

Are your stealth applicants really stealth?

The conversation around stealth applicants has been a consistent topic in higher education enrollment for more than a decade. Have we asked the right questions? Maybe it's time to look at stealth applicants a new way.

Are they really stealth applicants?

Is your institution taking the right steps to track suspects and prospects? Are you capturing all admissible students in your primary and secondary markets via Student Search Service®?

If not, you're setting your institution up for stealth applicants. The good news is that with a few process and search adjustments, you can alleviate most of these challenges.

The real issues that cause stealth applicants

Although many things cause a student to be considered a stealth applicant, three stand out.

1. You missed primary market students in your Search orders, either by errors in targeting or timing, who weren't known to you (but you were known to them).
2. Search names were never tracked as "Suspects," so your data doesn't show the complete picture of who you communicated with during the enrollment cycle.
3. After a while, you consider Search non-responders uninterested and remove them from communication lists. You stop tracking them.

Resolving these three pitfalls lessens the impact of stealth applicants on your enrollment projections. Let's expand on each.

You missed primary market students in your initial Search orders, either by errors in targeting or timing, who weren't known to you (but you were known to them).

To mitigate the impact of unexpected applications on your planning, your orders in Student Search Service should include all admissible students in your primary market. Once you have established your order criteria, continue to "sweep" for admissible students in your primary market year-round. College Board Search loads data 15 times a year. As a result, new students who meet your criteria enter the database constantly. Unless you go back to the database regularly to capture them, you'll be surprised by these students appearing as stealth applicants at best. Worse, these students may not apply at all. Sweep them up by copying your first order. Run it as the data loads (see our Data Load Schedule). You can also set up a standing order where names are delivered automatically.

Expert tip #1

Keep your searches simple and avoid over-filtering. Although it's tempting to include many filters to identify narrow populations, this leads to a perfect-fit student's name not being delivered to you if they didn't respond to criteria you're filtering on.

Expert tip #2

After analyzing last year's stealth applicants, build out as many personas of your stealth applicants as you see in your data. Build or time your new orders to include these students next time.

Request a consultation at cbsearch.collegeboard.org, collegeboardsearch@collegeboard.org or 866-499-5357.

Search names that you licensed were never tracked as “Suspects,” so your data doesn’t show the complete picture of who you communicated with during the enrollment cycle.

Even in 2018, it’s not uncommon for institutions to bypass loading all Search names into their Student Information System or CRM. Load all Search names into your CRM, so you can easily track these “Suspects” through to the matriculation stage. When you do, you’ll likely find students you formerly thought of as “stealth” were in your Search files and received your outreach multiple times.

To make sense of your Suspect data, become expert at tracking and managing your sources. Build segmented reports. A simple report that filters your origin sources into Search, Inquiry, and Stealth categories and tracks the applicant, admit, and matriculation rates of each allows you to understand aggregate conversion rates of each population. Develop a historic baseline by filtering previous years’ data into these categories. You’ll see your stealth percentage shrink, and you can make more targeted projections about the matriculation rates of each origin population.

Expert tip #1

Copy your Source category report. Run it with data from individual origin sources. Compare the data by source to the aggregate data of each category. Which sources are underperforming? Which are stars? Revise strategies or reallocate resources accordingly.

Expert tip #2

If you don’t have a CRM, talk to your IT colleagues about other ways to track your licensed names. Can your Student Information System handle the volume? Can MS Access or Tableau provide the technology to build the report?

After a while, you consider Search nonresponders uninterested and remove them from your communication lists. You stop tracking them.

If you count nonresponders as stealth applicants, reframe how you define nonresponders. Students don’t understand that they need to respond to Search communication. If you look closely,

you’ll see nonresponders email, click, make an @mention, or visit a webpage before they apply. Students become active consumers when they’re ready. Until they are, use available metrics to gauge their likelihood of applying. Adapt your modeling processes to reflect student behavior: Begin with a robust Search pool, track student engagement with your messages, and compare engagement and enrollment patterns to understand the impact or nonimpact of measurable behavior on enrollment. In other words, if you communicated with students, even if it was only outgoing communication, don’t count these students as stealth applicants.

Expert tip #1

Engage your campus’s marketing team and any vendors who deploy communication on your behalf to ensure all measurable engagement is tracked at the student level in your system of record. Use this data to populate your reports and for further, relevant content delivery.

Conclusion

Taking these steps guarantees most students who apply to your institution are in your care to be engaged in the enrollment process. You can track their conversion rates, in the aggregate, in your predictive model throughout the application cycle.

For help making these changes or planning a Search strategy, contact us for a free Search Consultation.

collegeboardsearch@collegeboard.org
866-499-5357

Request a consultation at cbsearch.collegeboard.org, collegeboardsearch@collegeboard.org or 866-499-5357.