Building a Sustainable Sophomore Search Plan

Searching for qualified students is a critical step in the process to build the freshman class your institutions wants. Colleges and universities nationwide and international use College Board Search to find right-fit students, however, only about one-third of institutions are actively recruiting Sophomores. When new students enter the database of nearly 7 million students, they do so in the largest numbers as Sophomores. If your institution isn’t actively recruiting Sophomores, perhaps it’s time to start!

The following is a Q&A with Kristen English, AVP of Admissions at Monmouth College in Illinois regarding their implementation of Sophomore Search

What prevented Monmouth from doing Sophomore Search in past years?

I just joined the Monmouth team last year, but I think what prevented us from searching sophomores in the past are the same things that probably prevent a lot of schools from considering this strategy.

1. It can be challenging to budget for an additional sophomore buy, either by adding more money to what you plan to spend, or shaving off some volume from your junior lists.

2. I think we were also worried that we didn’t have enough to send sophomores via mail, email and other messages.

3. There was also a little bit of apprehension about whether or not students who might express an interest very early will still be interested two years down the road.

4. Finally, to a certain extent, I think it’s about time and priorities. Frankly, it’s hard to think about sophomores when your attention is laser-focused on building junior lists, which itself can be difficult to find time for in the height of financial aid awarding season and with yield just around the corner.

What motivated you to implement a Sophomore search strategy at Monmouth this year?

We saw Sophomore Search as a way to continue to strengthen our inquiry pipeline, especially in key markets. Time flies, and the students who are sophomores now will be juniors in six short months, just in time for us to start gearing up for important fall Open House and high school visit and college fair messaging. We saw Sophomore Search as an opportunity to increase our visibly at specific high schools and in specific geographic markets sooner, and we wanted to capitalize on that. Our goal is to ultimately give our Admissions Counselors the strongest, most high-affinity
pool of seniors to work with beginning each August. I think Sophomore Search helps us get a jump on that, with more time to adjust if necessary.

What did you send Sophomores?

We included sophomores in the same search messaging we use for juniors, though we are measuring responsiveness separately. In my experience at other institutions before Monmouth, sophomores often respond at slightly higher rates than juniors in search, perhaps because they aren’t quite so inundated with messages. Once they become responders, sophomores will get similar messages as juniors—visit event invitations, high school visit and college fair promotion, general branding pieces.

How did you budget for adding Sophomore Search names?

We saw adding sophomores to our search strategy as important enough that we were able to carve out some dollars from our existing search budget. We are also trying to being more strategic with our junior and senior level searches by focusing our searches more surgically in out-of-state markets especially. That can help control volume, which then creates some space to layer in sophomores.

We also took into consideration that a shift to including sophomores would likely cost us more in year one, but probably wouldn’t be a significant increase cost-wise in the long term, since in most cases we’re licensing names we would have eventually paid for anyway, we’re just getting them sooner. We expect in the markets where we bought sophomores this year the volumes of our lists next year for juniors will be slightly lower, since the names we received will be de-duplicated from future orders.

Were you concerned about getting students into your pipeline too soon?

Yes and no. Like most Admission AVP’s…I’m concerned at least a little bit about basically everything! 😊 Ultimately I think the benefits of strengthening an inquiry pool for a given class far outweigh any potential risks of losing students’ attention sooner than you’d like.

What kind of advice would you give an enrollment leader who is looking to start doing Sophomore Search at their institution?

I would start with a comprehensive analysis of the inquiry pool for each of the last several class years, as well as an audit of previous search strategies. How have the lists you’ve been licensing been performing? By geographic market, by source, by class year? Is there opportunity to cut back anywhere and reallocate, perhaps by narrowing geographic criteria outside your primary markets especially? If you were going to pick up sophomores, which markets make the most sense? Primary, Secondary, and/or Tertiary?

Budget allocation can be tricky, and it really depends on each institution and the resources enrollment managers have to work with. The imperative is meeting enrollment goals. If I needed to ask for additional budget dollars, I would focus on making a case that strengthening inquiry pipelines in a measured and strategic way is critical to putting us in the best possible position to meet enrollment goals.

What kind of results can you share from your use of Sophomore Search?

Since we just began including sophomores in our search strategy at Monmouth, you’ll have to ask me in another eighteen months! However, I have had success with this strategy at other institutions in the past, especially in feeder markets.

Conclusion

Meeting enrollment goals is a challenge for nearly every institution. Whether your institution is large or small, public or private, you have a series of challenges to overcome each year. Implementing Search best practices, such as licensing Sophomore names can help get you on the path to meeting your enrollment goals.

For a partner in planning the implementation of Sophomore Search or for help with your Search strategy, please contact us for a free Search Consultation.

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