Building a Successful Adult Education Program

Beginning with the End in Mind –
Three Critical Factors to Examine First

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Part 1 of 3
After reading this document, you will better understand:

- What information needs to be reviewed to set realistic cost-per-enrollment goals and expectations.

- Why enrollment marketing processes for adult education programs should be considerably different than those for traditional students.

- How curriculum type and degree level affect the reach and appeal of your programs.

- Evaluating lead-to-rep ratios, conversion timelines and changes in the marketplace to effectively determine conversion rates.

Who We Are

A pioneer of interactive marketing in the higher education field, PlattForm has delivered high-quality Internet inquiries to institutions since the advent of online programs. More than 20 years ago, PlattForm began partnering with clients to develop marketing and enrollment strategies to reach out to a new generation of adult learners. Both practical innovation and exceptional customer service have led PlattForm to become the largest marketing and communications firm in the higher education industry.

Today, PlattForm provides a full spectrum of advertising, communications and marketing services to a growing client base. With more than 400 industry experts serving our nearly 4,000 partner schools located throughout the United States and Canada, we work every day at the forefront of higher education.
There's no question that higher education budgets as a whole have been rocked recently by economic change, and many members of this sector have been rattled by subsequent threats to their operational integrity. As a result, more institutions are looking for other areas of opportunity for growth. Many have turned to adult ground and distance education programs as an economically viable option to grow their overall student populations.

Some institutions, seeing these programs as an opportunity, have a tendency to jump in headfirst without understanding their competitive landscape or implementing a strategic approach to ensure success. At the other end of the spectrum, institutions can remain paralyzed by the notion of developing adult ground and distance education programs because they fear entering uncharted territory. Because the strategies that drive successful adult education programs vary considerably from those used for traditional undergraduate programs, it's important to know where to start in meeting the needs of adult learners. How are the initial considerations for marketing strategies and admissions processes different?

In this white paper, “Building a Successful Adult Education Program: Part 1,” we offer three critical factors to examine before launching adult education programs. We base our insights on working with hundreds of institutions who have successfully made the leap and from our interactions with college and university leaders who have introduced or expanded their adult education offerings.

**Beginning with the End in Mind**

We will begin with the end in mind by outlining how to evaluate these three key factors:

1. Curriculum type and degree level offerings
2. Cost-per-enrollment (CPE) goals
3. Inquiry-to-enrollment conversion rates

Let’s take a closer look at each of these considerations and how they should be evaluated to ensure success.
Where do you begin in examining the viability of adding adult education to the mix? Before we address the essential, “What comes first ... the marketing budgets or enrollment goals?” question – the higher education marketing version of the chicken or the egg – we should ask a different question. Have you determined what your likely course offering will be? What types of curricula will best fit your market demand, and how can the degree level of the program impact its approximated appeal?

Ideally, whether you are considering adding adult education on-ground or online, you will be creating an effective balance between local vs. global market influences and generic vs. specialty curricula in sizing up realistic ways to both meet your potential student needs and to stand out against the competition.

Let’s start with on-ground programs. Unless your institution has multiple locations or a plan for multiple locations, or you are established as a commuter campus serving a wide reach, the geotargeting for your potential program is automatically limited. So, you will want to concentrate on the local influences of the market, both now and in the near future. Often in doing so, you will find yourself filling a fairly specific niche in order to compete. Examples:

- **Healthcare** – Your research reveals that two of your major feeder schools (community colleges) who offer basic nursing education consistently have one- or two-year waiting lists, and that many of their graduates later go on to earn their Bachelor’s degree in nursing. Because your four-year B.S. in Nursing program is at capacity, you were considering adding a Master’s degree in Nursing to an already crowded Master’s market. But now, you may add a BSN-bridge as a blended on-campus and online course instead.

- **Business** – Your institution is considering adding a generic MBA because your undergraduate business school is beginning to flourish and there is data that shows your B.A. and B.S. business alumni will likely help support initial enrollment goals in a Master’s program. But in collaborating with your local economic development entities, you learn that a sizeable light manufacturing firm has committed to relocating their headquarters to your area within the next 18 months. Do you have the capacity to adjust your plan and launch an MBA that’s more specialized toward the needs of lean manufacturing? Or do you proceed to roll out a generic MBA that may or may not stand out in the crowd a year or two from now – just when you need to be able to measure the ROI for your next budget plan?

Possible answers to these questions can also be affected by your projected cost-per-enrollment goals, which we will be addressing next.
But first, how do these considerations interact in distance education or online adult education offerings? By definition, geotargeting your potential audience becomes less important, but still must be considered since localized name recognition still plays a role in how the integrity of your proposed program will be perceived. If part of your audience considering online education is aware that you have a sound reputation for on-ground education success, they may be more inclined to view your online programs favorably as well. That said, careful evaluation of the demand for programs both locally and nationwide is critical.

One way to do this is to carefully consider your competition for a specific distance education program. Remember, your potential students are choosing more than one institution to evaluate. Most institutions tend to claim, in the face of significant competition, that their programs are “different and better.” Upon further examination, there is often very little that separates these programs (at least in the eyes of potential students). Typically, many competing programs employ similar descriptive verbiage, which in terms of search engine optimization is something we always address with our clients – but that is a discussion beyond the scope of this article.

A critical question to ask is, “What does your institution offer that will set you apart?”

Here are three program areas that lend themselves to distance education and examples of considerations for each:

- **Business programs** – If your institution is considering business-related programs, be sure that your offerings are distinct. That can mean highlighting specialized concentrations, unique capstone projects, faculty with unusual expertise, connections with a nationally recognized leader in a business field or applications that articulate well with expected growth areas in the local, regional, national, or even global business environments. While it’s true that much of the historic success of distance education relied upon generic programs, especially in business, and many students are still attracted to generic business degrees, the landscape is now very crowded with basic programs. With such a high level of competition among institutions seeking to attract business students, if your curricula are too general, potential students can be enticed by another school with a slightly more unique or powerful appeal.
IT programs – Similar to business programs, these programs are more successful when specialized certifications or degrees are offered. However, in this case, demand drives the need for specialization, whereas with business programs, specialization serves more as a differentiator from the competition. Most potential students are hoping to attain specialized IT knowledge, since it’s not enough to have experience in general digital sectors without technical certifications in the industry as employment trends require both. To follow the specialized IT path, it’s worth carefully researching what IT recruitment managers, both locally and nationally, are seeking beyond the perennial favorite Cisco and Microsoft certifications. It’s also vital to know what specializations competitors offer and where there might be a market niche your school is qualified to fill. Growth areas cited by experts include Certified Information Systems Security Professional (CISSP), Microsoft’s Microsoft Certified Systems Engineer (MCSE), Cisco’s Cisco Certified Network Associate (CCNA) and various levels of Information Technology Infrastructure Library (ITIL).

Healthcare programs – The focus here is to introduce curricula with growth opportunities so your programs are sustainable. Typically female-heavy, the inquiry volume exists for healthcare programs in general. Although about 10.7 million women are already employed in the healthcare industry, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics that number is only expected to grow, often dramatically, in the next decade. This means that related education programs will continue to see large numbers of female enrollments. The challenge is, again, to research the program or programs that your institution is best equipped to handle well and grow, in terms of faculty support, outplacement of graduates and externships, if those are required. Even with distance education, these are factors that must be considered to attract the right students to your programs.

What resources can your institution use to develop realistic expectations for your proposed adult education plan?

- **Researching competitors.** Is your curricula type unique within the market? How much are your competitors spending on advertising campaigns?

- **The recruiting area.** Where are your students coming from? How many do you realistically feel your curricula can draw?

- **Job placement opportunities.** Are graduates of the program you are offering going to be highly sought after in the job market?

- **Competitive spending.** What are your competitors spending both online and via traditional media?

Essential considerations for adult education:

- Are you going to target your local market?
- Will your market be national?
- Or, will you focus on both, and to what degree?
While understanding why specialization is important, you also need to understand the potential drawbacks when it comes to inquiry generation and how it will affect your enrollment expectations. For example, institutions with successful Master’s degree programs are typically those offering degrees with specializations, such as a Master’s in Business, with choices in 10 different areas of focus or a Master’s in Healthcare Administration with three or four possible concentrations, because there is less competition for those programs.

However, a caution to take with this long-tailed approach is the realization that offering specialized programs can result in a narrower audience, as more focused degree offerings will likely appeal to fewer people. When adding degree concentrations, you’ll need to be sure not to narrow the focus so much that your audience limitations make the program no longer viable.

**Program Rule of Thumb:** Balance your program offerings to be manageable and to appeal to as wide a prospective student audience as possible while still being specific or unique enough to stand out from the competition.

Once you’ve assessed the reach and appeal of your programs, you have the information you need to move on to the next step: setting realistic cost-per-enrollment goals.
2. Setting Realistic Cost-Per-Enrollment (CPE) Goals

Have you reviewed all the relevant information for setting realistic cost-per-enrollment (CPE) goals? Or, for that matter, why should you use cost-per-enrollment as a factor in your essential analysis for adding adult education programming? Frankly, by using a business-minded approach, you can come up with a realistic budget and avoid a common mistake, which is to compare your online CPE to your ground campus CPE.

There are two effective ways for schools to evaluate cost-per-enrollment, which should be your “end in mind” when determining your expectations. Using one of these two approaches to determine CPE can help provide realistic expectations for your adult education programs:

- **Paid media only**: This is the most common way institutions evaluate cost-per-enrollment – dividing the total number of advertising dollars spent by the number of students that actually attend class. For example, if your institution spent $100,000 in advertising dollars for the year and enrolled 45 students, the cost-per-enrollment would be $2,222.

- **Fully loaded**: This method is gaining popularity among institutions. With this approach, it is up to the institution to factor in what it determines should be involved. Commonly it is advertising dollars plus admissions costs. However, this number could also include fees such as rent, financial aid, staff salaries, etc. It may be important to look at it this way, to help you evaluate the financial impact of having ground campuses versus online.

Here’s an important note: **Don’t underestimate the costs of distance education inquiries.** Since the distance education market has become much more competitive, the cost of inquiries has risen. Marketing for online programs used to be less expensive than ground schools, but now they are even – and in some cases more expensive – as more and more schools add online programs.
CPE Rule of Thumb: Before you can evaluate your expected cost-per-enrollment for your proposed adult education program, you will need to choose which method to use and how to apply it based on what you already know about your ground campus costs versus online, as well as factoring in rising costs for distance education inquiries.
3. Determining Conversion Rates

A third vital question to ask is this: “Is your institution organized to handle the inquiry flow you will need to reach your enrollment goals?” All other factors remaining equal, employing an integrated marketing strategy should provide an adequate pool of inquiries for your adult education and degree completion programs. However, just as with traditional undergraduate programs, you can’t stop there. Once the inquiries are generated, your focus should then turn to converting them into enrollments. How should you determine an acceptable rate of conversion for your institution? It all depends.

Setting realistic expectations for conversion rates starts with evaluating your admissions process. Again, we are beginning with the end in mind. You must understand what the strengths and weaknesses are in the enrollment process as you currently have it structured in order to accurately set goals for inquiry-to-enrollment conversions for proposed programs.

Are you staffed and operationally efficient to reach out to these students in a timely manner? Is your admissions team ready to clearly communicate why your institution, as well as a particular degree plan or program, is the right fit for them? Here are two common mistakes to avoid:

1. **Incorrect lead-to-rep ratio** – How many admissions representatives does your institution have? Do you have the correct lead-to-rep ratio? The correct ratio depends on various factors. If the curricula are ground-based, your institution should be able to handle 20-25 inquiries per admissions representative, per week. For distance learning, that ratio becomes 45-60 inquiries depending on whether or not an outsourced call center is being utilized. Most institutions are not prepared to handle additional inquiry volume without first examining the current level of staffing or daily responsibilities for their admissions representatives and then factoring in possible increases in global or specific inquiries.

2. **A rushed conversion timeline** – The time frame required to convert an inquiry is growing longer due to the impact of a slow economy and the fact that prospective students usually consider more than one institution when making a choice about their education. The cycle of the conversions is much shorter for an undergraduate degree than it is for a graduate degree. For graduate programs, the cycle can be 9-15 months. In the undergraduate realm, it spans about 30-90 days.

The lead-to-rep ratio is different for online programs because with ground-based programs, admissions representatives are often handling other responsibilities at the campus level. They are also leading campus tours and conducting interviews with students, and participating in other activities that require their time.
Rule of Thumb:
To determine inquiry conversion rate expectations for proposed programs, evaluating the function and scope of your present admissions team, as well as knowing current trends in conversion timelines, is vital.

Summary:
The methods your institution uses to determine its enrollment marketing and management processes for adult education programs should be considerably different than the process for more traditional students. Many schools arbitrarily choose the types of programs they will offer without knowing the marketplace or the appeal of the programs. Institutions should begin with their end goal in mind, and there are three critical factors that are helpful in determining that end: program type and degree level, cost-per-enrollment, and conversions. All play a central role in expectations and the resulting ROI. PlattForm suggests this simple, three-step checklist to make sure your marketing budget and enrollment goal expectations are set for success:

1. Determine how the curricula type and degree level affect the reach and appeal of your programs, including the prospective student audience in your recruiting area, locally and/or nationally.

2. Determine your expected conversions by degree type: undergraduate programs vs. graduate programs.

3. Reexamine your admissions process. How many admissions reps do you have? Can they handle the number of inquiries you are likely to receive within the appropriate timeframes?

Establishing expectations - with the end in mind - helps provide a clear vision for the next steps. PlattForm will continue the discussion of enrollment marketing best practices in parts two and three of this three-part white paper series. Our next paper will cover “Setting Up Your Admissions Program for Success.” The series will conclude with a discussion on “Marketing Best Practices.”
Contact us today for more information about how PlattForm can help your institution experience success with its adult education program.