5

Roadblocks That Could Be Holding Back Your Online Enrollment Growth

ABOUT ARCHER

THE HIGHER EDUCATION LANDSCAPE IS CONSTANTLY CHANGING

Yet two things seem to hold true: Sustainable enrollment growth is a necessity and student recruitment is becoming more competitive. To stay relevant, Colleges & Universities have to figure out how to provide a valuable education, deliver it in multiple, flexible formats, while providing student support and continuing to attract and retain the right students — ALL with limited time and resources.

You need to make your resources work smarter, not harder. And we're here to help. **Archer Education was founded on the belief that enrollment marketing and recruitment could be smarter and more effective** — and that schools should be able to focus on their core competencies instead of worrying about how to reach, enroll and retain right-fit students.

At our core, we're a team of proven Higher Education marketing experts that love solving challenging problems and we're on a mission: to redefine enrollment marketing and recruitment. By leveraging technology, analytics and strategy, we help colleges and universities recruit, enroll and retain the next generation of learners.

WHAT'S INSIDE ...

INTRODUCTION
How Online Education Can Stimulate Institutional Growth

Across higher education, online programs continue to experience growth for colleges and universities, while overall enrollment declines. There are a variety of reasons for this, but one powerful driver of this evolution is that the student demographic in and of itself is changing; and today's students are drawn towards the myriad of benefits that come with this learning format.

As evidence, while overall postsecondary enrollment fell in 2017, in the same time the proportion of students enrolled exclusively online grew from 14.7% to 15.4%. And with a third of all students now taking at least one course online, it's no wonder that Ivy League schools, like Harvard and Dartmouth, and smaller, more specialized institutions alike are developing and launching online programs to cater to their students needs' while also providing an avenue for enrollment growth.
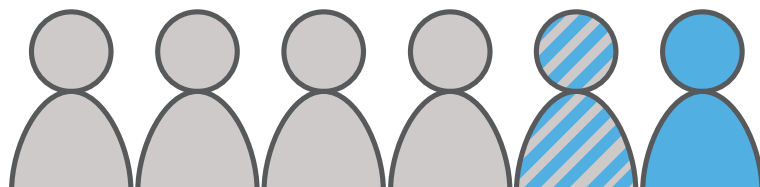
Approximately one in six students take online classes exclusively, and one third take at least one course online.

 But in order to create the right kind of online programs, it's first important to understand the student population that is drawn to them. According to the Lumina Foundation, 38% of today's college students are older than 25, 24% are raising children, and 49% are financially supporting themselves. This means that today's education "customer" is much more discerning and wants to understand the value of any degree they're pursuing. But it also means that, for this changing student population, the right online program might be the only realistic path to higher education. It is no surprise, then, that 79% of online students and 76% of alumni think that online education is "better than" or "equal to" on-campus education, while 57% of schools report that their graduates' employers feel similarly.

For institutions, online programs offer the potential to substantially and

sustainably grow enrollment--but only if institutions can actually deliver high quality education online. This means doing everything from creating course design and delivery methods, learning management systems, and streamlining technology integration. And while it's extremely important to get all these details right in order to deliver the kind of first-rate academic experience discerning students expect, institutions may lose sight of another important factor in creating these online programs: building sustainable enrollments through marketing.

Since growing enrollment is often one of the top reasons to launch online programs in the first place, it is crucial to have a strategic marketing plan in place to accomplish that goal. **The reality is that recruiting students for online programs requires a different approach than recruiting traditional students for campus-based learning.** It can be hard to un-learn old strategies, but the sooner institutions can get out of their own way, the sooner their programs can achieve substantial and sustainable growth. Here at Archer, we have identified 5 common roadblocks that often hold institutions back from achieving their full potential for enrollment growth in online programs. Eliminate these, and you'll be well on your way to maximizing online program enrollment!

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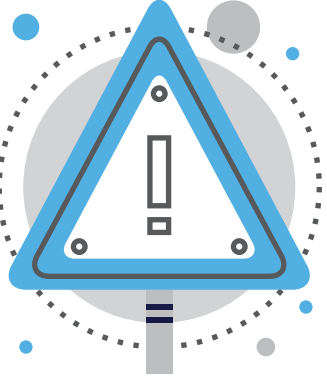
Roadblock 1

Having unrealistic expectations about what it takes to grow.

Across an institution, different parties can have varying expectations about what growth and success look like. So before going down the road of establishing an online program, it is crucial to ensure that all stakeholders are aligned around not only what the end goal is, but what it will take to get there.

The reality is that when investing for real, long-term growth in an online program, an incremental or cost-savings approach simply won't work. Instead, to achieve maximum results, it is best to have a return-on-investment (ROI) strategy with targets for enrollment volume, tuition revenue, and/or cost per enrollment.

The first step, then, is to get institutional buy-in. Do this by setting specific goals like a percentage of growth or enrollment number by program. Then form a detailed accounting of what each marketing dollar buys, along with the tradeoff for underivesting. This way, everyone can understand what is realistically needed to achieve success. If the cost turns out to be too high, or the ROI too low, the institution can save time and money by not launching the program at all.

> " ... it is crucial to ensure that all stakeholders are on the same page about not only what the end goal is, but what it will take to get there."

	Initial Investment	Additional Investment	Total Investment
Students/Enrollment	150	100	250
Lifetime Value/Credit Hour	36	36	36
Retention (85%)	30.6	30.6	30.6
Total Credit Hours	4590	3060	7650
Cost per credit Hour	$450	$450	$450
Revenue	$2,065,500	$1,377,000	$3,442,500
Rev per Student	$13,770	$13,770	$13,770
Marketing Costs	$400,000	$400,000	$800,000
Cost per Enroll	$2,667	$4,000	$3,200
Marketing ROI	$1,665,500	$977,000	$2,645,000

For example, in the model above, the institution has set a goal of achieving 67% growth by growing enrollment from 150 to 250 students. For simplicity, we'll assume no additional costs other than marketing. The first column represents a situation where marketing has been optimized by capturing the low-hanging fruit and monopolizing brand traffic. Column two shows that the next 100 enrollments will cost more than the first 150, meaning that the growth comes with a real cost. However, the final column illustrates that, even with that additional cost, this plan still provides additional positive marketing ROI.

Roadblock 2
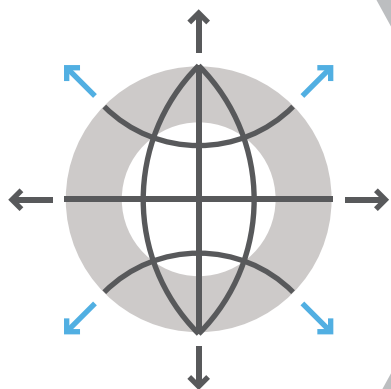
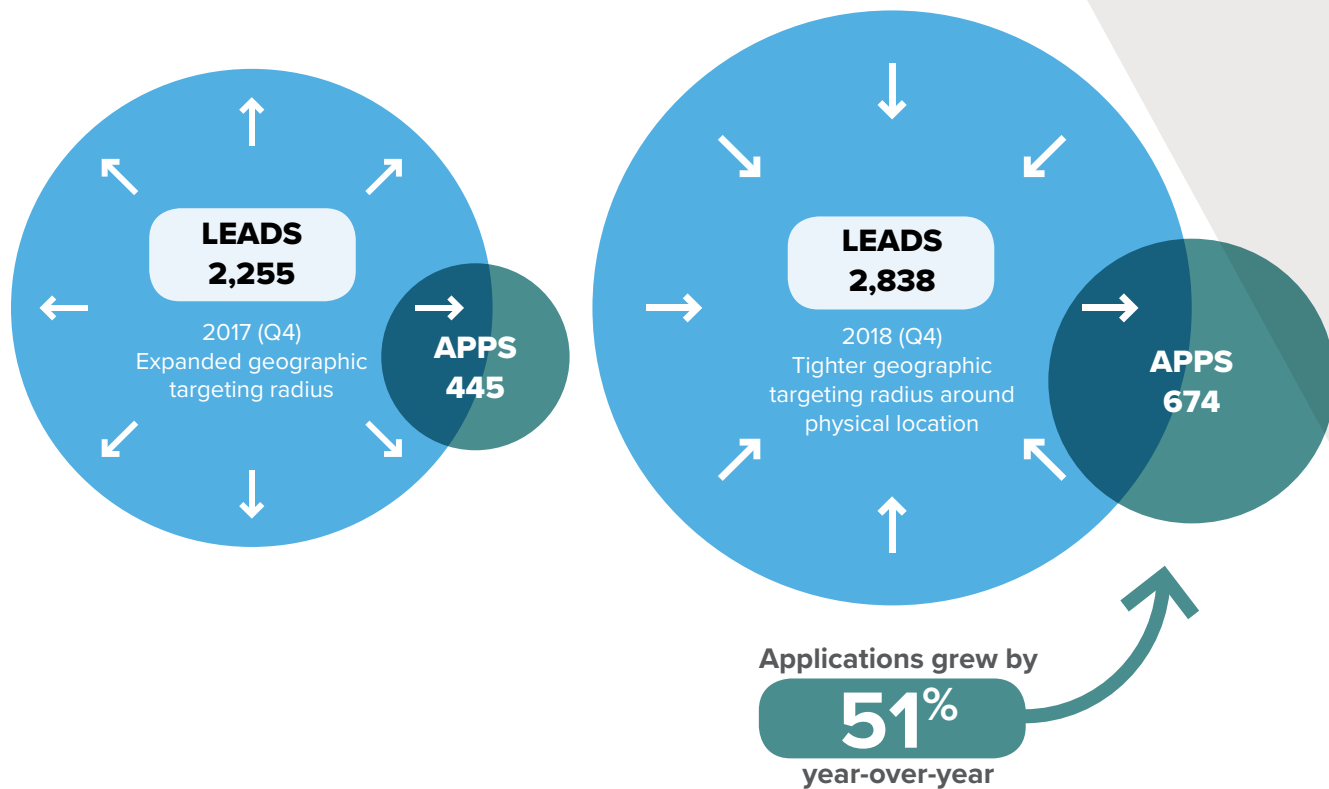## Expanding your geographic reach too far, too soon.

Just as with on-campus programs, it is crucial to consider the demographic data that makes up the profile of a prospective student for an online program. By their very nature, online programs are accessible anywhere, so it's only logical to assume that the geographical radius of prospective students immediately expands to a national or even worldwide market.

Online programs definitely allow institutions to expand their recruiting reach further than with on-campus programming. However, historical data shows that the most effective way for online programs to achieve enrollment growth is not by immediately expanding to generate a higher volume of inquiries, but by targeting the right population of students.

And what is the right population of students? According to Forbes, 78% of online students enroll at a school with a campus within 100 miles. So while a national, brute-force strategy might generate more inquiries on the whole, focusing on the students who might be more likely to attend, in this case a student within 100 miles of the institution's campus, will likely lead to better conversion rates and cost-per-enrollment.

On top of that, it's hard for an institution to compete outside its own market without spending a fortune: national brands have multi-million dollar budgets, and other local institutions have name-recognition and physical resources that a more distant institution can't offer without investing in brick and mortar support facilities. Diving in to all of this competition right off the bat is simply not a cost effective approach.

Institutions should focus their initial investment on their primary market, which is different depending on location; an institution in a major metro area will likely have a smaller reach (in terms of geographic radius) than one in a more rural location. Time and again, we have seen that re-allocating marketing funds from contiguous or out-of-state markets to the local market actually improves conversion rates.

LEADS
2,255

2017 (Q4)
Expanded geographic
targeting radius

APPS
445

LEADS
2,838

2018 (Q4)
Tighter geographic
targeting radius around
physical location

APPS
674

Applications grew by
51%
year-over-year

The above graphic illustrates an example of a nationally ranked university that Archer started working with in 2017. After our initial digital marketing assessment, we noticed a substantial under-investment in targeting to its local market; where the institution's brand had the most recognition and where it was seeing the strongest performance. Based on these findings, we hypothesized that this university would benefit from altering its wide-reach strategy to refocus on a more targeted audience. We created a tighter targeting radius around the university's physical location by shifting the core target geography from ~50% to nearly 90% within what we identified as the critical radius.

After making this change, we began to see the impact almost immediately. Not only did **inquiry volume increase by 26% year-over-year, but applications grew by 51% YoY**. This meant that the individuals we were targeting converted from leads to applications at a higher rate than past inquiries, likely because we were targeting prospective students that were a better fit for the institution.

This doesn't mean you can never expand your presence—it just means you have to be strategic about how you approach it and be sure to start with your most cost-effective market(s). Only after the primary market is saturated, use data-driven tools like brand search trends, student demographic data, and job demand to decide where next to expand the marketing reach.
Remember: geographic radius is only one element in the larger strategy of utilizing demographic data to build a profile of what an institution's prospective online student looks like.

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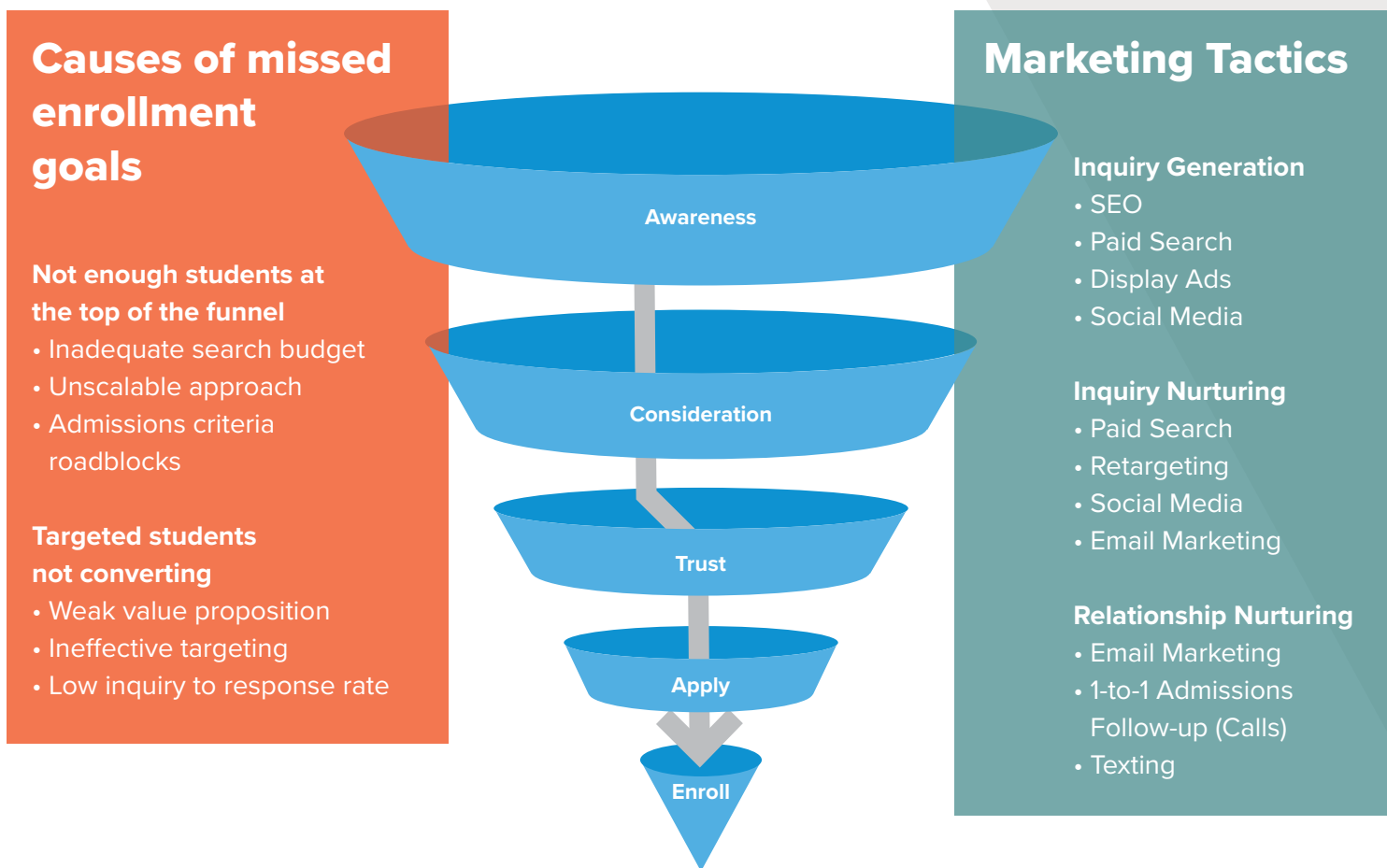
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Roadblock 3

Not investing in both demand creation AND capture.

Along the path to enrollment, there are numerous opportunities to capture potential students. At the top of this "funnel," the audience is prospective students in the earlier stages of the decision-making process and the goal is to introduce your institution's brand. This is a key moment for an institution's brand because, according to a 2017 Google/Ipsos Study, 56% of prospective students start researching generic programs and degrees online. On the other end, at the bottom of the funnel, institutions are instead capturing those who have already shown interest in a particular school or program.

When a prospective student ends up submitting a request for more information, that one channel will get all the credit for the inquiry. But that student may have had more than 1000 digital touchpoints in only 6 weeks of researching options. In reality, then, no single touchpoint is solely responsible for the prospective student asking for more information. So giving all the credit to one channel isn't accurately capturing the students' experience. Instead, it is crucial to continue to focus on the top of the funnel (demand creation) as well as the bottom of the funnel (demand capture) to create as many touch points as possible for prospective students.

While there are opportunities at every stage of the funnel, institutions tend to invest heavily in only one area while neglecting the others. It's tempting for institutions to invest most heavily in the channels that, on paper, seem to perform best. However, investing too heavily in only one stage of the funnel means your institution is likely missing out on a substantial pool of prospective students. Our enrollment marketing experts suggest creating a comprehensive strategy that encompasses channels at the both top and bottom of the funnel for optimal performance.

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Causes of missed enrollment goals

Not enough students at the top of the funnel
- Inadequate search budget
- Unscalable approach
- Admissions criteria roadblocks

Targeted students not converting
- Weak value proposition
- Ineffective targeting
- Low inquiry to response rate

Marketing Tactics

Inquiry Generation
- SEO
- Paid Search
- Display Ads
- Social Media

Inquiry Nurturing
- Paid Search
- Retargeting
- Social Media
- Email Marketing

Relationship Nurturing
- Email Marketing
- 1-to-1 Admissions Follow-up (Calls)
- Texting

Awareness

Consideration

Trust

Apply

Enroll

What does this mean in practice? When a prospective student is just beginning their search, they are likely exploring broad terms like areas of study or lists of institutions that offer their program of interest rather than the name of a specific school. Thus, if an institution prioritizes showing up in the results for more general search terms, it is an opportunity to engage with the prospective students who are still at the top of the funnel by sharing compelling messaging about their brand and programs.

This general introduction can then create demand for the program as a prospect becomes more engaged and moves further down the funnel. At this point, an institution that has already introduced the basic ideas of their brand and programs can communicate more specifically about the program a student is interested in, share enrollment information, and speak to the specific value of the particular degree program as well as the distinct value of the institution itself.

While top-of-the-funnel activities often have a higher cost than other bottom-of-the-funnel channels, they influence the later-stage activity that ultimately captures students. Creating this careful balance is tough, because it requires a combination of expert placement, compelling messaging, and measurement across channels to see which top of the funnel activities are helping to drive more conversions in the later stages.

Roadblock 4
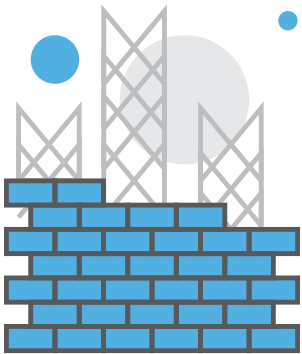
Not creating an infrastructure for success in your admissions system

Any institution that aspires to grow needs an established admissions infrastructure that can support that growth. This is because once an inquiry is generated, marketing to prospective students doesn't stop but rather becomes even more important. So if an institution drops the ball at this point, it is the equivalent of throwing away the money already spent on generating that inquiry. To continue to keep prospects engaged with your institution, ensure that effective operations and admissions processes are in place by establishing structure, process, and measurement.

STRUCTURE

Assessing proper structure in your admissions team helps to ensure that the team is staffed appropriately to handle the anticipated inquiry volume for your program(s). To do this, establish that each admissions representative has a specific threshold of inquiries to follow up with in a given day, week, and month. If admissions staff is consistently receiving more inquiries than the established target, examine your inquiry-to-contact ratio to see if it is affecting performance (hint: it likely is). Another way to handle an increase in volume is to create a team within admissions to assess the interest level of incoming inquiries before they are handed off to an admissions counselor or advisor. This structure can often help the admissions team is utilize its resources in the most efficient way possible.
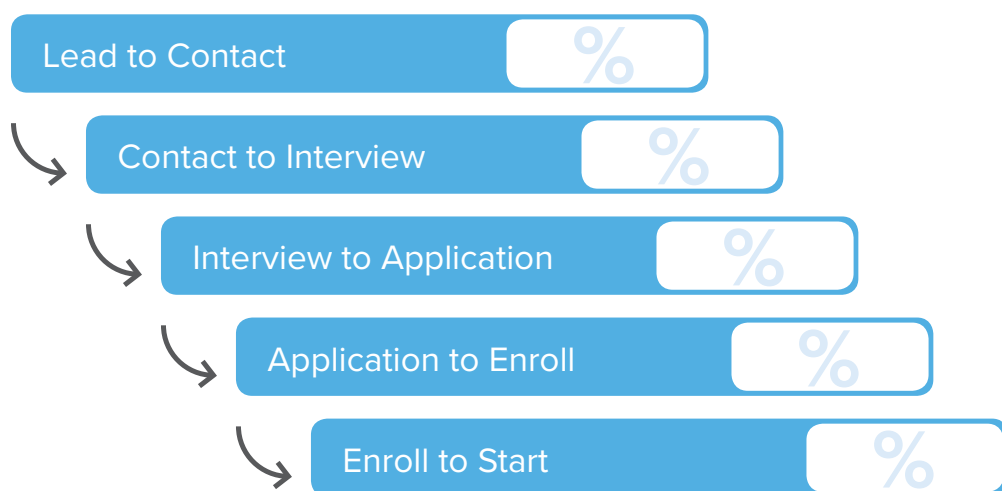
PROCESS

With a growing program, having clear processes is crucial for success. This means establishing specific protocols for first contact with prospective students based, ideally, on the individual marketing channel the student engaged with. This will ensure that when an inquiry is submitted to your institution, the student will receive program-specific matriculation communications including email, text, social, and chat, each with variable messaging depending on what stage the prospective student is in and how

they've interacted with past communication. The admissions team should also know exactly what to do at each step. This can be a huge undertaking, but in our experience it can make the largest impact on your most critical metrics. **Even a 10% lift in conversions is enough efficiency to help reduce your marketing spending in the long run.**

MEASUREMENT

Once you have a solid structure and sound process, establish analytics and reporting so your institution can understand five key metrics:

Lead to Contact	%
Contact to Interview	%
Interview to Application	%
Application to Enroll	%
Enroll to Start	%

Use reporting on these key metrics to find weak spots in your marketing and admissions process. For example, if your lead-to-contact rate is too low, is it because you haven't created a process for how to handle every type of incoming inquiry? Or is it due to a disconnect between marketing and admissions? You will only be able to get to the bottom of any issues by first uncovering them.

In short, all of the hard work that goes into building a successful enrollment marketing plan for a new online program can go to waste if the admissions team isn't prepared. So be proactive and strengthen any weak spots in admissions before investing in additional marketing.

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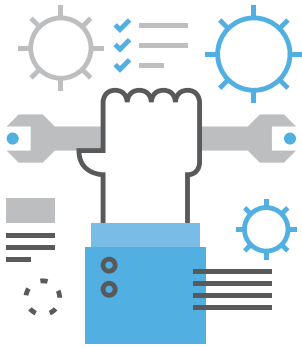
Roadblock 5

Not hiring experts

In 2018, 73% of schools made the decision to offer online programs. With the competition for online students continuing to grow, institutions can't afford to waste money by investing in the wrong marketing and admissions strategies. Since it is crucial to ensure that every dollar is spent as effectively as possible, it is best to only entrust proven experts with marketing for online programs.

Prospective students interested in online programs are fundamentally different than more traditional students enrolled full-time at brick and mortar campuses, so the way they make decisions about their education is different, and continues to evolve. 73% of online students report job and employment goals as a reason for enrolling. These include students planning to transition to a new career field (35%) and those who want to earn academic credentials to bolster their standing in their current line of work (30%).
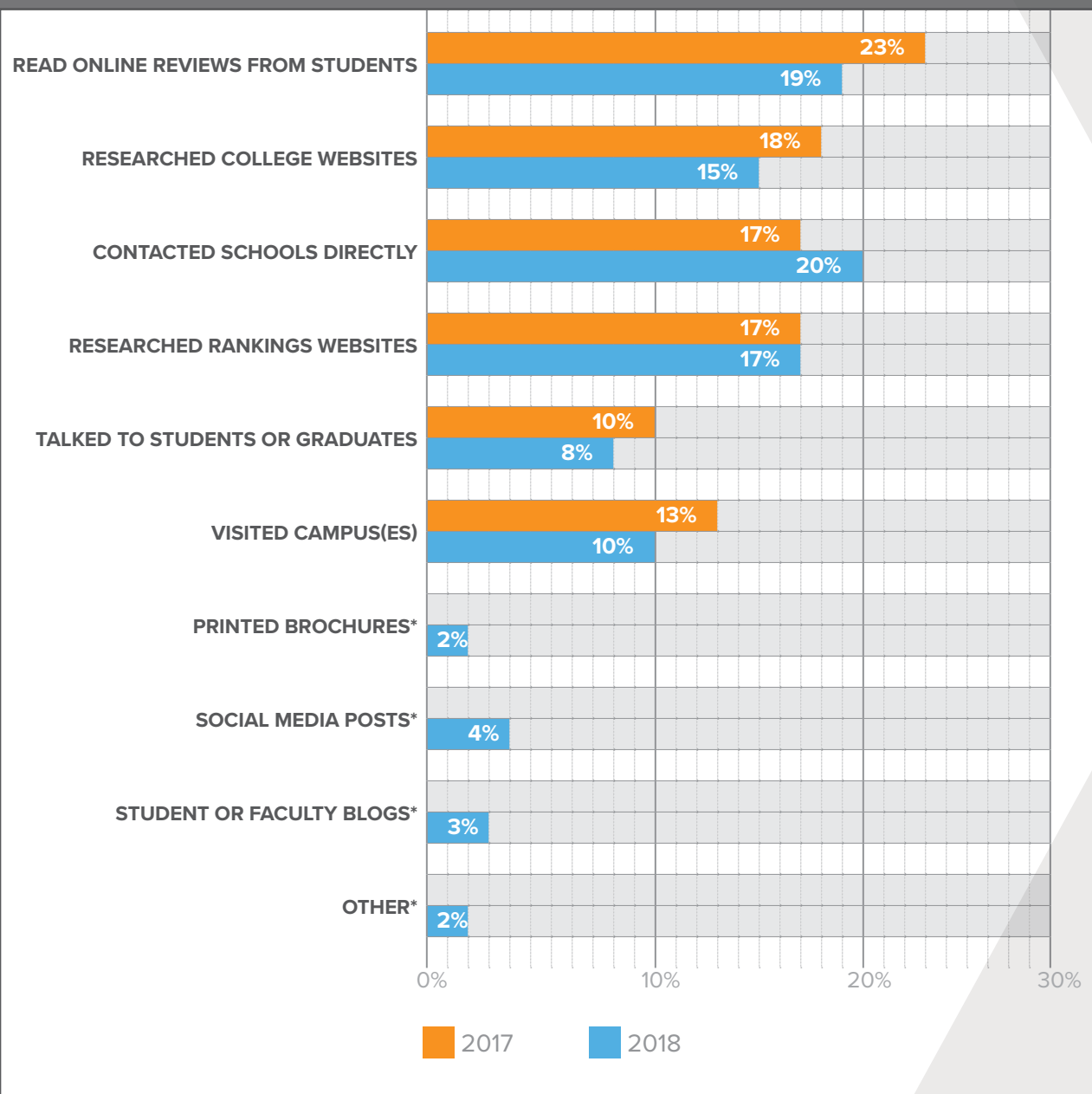
This new type of student provides the potential for meaningful enrollment growth, but only if you enroll them. So whether you hire in-house marketing experts or choose to outsource your marketing, make sure you are looking for expertise in omni-channel digital marketing. Then, determine and utilize metrics to hold these experts accountable, and always continue to test and optimize.

If your institution is considering outsourcing your marketing, consider the most important questions you should ask before you partner with any agency — to ensure you hire the right team and establish and foundation for success.

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How Prospective Students Research Online Programs

Category	2017	2018
READ ONLINE REVIEWS FROM STUDENTS	23%	19%
RESEARCHED COLLEGE WEBSITES	18%	15%
CONTACTED SCHOOLS DIRECTLY	17%	20%
RESEARCHED RANKINGS WEBSITES	17%	17%
TALKED TO STUDENTS OR GRADUATES	10%	8%
VISITED CAMPUS(ES)	13%	10%
PRINTED BROCHURES*		2%
SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS*		4%
STUDENT OR FACULTY BLOGS*		3%
OTHER*		2%

0%   10%   20%   30%

■ 2017   ■ 2018

Source: BestColleges.com 2019 Online Education Trends Report

Conclusion

As demand for online education continues to grow, institutions can reap the benefits of investing in these programs. If your institution can define a metric for success, focus targeting efforts, invest in demand creation (as well as capture), hire experts, and set up an effective admissions infrastructure, the investment will more than pay off. So don't let these five roadblocks continue to get in the way of enrollment growth.

Is your institution constantly optimizing its marketing campaigns?
If you are interested in partnering with an enrollment marketing services company that can help you reach further, recruit smarter, and grow faster, then sign up for a free digital marketing assessment from Archer Education today.

> **Get your free digital marketing assessment**