (2012). *The seven futures of American Education: Improving learning and teaching in a screen-captured world*. North Charleston, SC: CreateSpace.
- Slaughter, S., & Rhoades, G. (2004). *Academic capitalism and the new economy: Markets, state, and higher education*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Walker, J. (2014). Exploring the academic capitalist time regime. In B. Cantwell & I. Kauppinen (Eds.), *Academic capitalism in the age of globalization* (pp. 55–73). Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Wiles, R. (2017, February 6). University of Phoenix parent Apollo education starts new chapter as private firm. *Arizona Republic*. Retrieved from <https://www.azcentral.com/story/money/business/economy/2017/02/06/university-phoenix-parent-apollo-education-starts-new-chapter-private-firm/97553824/>
- Xu, D., & Jaggars, S. S. (2014). Performance gaps between online and face-to-face courses: Differences across types of students and academic subject areas. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 85, 633–659.
- Yin, R. K. (1994). *Case study research: Design and methods*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Yin, R. K. (2003). *Applications of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Yin, R. K. (2014). *Case study research: Design and methods* (5th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.