

# A Framework for Profiling Prospective Students in Higher Education



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## INTRODUCTION

Prospective student acquisition is a prominent issue in higher education marketing. Noel-Levitz (2012) estimated that higher education institutions are losing as high as 75% of the prospects after receiving an inquiry. Another study reported that 80% of the students who decide to apply to a program were influenced by the post-inquiry communications they had received from the higher education institutions (Aarinen, 2012). This chapter attempts to study the underlying concepts from literature and design a framework to extract prospective student profiles and further extend a discussion on how these profiles can be used to address the prospect engagement.

## BACKGROUND

In general, the consumer buying decision-making process consists of five different phases that drive potential shoppers throughout their purchase process. Kotler & Armstrong (2006) defined the five consumer buying decision-making phases as Need Recognition, Information Search, Evaluation of Alternatives, Making a Decision and Post Purchase Behavior. The higher education institutions tackle these consumer buying decision-making phases through the four phases of the admission funnel. The admission funnel primarily consists of the

awareness, inquiry, and application and admissions phases as shown in Figure 1.

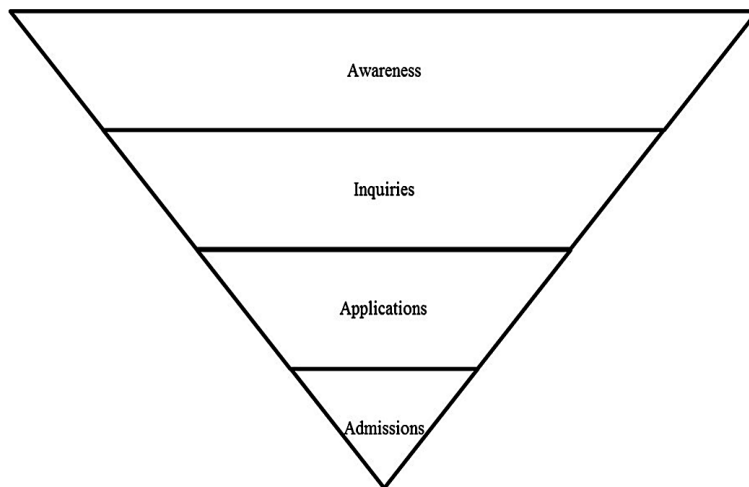
The awareness phase involves different marketing techniques the institutions rely on to reach out to prospects. The awareness phase will address the need recognition and information search phases by providing relevant information on the institutional websites. During the inquiry phase, a prospect tends to look for potential information on the institutional website and makes an inquiry by filling out the inquiry form. The institution responds to those inquiries by sending out different kinds of communications to prospects. These communications play a critical role in helping prospects to make a decision to apply or not.

The inquiry phase primarily targets the evaluation of alternatives and making a decision phases.

In the application phase, the institutions receive an application from the prospect. The cycle ends with the admission phase where the prospect would receive a decision on the application from the Institution.

To better market themselves and increase their student population, higher education institutions are employing different techniques like online (or) pay per click marketing and print media to increase their local and global presence and, social media to increase their social presence as well as brand awareness. Because of this exponentially growing educational market and varying prospective student behavior, institutions are receiving a

*Figure 1. Admission Funnel*



large number of inquiries from prospects about a specific program than the actual enrollments into that program (Hemsley-Brown & Oplatka, 2006; Moogan, 2011; Morris, 2009).

Earlier studies investigated several key decision-making variables of a prospective student (Aarinen, 2012; Moogan, Baron, & Harris, 1999; Moogan, 2011; Schäfer & Kummer, 2013), and some studies investigated the current student demographics to predict prospective student enrollment (Desjardins, 2002; Goenner & Pauls, 2006; Tareef & Balas, 2009). Other research studies developed predictive models using prospective student geo-demographic information collected through the online inquiries and estimated the prospective student enrollment rates (Goenner & Pauls, 2006; Michael, 1990; Morris, 2009). However, most of the online inquiries that educational institutions receive are incomplete, which will eventually provide incorrect predictions (Dupaul, 2010).

Moogan (2011) articulated that due to the lack of awareness about the kind of information a prospective student might be interested in receiving during the decision-making period, many educational institutions are losing potential prospects. The prospects tend to look for information before and after making the inquiry. The information accessed before making an inquiry is considered

as pre-inquiry navigational behavior and the information accessed after making an inquiry is considered as post-inquiry navigational behavior.

In general, profiling can be defined as the recording and analysis of an individual's psychological and behavioral characteristics (Nicoletti, Schiaffino, & Godoy, 2013). Building prospective student profiles is a complex task, as prospects do not usually give away explicit information about their interests (Catherine Bounsaythip, 2001; Srivastava, Cooley, Deshpande, & Tan, 2000). Therefore, the prospective student interests must be mined implicitly from the web server logs. Constructing accurate and comprehensive customer profiles play a key role in target marketing and enhanced customer engagement (Adomavicius & Alexander, 2001; Crossley, Kings, & Scott, 2003; Nicoletti et al., 2013).

Constructing prospective student profiles begin with collecting the prospect's information from various sources like online inquiry forms, campus visits, information brochures, educational fairs and job fairs. From a prospective student perspective, the general educational purchase process can be described in four phases: general interest in higher education, research for a specific institution or program of interest, decision to apply for one or more schools and finally, making a decision to enroll in a specific program (Goenner & Pauls, 2006).

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