Selling NIU: Attracting and Retaining High Achieving Students to NIU

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Introduction

Attracting and retaining top students are two of the most pressing issues that colleges and universities face. Between “competing” universities, alternatives to a traditional university setting, and forgoing higher education altogether, public universities face a myriad of issues. This paper will draw parallels of how businesses gain customers and the trend of how universities are similarly recruiting top high school talent.

The term ‘high achieving’ was originally meant to focus on students such as National Merit Scholars. After beginning the research, the focus was then shifted to encompass a larger group of students. Students who qualify for the Honors Program became the main focus for the research, as it seemed a better group on which to focus.

Originally, this research was going to focus on if companies attracted talent in the same way that universities attract talent; it transformed into the realization that high achieving students are much more akin to a highly valued sales prospect (i.e. the ideal customer). The sales cycle was chosen as a vehicle of explanation to draw parallels between how companies attract customers and how universities attract students.

The question, “What happens if the money runs out?” keeps permeating the research question of “How does Northern Illinois University (NIU) compete?” The goal is to find out how NIU can compete aside from financial support alone for students. Declining resources coupled with a declining ‘prospect pool’ makes attracting high achieving students more difficult than ever.

In this paper, the sales cycle will be defined as the following 8 steps:

1. Product Knowledge
Knowing one’s own product is very important; knowing the public’s view of one’s product is perhaps even more important. NIU is a relatively low-cost differentiated focused institution that provides a great value for the money. Knowing NIU’s value proposition is important. A value proposition is a statement of why a customer should buy or use a product or service. Realizing strengths and weaknesses of NIU is also important. These strengths need to be emphasized and played up while the weaknesses must be recognized and combatted (English).

2. Prospecting

At the head of the effort to recruit students is the office of Admissions. The function of the Admissions Office is to continually be recruiting students, some even as far off as two or three years into the future. Important questions for this stage of the sales cycle can include: “How big is the funnel to attract students?” or “What are the rules for admissions reps visiting high schools?”

Prospecting is one of the most important steps in the sales cycle. Prospecting is imagined as a funnel; there will be significantly more students contacted about coming to NIU than there are students that apply than there are students that get accepted. Building a funnel is important to always have enough students that apply year after year.

3. The Approach

The first time a student hears about NIU may be from events at their high school, a story about athletics, a family member or friend that went there, or a myriad of ways. The brand can either be positive or negative, depending on the context. For NIU, how do high achieving students first hear about NIU and what is that message?
Marketing materials, emails, high school visits/partnerships, billboards, radio and TV commercials are just some of the ways that NIU casts its net. Finding out what message is conveyed, as well as how it is received, is important. When dealing with high schools, there are legal issues at play such as the number of times an NIU representative can officially visit a high school.

4. Needs Assessment

Needs assessment is the introductory step in a conversation with a prospect. A company, such as NIU, should have a decent idea of what a prospect (student) is looking for in a product (education). However, as in business, many students are looking for different things. This step requires a high degree of personalization, as a general answer is not the best answer for many of these students with options.

5. Presentation

Presentation is a step that allows a prospect to view the product. In this case, it may be a student visiting campus for an open house or a day for admitted students. This step is extremely important to the sales cycle; it could be the first and only time a prospect is a captive audience fully immersed in the product. This step also requires a high degree of personalization, especially for high achieving students. This is why the Honors Program may have its own specific portion or even a day on its own.

The staff required to host such a day are some of the best brand ambassadors a university can have. These staff members’ jobs are to make sure that students have their questions answered, and essentially to ‘sell NIU’.
6. Objection Handling

Handling objections is when a salesperson answers questions or reassures hesitations that a prospect may have. For students, the most likely objection is the price of education or competing offers from other schools (Chilcutt 2014). Often times, admissions representatives and sometimes even current students field these questions and concerns. This is why the NIU Admissions staff must be well-trained and versed in these same questions, and why they must all know and believe in NIU’s value proposition.

Personalizing these answers and responses to concerns is critical, as it seems to be trending toward being more generalized with FAQ responses and the like. Other concerns that student may have include the following: research opportunities, misconceptions of a university, safety/security, internship and placement, and proximity to home. How a company is able to respond effectively to objections can represent how well they may do in overall sales (recruitment).

7. The Close

Closing the sale of a university education could have several different meanings. It could mean getting students to enroll in classes and sign up for housing at one point in time. This could also change, as some students enroll in multiple universities to have options. Determining at which point a student is “enrolled” could mean all the way up until into the next semester, at which point students have the opportunity to drop out until then. Some students even decide that school is not for them after having been there for a few weeks in the semester. Making this definition is important when tracking sales metrics.
8. Follow Up/Referrals

An often overlooked step in the sales cycle is the follow up and referral step. If a student is undecided, a phone call from a current NIU student could be the difference between NIU and another school entirely. While it is unreasonable to follow up with every single student that was reached out to, a degree of personalization could go a long way for high achieving students.

Current students can be great ambassadors. Inadvertently or purposefully, student can have impacts on their friends and family who may be undecided on where to go to school. People are much more likely to take advice from a friend or family member than a random stranger.

Qualifying Note

In the above eight steps listed, questions/preliminary thoughts about what would be included in that section of results were included. These eight steps represent the full recruiting cycle, from initial contact of high school students all the way up to being an active and engaged students and alumni.

Vocabulary/Terminology

In this paper, vocabulary substitutions and metaphors will be made to illustrate the similarities of student recruitment and the sales cycle of companies. For example, universities are the sellers, students the potential buyers, and the education is the product (service). Much like software as a service (SaaS), higher education is moving more toward being a service than a physical product, becoming education as a service (Craig 2014). The mediums through which education is transmitted has, like much else, have categorically shifted toward being technology-focused.
Review of the Literature

During the Fall 2013 and Spring 2014 semesters, NIU undertook a series of workshops on eight topics related to student career success at NIU (NIU Bold Futures 2014). They were as follows:

- Define and transform the "Huskie Shuffle."
- Create a campus that accommodates and celebrates all seasons of the year
- Ensure every student knows and is known by an academic advisor who is tracking their success
- Transform NIU from a "suitcase" culture into a 7 day/week college experience
- Provide effective and compelling campus connections for non-traditional students
- Ensure the first-year residence hall experience results in student career success
- Imagine ways to address the needs of students who conclude they can't afford to stay
- Place students on a positive career track journey, including mentoring connections with alumni

Out of these workshops, the reviewing team made the following recommendations (NIU Bold Futures 2014). State universities will have to:

1) Find ways to cut tuition costs and increase student persistence towards graduation;
2) Strengthen partnerships with community colleges or create a community college alternative within their educational setting;
3) Balance the student course load with employment needs and financial considerations so that students are able to afford and persist in their education;
4) Redefine the needs of non-traditional students and create services to meet those needs;
5) Build retention programs for international students in order to increase persistence towards graduation.
NIU knows much of what has to be improved for it to continue its tradition of success. The Bold Futures workshops generalized the NIU experience in general for all students. It was a comprehensive approach for all students. This research will pull aspects from these reports, but will hone in on high achieving students.

**Methodology**

This research was a combination study of what NIU is currently doing, as well as what other schools are doing and the overall national university trends that can affect enrollment of high achieving students.

First, NIU was studied. Everything from marketing materials, to admission counselors, to academic programs designed to retain students. These activities were then framed in the context of the sales cycle to break it down and make it easier to determine what is going well for each step as well as areas that could be improved.

Then a few other example schools (i.e. Beloit, Lynn University personalization) as well as outside research (private companies, industry overviews etc.) were examined in an effort to compile useful recommendations for what other ‘companies’ have found to be successful. The final product is a best-practices compilation of what NIU is currently doing, what other schools are doing, and how NIU can continue to compete.

Lastly, the overall trends of higher education were examined. While not specific to NIU, these trends do affect how students choose schools and their thought processes.
Results

Some results were specific to NIU, and others were not. The results were categorized below.

Sales Cycle

1. Product Knowledge

   The NIU value proposition is based on being an affordable, close to home, great return on investment (ROI) option for many kinds of students. NIU’s strengths include an emphasis on career success, financial aid/scholarships available, and cost of attendance. These were pulled from a UCLA study that said the top five factors listed as “very important” students attend a college are: academic reputation (63.8), graduates get good jobs (55.9), student was offered financial assistance (45.6), cost of attendance (43.3), and a visit to campus (41.8%) (Morse 2014).

   Knowing the product (education) is also realizing what the areas of improvement are as well. NIU’s brand has suffered a bit recently, with the connotation of being a commuter school, and maybe not as academically appealing as other schools in the area.

2. Prospecting

   NIU finds students in many of the same ways as other schools do. Many of these lists of students come from such places as the College Board, Cappex, and the ACT/SAT tests (Rollins 2016). This means, however, that NIU recruits in many of the same places as competing universities. This also encapsulates geographical targeting, as NIU is a very regionally based school and most of its students come from Illinois and the surrounding states.

   With the recent partnership of Marketing and Communications, as well as the incorporation of Admissions, the funnel should become larger soon. While more students may
not always be the answer, keeping the funnel full of prospects is crucial in any type of organization.

3. The Approach

The first message the potential students hear is still being determined by the University. NIU did not have a dedicated marketing department until several months ago. Marketing and Communications are working to determine what the best messaging strategy will be going forward (Rollins et al). Marketing and Communications are recent partners that have not been as cohesive as they could have been, so they are working to remedy this.

The first message students hear may come from marketing materials, advertisements, high school visits, or number of other sources. This messaging is not necessarily consistent, but the University is already taking steps to remedy this (Rollins et al).

4. Needs Assessment

The needs assessment is figuring out what a prospect (student) is looking for in a product (education). This specific step requires very specific target market research or a high degree of personalization not currently present.

NIU’s personalization is not where it could be for certain groups of students. High achieving students that have options often times require personalized recruitment efforts, which can get expensive in terms of time and resources. If NIU wants to get into more of a high-achieving student recruiting mindset, it is going to have to invest more money into this personalization. This decision, however, is not going to be an easy one give the current fiscal situation of the university.
Universities such as Lynn and Beloit, smaller, private universities, personalize the experience so much so that they have to turn away students (Kiley 2012). While not the same type of universities as NIU, these schools are examples of how universities have built this type of personalization in recruiting into their university culture. It took time and resources, but these universities are now able to be selective because of a cultural and structural change in how they recruit students (Kiley et al).

5. Presentation

The presentation of the product, or in this case a type of campus visit, is quintessential in getting students to attend a university. Students are two to three times more likely to attend a university if they have visited campus (Furukawa). According to research by UCLA, campus visits were listed as the number 5 reason as to why students chose to go to a given school. Almost 42% of students listed this as an important factor in their decision to go to their given university (Morse et al).

For high achieving students, campus visit could make the difference in where they go to school. These student have options, and often significant offerings from other schools. Being able to elucidate on how NIU has the opportunities they are looking for.

6. Objection Handling

Handing of objections also requires a degree of personalization, as well as a well-trained staff to field questions that a student may have. These objections may range from how NIU stacks up against other universities, to what types of scholarships are offered, to postgraduate work and more. Students, especially those in this target market, will have options. For some
students, price may be an issue, and for some, it may not. This is where NIU’s value proposition becomes valuable. Below are a few non-financial aspects that make NIU an attractive option.

**Research**

NIU is a research-based institution. Opportunities exist to do research from a student’s first day on campus, all the way up to doctoral programs. Research Rookies, Student Engagement Fund, USOAR, and programs such as REU are just some examples. Often times, students will get work directly under well-respected faculty in their field, not just with a graduate assistant. This level of personalization is rare at a university the size of NIU.

**Study Abroad**

The Study Abroad Office works with students to either find an existing program that they would enjoy, or create one for themselves. These could relate to a specific program or just be for cultural enrichment.

**Student Career Success**

One of President Baker’s focuses is on student career success. Industry data shows that students with internships in their respective field are much more likely to get a job in their field after graduation. Having at least one internship during a student’s time at school is critical for career success. The mantra of “every student should have an internship” permeates the efforts of Career Services and many professors who believe it as well.

Overall, being able to counter potential objections is very important. The answers should be personalized to each situation, but similar objections will come up and it is important to have
a well-established base answer that takes care of the question but also relates back to the value proposition.

7. The Close

In this case, the “closing” of the sale would be students enrolling into classes and putting down their housing deposits. An interesting point to bring up would be that many students are now “double-dipping”; they are putting down housing and enrollment deposits down at a few universities so they are buying more time to make a decision. This could be for multiple reasons, but the most common are housing deadlines, FAFSA package dispersing, financial aid offers and packages going out.

In the business world, sales can be closed a number of ways: in person, by phone, and even virtually. Understanding how fickle students can be, it is difficult to determine when a deal of this nature is closed. It could be when a student moves in, finished a semester or year, or even when a student graduates, depending on the metric in question.

8. Follow Up/Referral

An often overlooked step in sales is the follow up/referral step. Following up with students that have visited campus is a step that could be very reassuring to a student who is undecided. This step in personalization could take as little as a few moments, but make a difference in the decision of a student. NIU is currently somewhat doing this, and it would take more time and resources to ramp this up.

Students that are involved on campus are much more likely to stay the full time and graduate from NIU. If engaged as students, future alumni have a much higher likelihood of
becoming donors and staying actively engaged. Currently, NIU’s donor pool is not as high as it could be, so it is important for engaged students to become active alumni.

**General Results:**

Decreasing state revenue will continually prove to be a challenge (Ozan). With the gridlock in Springfield, all publicly funded state universities in Illinois are struggling. This is a problem for all universities, which have banded together to reduce budget cuts to higher education. While likely not going to be permanently gridlocked, the longer that it is, the more effect that it has on where students may choose to go to school (Wolfers 2016).

There has been a national trend of overall declining enrollment. While this is not an NIU specific problem, it still forces NIU to compete with limited resources for a shrinking pool of applicants. Especially during a time of economic duress, NIU is forced to compete on non-monetary grounds as well (Hanover 2014).

The trend of academic capitalism will continue to rise. Academic capitalism monetizes universities by such practices as commercializing research in order to combat lack of state funding/appropriations (Rubins 2007). This practice can lead to strengthened partnerships with the business world. This can also result in the attraction of more students, if it is publicized that corporations may sponsor a university or fund specific research projects.

The question of “Should NIU be increasing focus on these very high achieving students?” came up. NIU serves a very specific population of students. These include many first generation college students. Only about 24% of receive scholarship funding while around 80% of students receive some sort of financial aid, including loans. Many students depend on the financial aid and scholarships, and there is only a limited amount available.
Other useful information about NIU financials (Hardy 2016):

2014-15 $19.9 million awarded in state MAP Grant to 5,589 undergraduate students
2014-15 $29.8 million awarded in federal Pell Grant to 7,201 undergraduate students

This problem had not been as strongly considered. If a university is recruiting high achieving students, a significant amount of money is going to have to be used to do this. This takes money away from students who may need it, as opposed to those being awarded merit-based money to lure them to attend school there (Kopp).

One issue not considered at the beginning of this research was that perhaps NIU should not be focusing in on these high achieving students. A differing perspective was discovered that had not been considered at the beginning of the research. Currently, NIU serves a very needy student population (Hardy 2016). The question becomes: Does NIU have an obligation to serve this population with perhaps a less exclusively high achieving student focus?

Centralization of resources is something that has become a focus for the current and relatively new administration. Previously, and to an extent currently, NIU’s resources are a bit siloed; every college and many departments have separate budgets and pools of money. While much of this comes from alumni and corporate donations, finding out exactly how much money and what resources each college and the university as a whole has it a critical step (University Ventures).

Overall, NIU is on the right track to get where it needs to be. NIU is taking a few strategic steps now that will likely benefit the university for years. Consolidation of resources as well as Program Prioritization may seem a bit brash to some departments and programs that may lose money, but the idea is to improve the university overall.
Conclusions/Recommendations

NIU is currently doing many of the same things as other comparable universities. The question to focus on is how to differentiate? The following conclusions/recommendations were reached from the research on NIU and other schools.

- Personalize the experience- these students have options, much like a valued customer.
- Form relationships with locational based guidance counselors
  - Chicago suburbs seem to be where a majority of NIU students
- Consistent messaging
  - NIU’s value proposition
  - Competitive advantages
  - Marketing/Communications/Admissions need to work collaboratively
- Explore other avenues to find/reach these students
  - Many avenues saturated
  - Personalizing the experience
- Define what type of university NIU should be
  - High achieving state university?
  - University that serves a needy population (as it currently is now)
  - Somewhere in the middle?

NIU needs to determine what type of university that it wants to be going forward. There are pieces in place to go any different number of directions. For example, NIU currently serves a very specific, needy student population- roughly 80% of students receive some form of financial aid (Hardy et al). For many students, a university like NIU is their only option. Conversely
This research did not generate the results that were proposed or expected. The original research question of “How can NIU attract high achieving students?” has become “Should NIU be attracting this many high achieving students?” It is possible that more efforts to attract these students need to be put on hold until NIU can gain some stability from funding.

**Future Research**

Research could be done in the future after some determinations are made of how NIU is going to proceed for the next few years. This research could include the tracking of how high achieving students impact the university as students and then alumni. This research could also include the impact of Program Prioritization.

An NIU specific factor will be Program Prioritization. While not a new concept, NIU is currently undergoing reviews of its academic and administrative programs, and a committee is making recommendations about which of these programs should be enhanced, remain the same, be reduced, undergo transformation, or consider being eliminated.
Appendices

Appendix A
Below are the 23 reasons for choosing a college that students were offered in the latest UCLA survey. They are ranked in descending order, based on which factors students said were "very important" in influencing their final college selection.
1. College has very good academic reputation (63.8 percent)
2. This college's graduates get good jobs (55.9 percent)
3. I was offered financial assistance (45.6 percent)
4. The cost of attending this college (43.3 percent)
5. A visit to this campus (41.8 percent)
6. College has a good reputation for its social activities (40.2 percent)
7. Wanted to go to a college about this size (38.8 percent)
8. College's grads get into top grad/professional schools (32.8 percent)
9. The percentage of students that graduate from this college (30.4 percent)
10. I wanted to live near home (20.1 percent)
11. Information from a website (18.7 percent)
12. Rankings in national magazines (18.2 percent)
13. Parents wanted me to go to this school (15.1 percent)
14. Admitted early decision and/or early action (13.7 percent)
15. Could not afford first choice (13.4 percent)
16. High school counselor advised me (10.3 percent)
17. Not offered aid by first choice (9.5 percent)
18. Athletic department recruited me (8.9 percent)
19. Attracted by the religious affiliation/orientation of college (7.4 percent)
20. My relatives wanted me to come here (6.8 percent)
21. My teacher advised me (6.8 percent)
22. Private college counselor advised me (3.8 percent)
23. Ability to take online courses (3.2 percent)
Appendix B

Anne Hardy, Director of Scholarship Office

“Data for 2014-15 showed that approximately 24% of all students (undergraduate, graduate, and law) received scholarship funding. Total amount of institutional scholarship funding for 2014-15 exceeded $14.7 million. That is a lot of money to help less than a quarter of our students.

As an FYI, 80% of our students receive some form of financial aid (including loans). That demonstrates that we have a needy student population but not enough scholarship dollars to go around. Other information that you may find useful:

- 2014-15 $19.9 million awarded in state MAP Grant to 5,589 undergraduate students
- 2014-15 $29.8 million awarded in federal Pell Grant to 7,201 undergraduate students

I have some data from fall 2015 where students reported how influential their merit scholarship was in determining their decision to come to NIU. The mean value was 6.6 (on a scale of 1-10). That tells me that scholarships are fairly influential but are definitely not the only factor. [Dr. Rollins] would be able to tell you about the significance of other factors (location, program availability, overall cost, etc).”
References


