

# Making the Numbers Work

BY KIM FERNANDEZ

**International admissions officers embrace research and data as marketing tools.**

**B**ACK IN 2006, Ron Cushing, director of international services at the University of Cincinnati, got wind of a survey that would, once answered, stack up his programs against those of other schools in a number of categories, including academic offerings and recruiting practices. He signed up, filled out a few e-mail forms, and several months later saw, in black and white, how his program compared with others in the United States and around the world.

To say the least, it was eye-opening.

"Many international markets look to *U.S. News and World Report* as the benchmark," he says. "They look to that to see what might be a good school and what might not. But there are flaws in *U.S. News and World Report*."

The research part, though, made sense. And despite the fact that most U.S. universities weren't using research and data in their recruiting efforts, Cushing signed up to use the International Student Barometer (ISB) survey, which gathers data from more than 170,000 international students

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every year, representing 700 colleges and universities in 24 countries, and gives institutional participants not only the results of their own students' surveys, but also how those responses stack up against those from similar students at other universities.

“We use the data from the ISB to say, ‘Here is what our students here think,’” says Cushing. “And it’s what they think about the campus, our facilities, our instructors, the opportunities they have to work, the international office itself—all the things you’re going to be most concerned about as international students. Here is direct feedback from them in all of those areas.”

The results, he says, were immediately helpful.

“One of the early pieces of data we received showed that we were three weeks behind the competition when it came to making responses in admissions decisions at the undergraduate level,” he says. “At that time, we didn’t have an international admissions office at the undergraduate level. And we were able to take that data and make the argument that we were behind our competitors, and that we needed an international admissions office to bring us up to market speed.” It happened—he got his admissions staff. “The data was important,” he says.

While the trend of using data and research to boost international student recruitment and admissions hasn’t exactly taken off in the United States—experts say only a handful of schools have started doing it in earnest—it’s been a consideration in Europe for quite some time. There, they say, studies and surveys are the rule rather than the exception, and research is used to help market schools to the students who would be best served by them.

U.S. universities are just starting to jump aboard the train, using data to do everything from help design the format and tone of their Web sites to massage international marketing efforts into just the right shape for each unique audience. And while it does cost some

money and take some time, those who’ve done it say the data more than pays for itself once it goes into use.

### Paying Off

Pamela Barrett, senior consultant with the International Graduate Insight Group (which administers the ISB), says Cushing’s experience is not unique.

“There is huge interest in the survey,” she says, adding that 25 U.S. institutions are currently using it. “There’s quite an understanding

that the research provides you with the data and evidence to improve your international student recruitment and the services you provide. Data can help you set expectations during recruitment, and help you meet the expectations of students once they’re on campus.”

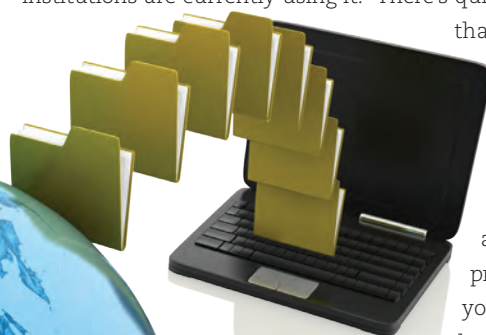
Others agree. “We’re seeing a higher demand for and interest in data and information,” says Rahul Choudaha, director of development and innovation at World Education Services in New York. “The openness of the data that’s available is driving that. Earlier, there was not much data available, and as it becomes more automated, there are more data points available.”

He says the reason for the push is simple: universities, like many other businesses, have to do more and more with less nowadays.

“There’s an efficiency argument for using data,” he says. “We’re seeing budget cuts. Institutions are doing more with less. We have to prove the efficiency of our efforts, and the demand for research to improve our practices is increasing.”

Even so, he says, international education offices lag behind their domestically focused colleagues when it comes to collecting and interpreting data to help fill classrooms.

“These kinds of reporting systems have existed in the for-profit world outside of education for some time,” he says. “Inside education,





they've been used in domestic admissions, too. But up to recently, pretty much nothing had been done on the international admissions recruitment side. People haven't done this kind of research and analysis."

And in an age when potential students need only fire up their computers or iPads to get a sense of the universities that might interest them, from all over the world, he says, admissions officers and recruiters have started demanding the data to best catch their eyes.

"Institutions are now trying to use and track a lot of external reports that are available," he says. "They're looking at data and information about larger trends and student mobility, and trying to figure out how those numbers affect their individual institutions. At a more institutional level, people are trying to become more aware of how they can track their applicant pipelines effectively. You have a number of people applying and a number getting admitted and a number who enroll. So the management practices that have existed on the domestic side are becoming more open on the international admissions side as well."

While some of that research is as specific as that of the ISB, other areas focus on simply catching the attention of international stu-



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dents and helping them understand how to navigate a school's Web site or admissions process. And those bits of information can come from some surprising places.

## Playing the Game

Daniel Chatham, dean of admissions and financial aid at Keck Graduate Institute (KGI) of Applied Life Sciences in Claremont, California, says research and admissions were a natural marriage to him.

"I wanted to adapt research to help me recruit more effectively and achieve our enrollment goals," he says. But he didn't want to start at ground zero, and so he looked at some data that already existed and found, quite simply, that some things are universal.

"I saw a TED [Technology, Entertainment, Design Conference] talk about game dynamics," he says.<sup>1</sup> "We started incorporating that two or three years ago."

You read that right. Game dynamics actually have a useful place in admissions, as it turns out.

"One of the things we're using is research in game dynamics and applying the principles of game dynamics and game design to certain aspects of our admissions practice—appointment deadlines, status and progress indicators, and that sort of thing," he says. "There is an established and growing body of research about game dynamics and game design, and applying those things to the applications process leads to better results. We have a more engaged applicant pool and higher completion and conversion rates based on using certain appropriate game dynamics theories. We apply those to real processes in a tangible, actionable way."

Doing that, he says, is relatively simple.

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“Cushing finds the ISB to be such a useful tool. Any data that is not only collected for his department, but then analyzed and handed back to him in an easy-to-interpret form, is huge.”

“When communicating with an applicant that they have five of seven necessary requirements done for their application, we do it using a symbol like a thermometer or gauge showing their percentage of completion,” he says. “It’s a visual cue that they’ve almost achieved something, and it monitors their progress. Instead of letting a student flounder or not know what they’ve submitted, we have it right there: these are the things you’ve submitted, these are the things we’re still missing. We also use an appointment mechanism for admissions interviews. People will show up for a specific appointment more often than they’ll get themselves motivated if they don’t have a specific time.”

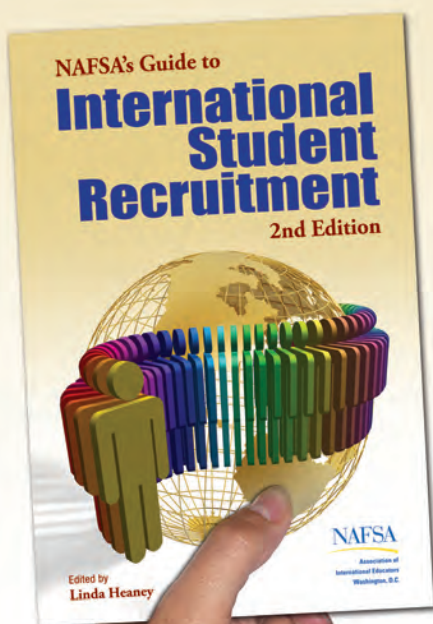
They also use this kind of research internally, he says, to monitor their own progress.

“We do research and find our own internal data,” he says. “It’s not quite academic research, but it’s the data we generate every day about our applicant pool, conversion rates, and that sort of thing. We have created an extensive set of dashboards that monitor our activities for recruitment purposes.” That allows staff to see what changes over time, and how those changes affect applications and enrollment rates.

### Challenges

Choudaha says that while many universities could probably easily come up with their own research, establishing priorities and goals is critical, and there’s a real risk of information overload.

“One challenge is capacity in terms of the human resources



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you have available," he says. "Do you have people with these skill sets to do these analyses? And second is how to interpret the data you collect. How do you make sense of it to improve the practice? It's not about just having a lot of data. It's about how you interpret it and make decisions based on it."

"Look at Google Analytics," he says. "That was nonexistent a few years back, and now the Web site has become the dominant way by which universities discover applicants. The emergence of these free tools means we've become more aware of monitoring traffic more vigilantly. But information on how to use these data is still missing. One of the biggest surprising factors for me has been that people report the inability to differentiate between challenges. They're still working and making decisions based, a lot of times, on hunches and not any underlying data that supports them."

That, says Cushing, is why he finds the ISB to be such a useful tool. Any data that is not only collected for his department, but then analyzed and handed back to him in an easy-to-interpret form, is huge.

"From a time perspective, it doesn't take me any more time than it would to deal with any other issue," he says. "I don't implement it. I don't tally the data. That all comes to me already done. I release the survey with a few e-mails to students, and it takes me zero time to do the data analysis. What takes my time is using that to find out where our areas of weakness are, and how we might address those—to try and develop programs that make things better."

Does it work? He says, absolutely.

"Our numbers have gone up dramatically in the last two to three years," he says. "We've more than tripled our undergraduate student numbers. Recruiting is our focus since we started this initiative."

That includes changes he's made in recruiting, such as using agents in China, as

well as changes made for students already at the campus.

"We've done things like open our library 24/7, expanded our shuttle service, have a room dedicated to prayer," he says. "We've done all of those things in response to data we've gotten from the survey."

Those kinds of things have boosted the university's standing among other institutions around the world that also use the ISB. "We can say that we're in a wave that has 203 schools worldwide, and we're in the top 10 in this and the top 20 in that," he says. "Those kinds of arguments go a long way."

So the cost, he says is well worth it.

"It costs me \$7,000 to implement this every year," he says. "The data we get back is well worth that investment. To me, it's a tremendous value."

Barrett says she's hearing that from more and more schools: that the time and money put into gathering and interpreting data almost always sways things in the right direction. And that, she says, is increasingly important as schools compete more and more with those around the globe, and not just nearby.

"Most of us know what we're doing and have been in the field for quite awhile," she says. "We need to be able to demonstrate the impact of our work. This is one way of doing that."

**KIM FERNANDEZ** is a freelance writer in Bethesda, Maryland. Her last article for *IE* was "One Path—Many Destinations" published with the May/June 2011 issue.

#### ENDNOTE

1 TED (online at [www.ted.com](http://www.ted.com)) is a nonprofit devoted to "ideas worth spreading." It began in 1984 as a conference bringing together people from three worlds: technology, entertainment, and design. It has since expanded to include more learning opportunities and they are building a clearinghouse that offers free knowledge and inspiration from the world's most inspired thinkers.

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