

Perspectives

A Newsmagazine for Graduate Enrollment Management Professionals

How an Admissions Blog Can Help You Reach Your Enrollment Goals



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Graduate Enrollment
Management Professionals

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Table of Contents

Fall 2022, Vol. 34, Number 3



From the President	3
By Kristen Sterba, NAGAP President	



GEM to the Corporate World	4
By Dave Fletcher, DMin, Barry University School of Podiatric Medicine, and Kate McConnell, MBA, Penn State Great Valley School of Graduate Professional Studies	

Q&A

with Ray Lutzky, PhD, Academic Partnerships	4
with William Rieth, eCity Interactive	6
with Wendy Hamstra-Smith, Enrollment Rx	7
with Jillian Baer, Liaison International	8



How an Admissions Blog Can Help You Reach Your Enrollment Goals	10
By Amanda Miller, MA, The Heller School at Brandeis University	

Behind the Curtain: Tufts Gordon Institute's Attempt to De-Mystify the Admissions Process and Increase Prospective Student Engagement	12
By Ethan Robles, MA, and Wei Cai, Tufts University's Gordon Institute	



Growing Graduate Degrees Online: 3 Success Factors for Managing Program Partnerships	15
By Ray Lutzky, PhD, Academic Partnerships	



The 4 P's of Graduate Marketing	21
By Michael McGetrick, MBA, Spark451, Inc.	



NAGAP Leadership Academy Alumni	25
By Kittie Pain, MLitt, Kutztown University of Pennsylvania	

Q&A with NAGAP Committee Chairs

with Katie-Ann Mason, EdM, Bridgewater State University	28
with Fran Reed, Neumann University	29

2022 Summer PDI Fellowship Essays

By Shaina Peterson, Brown School at Washington University in St. Louis	30
By Katelyn MacCormac, Carleton University	32

New Job, New Baby: What I've Learned About Supporting Working Parents and New Hires	33
By Melissa Sersland, MS, Northwestern University	



Growing Graduate Degrees Online: 3 Success Factors for Managing Program Partnerships

By Ray Lutzky, PhD, Academic Partnerships



Graduate enrollment management professionals are under more pressure than ever to outperform the student growth expectations of their executive leaders. This pressure from campus executives has been exacerbated by global trends including a historically strong U.S. job market and boom in virtual learning. This increased stress on presidents, provosts, and chief enrollment officers is lending itself to a wave of retirements among seasoned professionals, including GEM professionals. A recent NAGAP/EAB study also found a greater number of younger professionals are quitting the field altogether, having no desire to experience the same situation their leaders are now in and finding better pay in other industries.

Seasoned graduate enrollment administrators know that exigencies impact these goals. Meeting enrollment goals is usually viewed as a “starting point,” and should be the result of lengthy and complicated negotiation among stakeholder groups including presidents, provosts, and boards of trustees. Some graduate enrollment professionals also know (from personal experience) that their presidents and provosts will always end up asking for “50 more students” for some degree program that

needs some extra (often to the chagrin of the faculty teaching those students).

How can graduate enrollment managers help expand capacity and meet these ever-increasing demands of these provosts and presidents? As mentioned, growth in online degree programs has accelerated in the wake of the global pandemic’s push towards virtual learning. An answer to the “enrollment growth puzzle” for some university leaders is to build on their recent virtual

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successes for long-term sustainable enrollment growth opportunities online.

Despite ever-increasing competition for online and on-campus graduate students, shrinking resources for public and private institutions, new working environments that may involve hybrid and remote work (or not), leading universities are launching new online graduate programs today faster than ever before. Some of these universities make the choice to offer degrees entirely online not only to attract different students, but to lessen the impact on shrinking campus resources (all classes always require skilled faculty, for example, but virtual classes may not need a space on campus).

Creating online graduate enrollment growth demands expertise in creating a best-in-class virtual learning ecosystem for today's students. That ecosystem can be built at a variety of scales, from the so-called mega-universities that compete nationally, to more regional, state institutions that have strong programs with opportunities for managed expansion. A key reason that the mega-universities dominate the graduate enrollment landscape online, despite having higher tuition prices than most public regional universities, is their ability to scale to meet students "where they are." Mega-universities create infrastructure and systems to scale their ability to reach students (marketing, teaching, enrollment, learning management system) and to meet demand for graduate programs. Unfortunately, most regional public or small private universities lack the enormous resources or institutional agility to "build" an online division and these systems, particularly when it comes to scalable enrollment outreach and student success. This lacuna in university enrollment operations can be supplemented by partnership with a trusted online program management company, or OPM.

William Paterson University of New Jersey (WPUNJ) selected Academic Partnerships, a leading online program management company, to help them deliver high quality, affordable workforce-relevant academic programs to students online. WPUNJ is a leading public university with more than 10,000 students and offers a wide range of undergraduate and graduate degree programs through four academic colleges: Arts, Humanities, and Social

Sciences; Cotsakos College of Business; Education; and Science and Health. Their partnership demonstrates the power and best practices of partnerships for graduate programs thinking of going (or growing) online.

Since 2020, more than 3,000 students have enrolled at William Paterson University in online degree programs supported by Academic Partnerships. Some of these students have already completed their respective graduate degree programs and attended an in-person graduation in Newark, New Jersey, last May. WPUNJ, supported by Academic Partnerships' ability to scale and was able to build the ecosystem required for success. This success was primarily accomplished through three key elements that set a strong foundation not only for the recruitment of new students, but for their successful continuous enrollment and graduation. The three elements of the William Paterson University model are executive sponsorship, collaborative partnership, and shared vision.

#1: Executive Sponsorship

Great university leaders set the tone for academic communities. These executives know they must not only lead change on campus, but they must also embody that change. To affect transformational institutional growth and to shift community mindsets towards innovation, a university leader must provide the executive presence and sponsorship necessary to endorse a shared vision and outcome for success. The executive team at William Paterson University provided their endorsement and leadership from the beginning of their work with Academic Partnerships, and it made a tremendous impact.

Provost Joshua P. Powers was joined by Associate Provost for Curriculum and International Education Jonathan Lincoln and Associate Provost for Academic Initiatives Kara M. Rabbitt, and led the vision and call for internal championship. To ensure success launching new online graduate programs, these executive leaders invested their time, presence, and energy in making sure different academic teams, departments, and administrators at WPUNJ rallied around their shared goals.

The collegial atmosphere created by executive leadership set the tone for a dynamic partnership with clear

delineation of roles with a shared commitment to student success. Just as it does for its on-campus programs, William Paterson focuses on and retains complete control over the academic core of the online programs that Academic Partnerships' supports through resources and market-relevant expertise. Academic Partnerships supports the university through integrated marketing, enrollment and retention services, and actionable insights. William Paterson University and its faculty remain in complete control of admission standards, decisions, program curriculum and instruction, program standards and content, as well as the conferral of degrees and grades.

#2: Collaborative Partnership

As previously discussed, the ability to scale efficiently and with agility is a key factor in university leadership's decision to involve an online program management company like Academic Partnerships in the development of new graduate programs. Scalability does not just mean having the right technology and infrastructure, although these would be considered "table stakes" required to "get the job done." A true collaborative partnership that brings shared success to campus communities requires managed growth without sacrificing quality. In a deep partnership, graduate enrollment managers and university partners retain complete control of the academic core of the online programs.

While retaining complete control, by working with Academic Partnerships William Paterson University gains enhanced outreach to qualified prospective students, external investment to launch new programs, and continuous investment to maintain efficiency and market leadership for online programs.

The Academic Partnerships team worked comprehensively with faculty and administrative teams at WPUNJ through effective and efficient collaboration. By working collaboratively through a shared process to set goals for growth alongside professors and other student-facing professionals, Academic Partnerships was able to offer WPUNJ realistic, grounded recommendations that fit within their existing framework. Over the course of two days, the team from Academic Partnerships provided faculty with an opportunity to get any questions answered

and support the delivery of their high-quality degrees (this meeting was also attended by Associate Provosts Lincoln and Rabbitt, demonstrating the support of the senior academic leadership to the faculty during these sessions).

The faculty of William Paterson University also benefited from resources provided by Academic Partnerships, such as course mapping tools and instructional design support to ensure best practices in online pedagogy. Investment in faculty is critical – collaborative partnerships mean deeply engaging with university academic experts and professors to ensure the highest level of quality and integrity of content and learning materials. A major criticism of online programs continues to be academic rigor, and this step can make a difference when building online graduate programs designed to help students succeed in their careers.

#3: Alignment of Vision

At the outset of any partnership, it is important to assume shared vision and positive intent on all sides among partners to ensure success. Justifying that assumption to engender trust and respect, however, requires time, as well as the executive sponsorship and collaboration mentioned above. In on-campus terms, building a magnificent partnership is like building a magnificent campus building – it takes planning, campus stakeholder alignment, and a strong foundation. With strong executive sponsorship and operational alignment, the relationship between William Paterson University and Academic Partnerships has blossomed over 2 years to include new academic disciplines and operational efficiencies. This shared success has spurred trust and expanded the partnership in exciting ways.

The success of WPUNJ goes beyond the enrollment growth illustrated. Student enrollment growth brings with it new resources for staffing and teaching. Shared success has led to an innovative, deep partnership where good questions are asked on both sides. The team at WPUNJ places a premium on reaching the right applicants for their online graduate programs, and Academic Partnerships has paid deep attention to the digital strategy employed to attract those prospective applicants, and regularly informs WPUNJ on market trends and ways to manage growth in cost-sensitive ways. For

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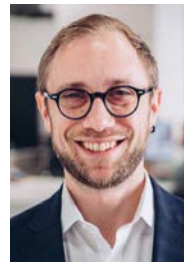
example, William Paterson University can maintain an average tuition for its online MBA that is far below mega-universities and many local, private competitors with online MBA programs. When news of shared success reached other stakeholder groups at WPUNJ, additional programs (including undergraduate degrees) were added to the expanding portfolio of high-quality online offerings provided in partnership with AP.

The landscape of online higher education is dynamic, diverse, and competitive, going well beyond traditional recruitment territories. The launch of new online graduate programs expands geographic opportunities for enrollment managers, enabling William Paterson to not only grow outside of New Jersey, but to become more competitive for online students in the Garden State, as well. For example, from 2015 to 2020, the number of New Jersey students enrolled in online programs from out-of-state institutions increased by almost 160 percent, according to [The National Council for State Authorization Reciprocity Agreements](#). Among the top three destinations are the out-of-state mega-universities mentioned earlier (these institutions are also among the primary competitors of William Paterson University in digital advertising).

By creating an efficient partnership with a shared vision, William Paterson University successfully navigates this challenging competitive environment to reach and serve new online students in New Jersey and beyond. The superior quality, affordability, and workforce relevance of WPUNJ online graduate programs is even clearer when compared with some of the mega-university options targeting New Jersey students. With an intentional focus on academic quality, core programs and student success, William Paterson University continues to grow

strong graduate programs while going up against large, sophisticated, and well-resourced out-of-state competitors.

Graduate enrollment managers have options to consider when planning how to meet (and exceed) goals from executive leadership. Partnerships with industry-leading private companies like OPMs can help universities innovatively reach new populations of students. Undergraduate enrollment managers have long leveraged these kinds of partnerships to enable enrollment growth and expand institutional outreach. For example, universities increasingly view opportunities to the almost 40 million Americans with some college but no undergraduate degree with industry-specific virtual learning programs designed to be “stackable” for adult working learners. Companies like Google and Amazon have partnered with universities to award academic credit for industry training. Graduate degree programs can similarly position themselves for success through private partnerships, and stand to benefit from this shift in focus, also. As undergraduate students find new, stackable ways to complete their degrees, new opportunities to serve these students online will emerge for innovative graduate enrollment managers. ■



Ray Lutzky is vice president at Academic Partnerships and a former NAGAP Board member.

Strategic Partnership Council



The Strategic Partnership Council (SPC) is designed for organizations whose missions are aligned with NAGAP's and who wish to become more strategically engaged with our association.

Through customized marketing and collaboration platforms we offer bundled packages and unique opportunities for organizations to help build and maintain year-round relationships with our members and GEM professionals across the nation and around the world.

To learn more about the SPC, visit our website: <https://nagap.org/strategic-partnership-council>