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## Higher Education Case Study

### *The Recruitment “Stool” Gains a Fourth Leg at Chowan University*

*In 2009, this 161 year-old private liberal arts institute sets a record for freshman enrollment*

As most college admissions professionals know, achieving student recruitment goals is usually a very wobbly process. There is the old analogy that it is like a three-legged stool. You can’t change one of the three “legs,” i.e. the academic profile, financial aid, or class size, without adjusting the other “legs.”

However, in 2009, without increasing financial aid or reducing academic requirements, Chowan University increased full-time freshman enrollment by 29%, while also reducing its marketing cost per enrolled student by 50%. A targeted, personalized, one-to-one marketing approach paid big rewards for this institution while keeping the enrollment stool steady.

### **The Problem**

Chowan University is a private liberal arts institution located in Murfreesboro, NC, an area of the state that locals refer to as the Inner Banks. Surrounded by small agrarian communities, and 45 minutes from I-95, Chowan is definitely off the beaten path, but as they put it, “only an hour from anywhere.”

Originally founded in 1848 as Chowan Baptist Female Institute, a 4-year women’s college, the school became Chowan College in 1910, and began enrolling male students in 1931. On the heels of the Great Depression, the school became a 2-year institute in 1937 but returned to four-year status in 1992.

In 2004, Chowan College was certainly on a very wobbly footing. A new president was appointed, and a new course set for Chowan that involved a number of changes. The school was renamed Chowan University in 2006, and took an aggressive approach to recruiting students, recognizing them as the lifeblood of a tuition supported institution.

Chowan began working with a well-respected higher education recruitment partner based in Richmond, VA. The aggressive direct mail approach of sending search letters to a pool of nearly 100,000 prospects successfully brought results, but it also resulted in other issues. First, while the approach brought in a lot of applications, it was an expensive pursuit. Second, with the onslaught of apps, Chowan experienced too many “soft” applications and a lagging yield. Third, the quantity of soft apps really stretched the resources of the admissions office, which resulted in less than optimal use of the assets available.



## The Solution

In late 2008, Chowan University engaged New Reach Media as its strategic partner for enrollment communications to employ a new strategy. The new approach was to address the shortcomings of the existing program, specifically too many unqualified applications and its high expense.

The first step of the new strategy was to take a more targeted approach and reduce the size of the search pool. This was accomplished through a quantitative analysis of the three previous years' search pools and their results by New Reach Media. Based on this analysis, Chad Holt, Dean of Admissions at Chowan University, worked with New Reach and developed a plan that targeted only the higher potential candidates with a more effective and economical approach. The result was a reduction in the size of the search pool from nearly 100,000 to less than 40,000.

The smaller pool obviously demanded a higher conversion rate, and therefore the communication and recruitment process needed to be more effective, yet meet the new budget objectives at the same time. The new communication plan that was devised consisted of replacing the previous conventional search letter in a fancy four-color envelope with personalized four-color postcards and complementary emails to drive students to personal microsites where the recruitment message could be delivered on a one-to-one basis.

When students arrived at their personal microsites, they were addressed with personalized, targeted information based on what was already known about them, as well as given the opportunity to share more information about themselves and their preferences through a brief survey. Additionally, they had the options of completing a "VIP" application and other pre-populated sign-up forms that promoted campus visits and scholarship programs.

Unlike the typical search approach that usually relies on a single communication to develop interest from a prospect, and then takes no further action unless a response is received, the new strategy involved leveraging the economy of the postcard and the email communications to reach out numerous times to the pool of higher potential candidates.

At the heart of this campaign was New Reach Media's Personal Relationship Optimization<sup>sm</sup> (PRO<sup>sm</sup>) platform. Unique student microsite visits and activities were tracked in real time and reported to the admissions staff on a daily basis. The data collected from microsite activity was also pushed back to the school and integrated into its Jenzabar enrollment management system. This process reduced much of the manual data input that was involved with past programs.

The daily reports and data provided by the PRO<sup>sm</sup> platform allowed the Chowan admissions staff to evaluate the level of interest of individual students based on their website activities. It was made obvious which students were showing interest by whether they visited their personal sites and then how much interaction they engaged in there.

This data was also used to further refine ongoing personalized emails and intermittent postcards to interested students to drive applications, campus visits, and scholarship information at the appropriate times. The call to action of the postcards or links in the emails always involved sending the students to their personal microsites where personalized pre-populated forms made it easy for the students to apply or respond.



This process was continued beyond the search and enrollment application and into the yield phase as well. Content on the personal microsites changed for accepted applicants to drive a new set of objectives. Financial aid and housing forms were promoted, as well as assuring that the all important campus visit took place. And of course, getting the commitment of the enrollment deposit was a main goal. The microsites continued to support the enrollment process up to matriculation.

## **Results**

For the fall semester of 2009, Chowan University increased its new fulltime enrollment by 29.5% over 2008. This was accomplished in light of a 2% decrease in inquiries, and a 25% reduction in applications, thereby demonstrating the effectiveness of Dean Holt's targeted personalized approach and diligent staff.

Key to the success of this program was the high conversion rate of the applicants. While there was nearly a 9% reduction in the total offers of admission, the total net deposits for 2009 exceeded 2008 by 32%.

But what about the cost to achieve these improved enrollment results? What legs on the admissions stool changed? In terms of academics and financial aid, they were kept in parity with 2008.

In terms of the budget for enrollment, again Dean Holt resoundingly met his initial goal of reducing cost. Compared to 2008, the operational cost per full time enrolled student decreased by 49.5%. Similar decreases were seen down the line with operational cost per inquiry falling by 33%, and the cost per net deposit falling by 50%. Overall, Chowan University reduced its total recruitment costs by nearly \$200,000 while achieving a record enrollment.

## **Conclusion**

Chowan University appears to have defied the old adage of the three-legged stool. The new approach utilizing New Reach Media's one-to-one communication platform proved to be an effective, economical solution that brought the stability of a fourth leg to a potentially precarious situation. In the final analysis, the initial objectives of better-qualified applications and a lower overall cost were not just achieved, but surpassed in many ways.

If you would like additional information about how Chowan University turned 2009 into a banner year for enrollment, feel free to contact Chad Holt, VP of Enrollment at Chowan University, at 252-398-6298, or Craig Jenkins, President of New Reach Media, at 210-764-8881. Both will be happy to answer your questions.