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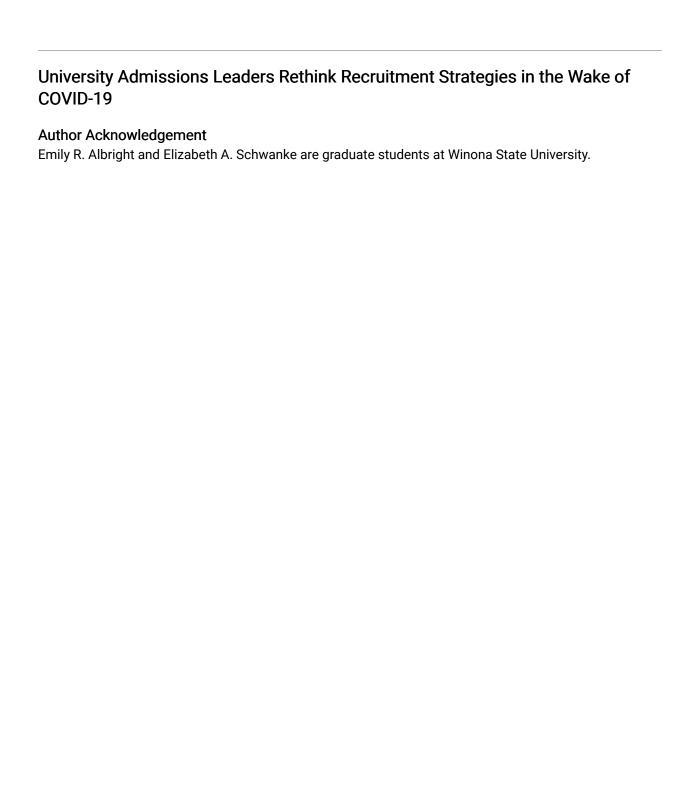*Winona State University*, elizabeth.schwanke@winona.edu

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Abstract

In the wake of COVID-19, university admissions leaders were challenged to rethink recruitment strategies and practices. This qualitative research inquiry explored how admissions leaders changed student recruitment strategies in response to the inability to connect with prospective students in-person. The study collected data from six university admissions leaders in the Midwest region of the United States. Systems theory and the concept of organizational adaptation supported this investigation. Findings of the study reveal challenges admissions offices faced in response to the pandemic, identify new recruitment strategies developed by admissions leaders, and inform what strategies may comprise the future of recruitment. Three themes emerged from the study: (1) enhancement of web presence, (2) expansion of virtual experiences, and (3) continuation of online and in-person recruitment strategies as the new standard.

Keywords: Admissions, Recruitment Strategies, Virtual Recruitment, COVID-19 pandemic

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In March 2020, colleges, universities, and K-12 institutions abruptly and simultaneously closed classrooms, shifted activities online, and implemented new procedures in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic. Campuses closed, students and staff went home, and in-person connections paused indefinitely. The pandemic interrupted everyday functions for organizations across the globe, including admissions offices at higher education institutions needing to recruit and matriculate an incoming first-year class (Hisel & Pinion, 2020).

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, college admissions leaders engaged in a process to rethink, revise, and reinvent recruitment practices to continue offering opportunities for prospective students to connect with campus information and experiences. Many institutions in the United States reported having quickly set up or expanded online enrollment programs as a COVID-19 response (Jeffe, 2020). Existing research evaluates traditional in-person recruitment methods, but little is known about challenges admissions leaders faced in the wake of COVID-19 and the revision of recruitment strategies when these methods became unworkable. To fill the gap in knowledge, this study explores COVID-19 response decisions and experiences of admissions leaders from six public universities in a regional education system.

The purpose of this study was to explore how admissions leaders rethought recruitment strategies in response to challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Understanding how the landscape of college recruitment fundamentally changed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic will support admissions leaders in the quest to identify and implement new standards of best practices in the field. This research contributes to the literature about college recruitment practices and admissions leaders sustaining organizational advancement during the pandemic.

Literature Review

Student recruitment unequivocally impacts institutions' sustainability. Matriculating robust classes of diverse, intelligent, and talented students is the primary mission for admissions offices across the United States (Adams-Johnson et al., 2019). Given the intangible nature of education, admissions recruiters must find compelling methods of promoting institutions' tangible characteristics. While education is not a product consumers are able to see, touch, or use immediately, features such as academic programs, campus appearance, social opportunities, student support services, and professional connections are components with the power to sell enrollment in higher education (Han, 2014). Since the 19080s, when the transition between the 'baby boom' generation and the 'Gen-Xers' threatened enrollment numbers, institutions focused on persuasive marking on persuasive marking strategies as primary means of survival. (Adams-Johnson, 2019).

One of the most prominent marketing strategies used by colleges and universities includes hosting prospective students on campus. A 'high-touch' on-campus

experience—whether a tour, an open house, or a meeting with an admissions officer—is the most influential aspect of the college search process (Secore, 2018). Data from an East Coast university concluded students are more likely to enroll after a campus visit. The institution determined students with one campus visit touchpoint had a 16.4% yield rate while students with two campus visit touchpoints had a 20.5% yield rate (Hope, 2015). Singer (2003) suggested that students leave a campus visit with more knowledge and vision of a potential future at the university visited, strengthening students' positive image of the institution. Campus visits, especially those including a campus tour, provide prospective students with opportunities to engage with the campus environment as well as intrinsically experience the institutional climate and culture. Campus features such as buildings, equipment, signage, people, and landscape influence prospective students and shape future actions (Secore, 2018).

Two other notable recruitment practices include connecting with students in a college fair or high school visit setting. College fairs, which may be held in a conference room, high school gymnasium, or event center, host an extensive range of postsecondary institutions ready to catch the attention of prospective students (Maldonado, 2008). Often free and open to the community, the college fair setting allows students to interact with multiple admissions representatives and engage in meaningful, though quick and informal, conversations about student-school compatibility (Dilorenzo, 2007). High school visits typically involve an admissions recruiter from just one college coming to a high school to meet with interested students. Lautz et al. (2005) suggested these visits offer students an exclusive opportunity to dialogue with the person who may evaluate applications for admission. The off-campus interactions occurring at college fairs and high school visits often encourage students to schedule an on-campus visit (Gordon, 2006).

These in-person recruitment methods traditionally serve as the primary touchpoints, or data collection opportunities, admissions officials use to build predictive models to forecast application numbers and enrollment yield rates (Goenner & Pauls, 2006). Strategic enrollment management depends on predictive enrollment modeling, which is unavailable without recruitment touchpoints. A phenomenon first noted in the 1990s is the 'stealth applicant.'' A 'stealth applicant' is a prospective student where the application submission is the first recorded interaction with the postsecondary institution. From a data perspective, stealth applicants appear out of thin air. Having more applications than prospective students may appear as a bonus in the competitive world of college admissions; however, stealth applicants distort enrollment predictability and complicate the role of admissions leaders responsible for strategic recruitment planning (Hoover, 2020).

Offering an in-person interaction is a highly effective recruitment strategy because of the ability for students to experience the grinning face and friendly handshake of admissions representatives as well as the ability for admissions offices to gain predictive data. When discussing the value of in-person recruitment, the Dean of Students at Stanford University stated, "You can't shake an internet hand," (Gordon, 2006, p. B11). When discussing the value

of predictive analytics, Hoover (2020) suggested that one cannot make predictions without recruitment touchpoint data.

Admissions representatives traditionally marketed postsecondary institutions to prospective students through in-person experiences at on-campus visits, college fairs, and high school visits, but in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the need to find recruitment strategies without in-person contact emerged (Howells, 2021). In a study of four-year public and private institutions, the majority of respondents report previously established enrollment goals for the 2020-2021 academic year changed due to recruitment challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic response (Jeffe, 2020). The demeanor of admissions recruiters' target audience also changed. A sizable portion of high school students reported COVID-19's negative impacts on readiness, willingness, or ability to pursue higher education (Kim et al., 2020). Still, even in the face of global pandemic concerns, the general desire to go to college is alive and well. An overwhelming majority, over 90%, of high school students surveyed still plan to enroll in college and nearly 73% plan to matriculate to a traditional four-year university (Silverback Strategies, 2021). In the continually shifting landscape of COVID-19, college and university admissions leaders faced immense pressure to reinvent "...a process that hasn't changed in over 50 years in the span of a couple months […] and they [didn't] have another choice." (Smith, 2020, para. 2).

Theoretical Framework

This research inquiry was positioned within the theoretical frameworks of systems theory and organizational adaptation. These theories are appropriate for this area of inquiry because the theories facilitate understanding of how organizations, such as higher education institutions, exist within a system environment and must adapt when the environment experiences change, like a global health pandemic.

Systems theory recognizes the interactions between organizations and constantly changing environments over which the organization has little control (Lai & Lin, 2017). All systems exist within an environment which influences the behavior of components in the system. The environment exerts control over the system but cannot be controlled by the system (Skyttner, 2001). Systems theory guides the understanding of the interdependent relationship between an organization and its environment (Lai & Lin, 2017).

Organizational adaptation delineates intentional decisions that lead to observable actions which aim to reduce dissonance between an organization and its environment (Sarta et al., 2021). Environmental uncertainty is one of the greatest challenges that organizations face (Thompson, 1967). The ability to adapt to environmental changes determines the success or failure of an organization. In competitive arenas, a higher level of adaptability compared to other organizations in the same environment may positively influence ratings and rank. (Potter, 2014). As environments change or experience unexpected disturbances, organizations in the environment must also adapt to regulate the system. Understanding organizational adaptation

and finding best vehicles of change within a vocational field contributes to an organization's ability to maintain stability and progress advancement (Skyttner, 2001).

Methodology

The design for this study is qualitative methodology grounded in participatory action research (PAR). As a research strategy, PAR seeks answers by learning about problems in naturally occurring contexts (Lawson et al., 2015). PAR engages researchers and participants through reflective inquiry (Baum et al., 2006). The method centers on multiple participants actively learning from firsthand experiences and making those lessons accessible to others. Researchers and participants commit to inquisitive consideration of circumstances, actions, and consequences to generate leading knowledge addressing problems and research questions (McTaggart, 1991).

Research questions guiding this study are:
1. What challenges did admissions leaders face in the wake of COVID-19?
2. How did admissions leaders rethink recruitment strategies in response to the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. What recruitment strategies will admissions offices use post-pandemic?

The sample for this research consisted of admission leaders from six Midwestern public universities. All six participants were in the role of Director of Admissions and represented four-year institutions that belong to the same state-governed system of colleges and universities. The universities represented average student populations ranging from approximately 5,000 to 15,000 and belong to urban and rural communities in various regions of the state. These six admissions offices consisted of a first-year student admissions counseling staff of four to six people, with most of the offices having just four counselors to complete the first-year student recruitment plan.

Data collection took place amid the Fall 2021 academic term using an online survey via Microsoft Forms. The survey included seven questions using a mixture of Likert scale, short answer, and open-ended prompts about admissions recruitment experiences in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The researchers interpreted the survey responses using qualitative data analysis (QDA). QDA allows researchers to extract meaning and detect themes by looking for patterns within the data set (Miles & Huberman, 1994). To identify emergent themes from the study, the researchers examined survey responses for recurring phrases and ideas.

Findings

Three themes emerged from the examination of survey responses from the six university admissions leaders: (1) enhancement of web presence (2) expansion of virtual experiences, and (3) continuation of online and in-person recruitment strategies post-pandemic.

Table 1. *Emerging Themes from Survey Data*

Theme	Theme	Percent of Respondents Discussing Theme
Theme 1	Enhancement of web presence	100%
Theme 2	Expansion of virtual experiences	100%
Theme 3	Continuation of online and in-person recruitment strategies post-pandemic	100%

Enhancement of Web Presence

Results of one survey question using a Likert scale revealed that 83.33% of respondents "strongly agree" and 16.66% "agree" that the COVID-19 pandemic challenged recruitment teams. Respondents unanimously cited the inability to connect with students in-person and actively promote institutional information as the greatest source of adversity. When elaborating on how admissions leaders implemented new strategies to combat this challenge, all six admissions directors discussed the enhancement of institutional web presence. The respondents of this study specified examples of admissions offices creating accounts on various social media platforms, completing comprehensive website updates, and increasing digital marketing efforts.

One admissions leader discussed the creation of an admissions office Twitter account and a Facebook group, which allowed the office to share messages through different platforms and reach the diverse student and parent audiences. The same admissions director shared the strategy of creating individual social media accounts for each admissions officer to interact and connect on a personal level with prospective students on popular social media platforms.

The survey revealed the review and updating of institutional websites as a recruitment strategy that surfaced in response to COVID-19. The inability to connect with students in-person led to increased website traffic, which heightened the need for universities to offer a high-quality web-browsing experience. One survey respondent documented the challenging experience of discovering a high volume of outdated or incorrect information on various webpages, including the admissions page and other campus partners' pages. In response to this issue, admissions offices and university marketing teams worked together immediately to design and publish updates with accurate information for prospective students to access. In an effort to ensure webpages did not become inadequate again, one admissions leader disclosed the creation of a university-wide electronic ticket system, allowing any university employee to submit a ticket identifying the need for a website update.

All six admissions directors discussed the increase of digital marketing efforts as a recruitment strategy in direct response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As reported by survey responses, admissions offices no longer needed to spend the funding that was typically allocated to cover the expense of admissions officers traveling to meet with students in-person. Instead, admissions leaders put those funds toward the creation of targeted online ad campaigns. One admissions director discussed the implementation of video ads on YouTube. The same institution purchased digital space to advertise on Facebook and Instagram. Another admissions director shared the strategy of purchasing a Snapchat filter using a geofence around the state fairgrounds to advertise the institution to state fair attendees.

Expansion of Virtual Experiences

In response to a Likert scale question querying the degree to which institutions adapted recruitment strategies in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, 66.66% of respondents "strongly agree" that recruitment strategies changed and 33.33% of respondents "agree." One respondent acknowledged challenge due to the "loss of the most tried and true methods of recruitment: campus tours, high school visits, and college fairs." An open-ended question investigating how admissions offices revised or developed recruitment methods in response to the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the expansion of virtual experiences as the prevailing strategy used by all institutions.

Existing research establishes campus tour experiences as the most prominent and influential recruitment strategy (Secore, 2018). Between March 2020 and March 2021, a survey found just 23% of high school students attended a college or university on-campus visit (Silverback Strategies, 2021). Two of the six respondents indicated offering virtual tour experiences in recruitment prior to the pandemic to offer a basic virtual or video tour of campus. All six admissions leaders identified the creation or expansion of robust virtual tour experiences as a priority in COVID-19 response plans. As reported by survey responses, expansion efforts included filming in-depth campus tour videos with specific information related to the student experience during the pandemic. Additionally, respondents discussed developing partnerships with marketing complies, like YouVisit, to create self-guided virtual reality and 360-degree tour experiences.

To continue interactions between admissions officers and prospective students, institutions developed virtual experiences as a strategy to mimic traditional in-person recruitment encounters. One admissions director shared, "During the complete shutdown, we transitioned all of our planned in-person recruitment activities to a virtual space. This included our daily campus visits and tours, special group events, and high school visits." All respondents indicated heavy use of Zoom, a teleconferencing software with a userbase that grew exponentially in correlation with the COVID-19 pandemic (Bond, 2021). The survey responses report admissions offices' use of Zoom to offer virtual one-on-one meetings, mid-sized information sessions, large open house events, and even multi-institution college fairs.

Continuation of Online and In-Person Recruitment Strategies Post-Pandemic

Using a Likert scale, participants were asked if the institution represented will continue using one or more recruitment strategies developed in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Results showed that 50% of respondents answered, "strongly agree" and 50% of respondents answered, "agree." In response to an open-ended question about which recruitment strategies admissions offices will use post-pandemic, all six admissions leaders suggest that implementing a combination of online and in-person strategies will be the new standard practice and will strengthen future recruitment efforts. When asked to imagine a post-pandemic recruitment cycle, one respondent stated, "We will continue offering virtual options, but won't rely on them nearly as much." Another admissions leader said, "If it [online offerings] is what the student wants, then we need to provide it. We need to make ourselves available to students however we can." Identifying a valuable aspect of virtual recruitment, a different respondent pointed out, "It's especially beneficial for students who live far away or can't make it to campus." Reflecting on how the COVID-19 pandemic has changed the landscape of college recruitment practices, one admissions director asserts, "Simply put, we can't *not* continue to offer both virtual and in-person options. There is a demand for both—whether that be because of comfort level, logistical challenges, access issues, or otherwise—the demand exists, so we will work to continue to meet that demand."

Discussion, Implications, and Recommendations

This study yielded findings that have implications for admissions leaders responsible for planning and navigating recruitment strategies. The COVID-19 pandemic forced a sudden shift in the way recruiters could interact with prospective students. The conditions of the pandemic challenged admissions leaders to rethink recruitment strategies and find new ways to market features of higher education institutions with the goal of matriculating incoming students.

One of the greatest challenges that admissions leaders faced in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic was the ability to connect with students and effectively promote institutional information due to the inability to conduct in-person interactions. This challenge forced admissions leaders to rethink where and how the institution offered information that would be of interest to prospective students. One strategy that surfaced in response to this challenge was to enhance institutional web presence. Offering accurate, up-to-date, and easily accessible information online became critical when students could no longer obtain information in-person. Taking action to update existing webpages and create social media accounts were the primary vehicles of enhancement reported in this study.

Due to the inability to connect with students through traditional in-person recruitment methods such as campus visits, high school visits, and college fairs, admissions leaders needed to rethink recruitment strategies to find new methods of interacting with students. One prominent strategy in the revision of recruitment practices involved the expansion of virtual experiences to

engage with students. Many admissions offices relied on virtual experiences to mimic recruitment interactions that traditionally occurred in-person before the COVID-19 pandemic. Several admissions leaders stressed the importance of creating or improving virtual campus tours, information sessions, and other opportunities for students to connect with the institution.

While the inability to engage with prospective students in-person was one of the most significant sources of challenge for admissions offices, several admissions leaders observed advantages of online strategies, such as the ability to offer robust information and experiences in a convenient way to students who may be unable or not yet interested enough to connect with the institution in-person. The forced revision of recruitment strategies and implementation of virtual opportunities incidentally changed the landscape of college admissions. As the intensity of the COVID-19 pandemic subsides, many admissions offices will continue to employ online strategies in addition to the return of traditional in-person recruitment strategies.

Recommendations for further research about university admissions and the impact of COVID-19 on recruitment strategies include (1) exploring student perspectives on recruitment methods, (2) examining the influence of recruitment strategies on enrollment numbers, (3) investigating levels of student engagement and reach associated with recruitment methods, and (4) comparing recruitment strategies implemented by a more diverse array of colleges and universities.

Conclusion

This study offered a qualitative inquiry about how admissions leaders rethought and revised recruitment strategies in the wake of COVID-19. The study collected data from university admissions leaders in the Midwest region of the United States. Findings of this study reveal challenges admissions offices faced in response to the pandemic expressly highlighting the inability to connect with prospective students in-person. The findings also show the strategies developed to combat this challenge through the enhancement of institutional web presence and the expansion of virtual experience offerings. Finally, the findings suggest the new standard of best practice for university admissions recruitment involves a combination of online and in-person recruitment strategies.

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