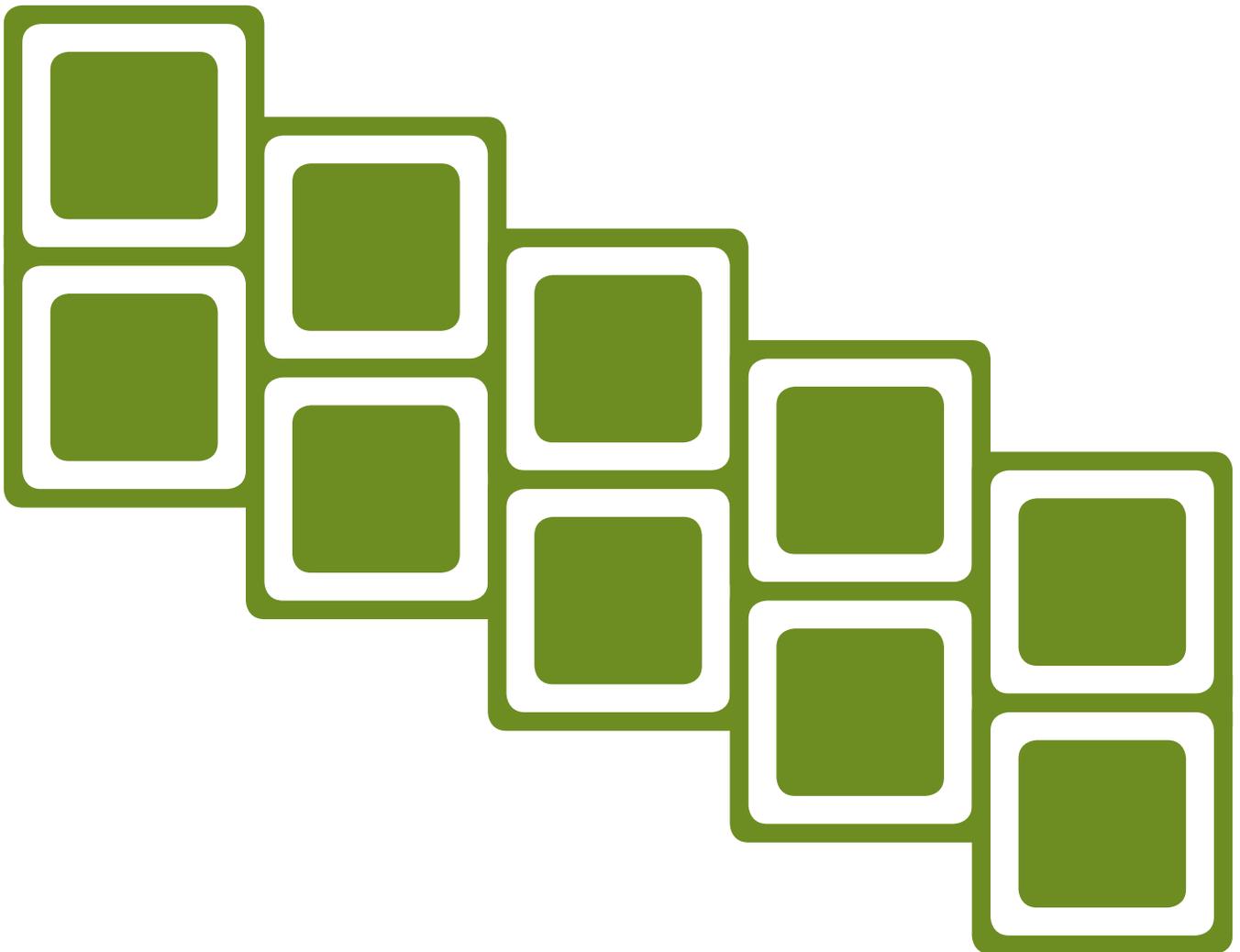


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Converting Admits into Registrants: Increasing the Yield of Visiting Students in Summer Session

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Abstract

In an effort to increase enrollment, the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) employed new strategies to encourage visiting students admitted for the summer session to register in summer courses. This case study describes how UIC shifted from a passive student services approach to a more active model, which included relationship building and one-on-one communications with students in a strategy designed to improve enrollment yield among summer students.

Introduction

Before 2010, the student services model at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) Summer Session Office was one you might expect to find at any institution that works to attract visiting summer students to its campus. Over the years the Summer Session Office has worked hard to develop strong student services. Staff are trained with best practices to respond to students' calls and emails in a professional and timely manner. Solid collaborative relationships have been established with key units—such as admissions, registration, and academic departments—to ensure that issues related to visiting students are handled smoothly. The admission-to-enrollment experience is made as seamless as possible by understanding the visiting student audience and anticipating and meeting their needs.

However, the office's thinking—and service model—evolved after exposure to a suite of fully online programs and their outcomes-based support model. What follows is a case study of how the Summer Session Office adopted a more proactive service model, which included relationship building and one-on-one communications with students in an effort to increase enrollment of visiting students.

Background

UIC is a public research university with a single urban campus in downtown Chicago. It offers a four-week session in the summer followed by an eight-week session. The program principally consists of credit-bearing undergraduate courses funded by the Summer Session Office (327 in summer 2010). Although UIC's summer session also includes graduate and professional courses, these are not managed by this office.

The Summer Session Office is primarily charged with protecting and growing undergraduate summer enrollments; key marketing targets are both campus undergraduates and visiting undergraduates. In fall 2010, the institution enrolled 27,300 students, 62% (16,800) of whom were undergraduates. In summer 2010, the campus had a total of 9,000 enrollments, 50% (4,500) of them undergraduates. Visiting students—many who return home to the Chicago area for the summer and are attracted to UIC's location, session options, and broad course selection—accounted for 17% of all undergraduates in the summer.

The application process for visiting summer students has been kept relatively simple. All high school graduates in good academic standing at their current institutions are eligible to apply. Students can apply online up to a week before the start of classes, and no application fees or transcripts are required (instead, students are asked to self-report their academic standing on the application).

UIC's summer activity, especially undergraduate enrollments, has historically produced significant revenue for the campus. Net revenue is not directly shared with the Summer Session Office or the colleges but instead is retained by the campus general budget in order to fund a variety of campus programs and needs. However, the campus does provide the Summer Session Office

with a budget to cover administrative expenses, marketing, and instructional salaries. Historically this budget was provided as a fixed allocation with prescribed increases. In recent years the campus revised this funding model to one that is more flexible in responding to enrollment demand, relying on the Summer Session Office to evaluate the mix and to expand course offerings on the basis of this demand.

Opportunities for Growth

Over the years, the university has gradually begun shifting to a more evidence-based, results-oriented environment. Against this backdrop and in an effort to develop new opportunities for growth, UIC’s summer session was expanded in 2008 to add a new four-week session to the existing eight-week session. This change called for a reexamination of summer session marketing. It also precipitated new ideas about the role of student services in these growth efforts.

Since the expansion meant that more students—specifically those from schools operating on quarter systems—could now take UIC’s courses, marketing efforts were increased to attract visiting students, and this intensified marketing was continued in 2009. The list of feeder schools for visiting student applicants was refined by identifying new feeders. The purchase of email and postal lists was discontinued because they were of poor quality and not effective in reaching the intended audience. Savings were used to buy more Facebook advertising, increase placement of newspaper inserts, and start poster at target schools.

Table 1: Applications and Enrollments of Visiting Students, 2007–2009

	Applications	Net change	Enrolled	Net change	% Yield from applications*
2007	1,477		642		43%
2008	1,389**	-88**	729	+87	52%
2009	1,708	+319	745	+16	44%

* Percent yield is calculated on all applications rather than admitted applicants only, since UIC consistently admits approximately 96% of visiting summer applicants each year.

** Because of the expansion of the session structure in 2008, applications became available later than usual, resulting in a decrease in submitted applications.

As Table 1 shows, these focused efforts increased applications by visiting students from 2007 to 2009 by 231, which confirmed that these marketing efforts were working. This larger applicant pool also generated a net increase over two years of 103 enrolled students.

However, the percentage of applicants who actually enrolled remained fairly constant. The Summer Session Office had always been aware that enrollment yield from applications was about 44% over the years. Now that there was a growing consciousness about the results of these marketing efforts, this raised the question of whether there was a way to foster enrollment growth by also increasing yield. This led to the realization that it was time to try something different to

reach out to prospective students who were past the admission stage but in the preregistration stage. Since there had already been an investment in marketing to get visiting students to apply—which had succeeded—there now also needed to be a way to get more applicants to take the next step and register.

A Different Model of Student Services

It was during this time that UIC established a new School of Continuing Studies (which currently reports to the vice provost for planning and programs). The school houses several units including the Summer Session Office and UIC Online, which administers several fully online self-supporting degree and certificate programs. This restructuring resulted in an unexpected benefit for the Summer Session Office by providing exposure to enrollment advising methods used by UIC Online. This unit's enrollment model is based on having dedicated staff who know the programs and cultivate an ongoing relationship with prospective students. UIC Online's staff proactively communicate with students by using their individual situations and needs as springboards for conversations throughout the students' life cycle.

Although UIC Online has a more assertively entrepreneurial service model, the Summer Session Office was still able to benefit from the exposure to this model while considering whether there were new ways to increase summer enrollments. The Summer Session Office decided to adopt this proactive approach of initiating contact with interested students instead of passively waiting for them to contact the office. This approach was used with visiting applicants who had been admitted, since they had already expressed an interest in summer session and taken action by applying. Since the office had the attention of these students, it made sense to take advantage of it by personally reaching out to them.

Implementing the Conversion Strategy

The Summer Session Office developed a plan for summer 2010, called the conversion strategy, in which admitted visiting students who had not registered for courses once registration began were systematically contacted by phone by student services staff. Since students were not expecting calls from UIC, a lot of time was spent putting together the scripts to ensure that they were not "sales-y" and maintained a friendly and helpful tone. (See Appendix for the phone script.) During the conversion calls, staff reminded students that they had applied and been admitted to summer session, and then asked if they had any questions about registering, now that registration had begun. It was a subtle way of bringing up that they had not yet registered without directly saying so.

If a student could not be reached by phone, staff left a voicemail and sent a follow-up email. The email stated that the Summer Session Office had tried contacting the students by phone. As with the phone script, the email maintained a friendly and helpful tone, asking students if they had any questions about registering. (See Appendix for the email script.) Emails were found to be effective because many students preferred to respond to emails instead of calling the office back.

The calls were broken up into two batches to make the conversion strategy more manageable for staff. The first batch of calls were made to students who were admitted from mid-March through the end of April; these students were contacted before the start of the four-week session (see Table 2). The second batch of calls were made to students who were admitted in May; these students were contacted before the start of the eight-week session—the session that is most popular with visiting students (see Table 2).

Table 2: 2010 Conversion Strategy Timeline

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
APRIL	26	27	28 First day for visiting students to register	29	30
	3	4 5 Batch 1 (241 students contacted)		6	7 4-week session application deadline
MAY	10	11	12	13	14
	17 4-week session starts	18	19	20	21
JUNE	31	1 2 Batch 2 (152 students contacted)		3	4 8-week session application deadline
	7	8	9	10	11
	14 8-week session starts	15	16	17	18

Note: Batch 1: students admitted from mid-March through April. Batch 2: students admitted in May.

Although May and June are busy months for the Summer Session Office, the goal of personally reaching out to 393 students (about 25 students per day) was successfully met. Since there was only a small window of time between the start of registration for visiting students and the start of summer session, timing was critical, requiring a solid plan and two staff members working on this student services initiative to manage the workload.

Outcomes in Year 1

Of the 393 admitted students who were contacted in 2010, 82 (21%) registered for courses. While this outcome was gratifying, the main concern was how it translated to the overall conversion rate. The conversion strategy resulted in an increase in registered students (+24) in 2010 (see Table 3). However, the conversion rate remained the same as in the previous summer, with 44% of all admitted students registering for courses.

Table 3: Applications and Enrollments of Visiting Students, 2007–2011

	Applications	Net change	Enrolled	Net change	% Yield from applications
2007	1,477		642		43
2008	1,389	-88	729	+87	52
2009	1,708	+319	745	+16	44
2010 (Year 1)	1,730	+22	769	+24	44
2011 (Year 2)	1,590	-140	702	-67	44

Although it is difficult to tell whether the previously unregistered students would have registered even if the Summer Session Office had not reached out to them, and outcomes did not show an overall increase in the conversion rate, the students' reactions encouraged the office to continue with the conversion strategy for a second year. While many students were surprised that the Summer Session Office personally contacted them, they responded positively to the calls and emails. Students typically did not have any major issues, but they used the conversion calls and emails as an opportunity to ask us questions. This seemed to be an immeasurable benefit since they might not have taken the initiative to contact the campus on their own.

Modifications and Outcomes in Year 2

Overall, the first year of the conversion strategy went smoothly, so only a few modifications were made for Year 2. Since the workload was found to be manageable for one person, only one staff member contacted students in 2011. Having only one person contact students also made it less confusing for other staff when students replied to conversion calls and emails. Another important change was modifying the application for visiting students by adding a question about what courses students wanted to enroll in. This provided staff with a key talking point when contacting students.

In Year 2 the date range for the list of admitted but unregistered students was expanded, and 526 students were contacted. Because the detailed data from 2010 suggested that students who applied earlier were more likely to register, the contact list now included students who had applied before mid-March. However, despite the increase in the number of students contacted, the number of students from that group who registered for courses was 84, 16% of the total contacted and only two more than had registered in 2010. And as Table 3 indicates, although the application and registration numbers dropped, the conversion rate remained constant at 44%.

Conclusion

The sizable group of visiting students who are admitted for summer session at UIC each year but who do not register for courses has long seemed a population that could yield additional enrollments with the appropriate effort. These students are, after all, “qualified leads.” They have shown interest both in summer session and in UIC by taking the time to apply. The efforts designed and executed by UIC’s Summer Session Office staff over 2010 and 2011 sought to realize a higher conversion rate from admitted to registered students by actively reaching out to these students and attempting to remove or resolve any obstacles the students might be experiencing—or simply perceiving. Although it must be recognized that the percentage of admitted students who convert to registered students might have decreased without the efforts the Summer Session Office made for these two summers, it is clear that this new focus has not increased the historical conversion rate.

What value, then, if any, did this initiative have? First, in the way that all organizations that intend to remain vital must do, it caused the Summer Session Office to review its practice and reinvigorate it. Second, it demonstrated—if not scientifically, at least persuasively—that the students who are admitted but do not register may have reasons for their decisions other than that they had unanswered questions about UIC, the course selection, or some other factor that staff could help to resolve. And finally, there is a recognition that this more active posture is a valuable addition to the Summer Session Office’s student services approach—especially in that it helped refine the understanding of student needs even further. Student services staff have gained a new perspective on their work. Interactions with students are no longer simply about providing information but are about seeing that a student enrolls in a course, if that is what he or she needs and wants.

Appendix

Phone Script

“Hi [Tom], this is Kati Cruger from the Summer Session Office at the University of Illinois at Chicago. You applied and were admitted to UIC’s Summer Session. Since registration for courses has begun and classes will be starting soon, I’m calling to check in to find out if you have any questions about registering.”

Email Script

Subject line: UIC Summer Session Phone Call Follow-up

Hi [Tom],

I tried contacting you by phone but I was unable to reach you. As I may have mentioned in my message, you applied and were admitted to UIC’s Summer Session. Since registration for summer courses has begun, I just wanted to check in to find out if you have any questions about registering.

Classes will be starting soon. The 4-week session begins on Monday, May 17 and the 8-week session begins on Monday, June 14. Visit our website for other key dates and registration deadlines. If you have any questions, don’t hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Kati Cruger

Biographies

Natalie Kokorudz is assistant director of the Summer Session Office at the University of Illinois at Chicago. A graduate from UIC, she has been working at the Summer Session Office for the past 13 years. She initially was responsible for customer service and financial management. Currently her responsibilities have grown to oversight of student services, marketing, the operating budget, and the summer instructional budget, in which she works with the colleges on planning and funding summer course offerings. She also has been serving on the Executive Committee of the North Central Conference on Summer Schools as secretary since 2007. What she likes about working in summer session is the variety of activities involved in making summer happen and the challenge of making the most of university resources to serve student needs.

Pam Levy is a senior program coordinator at the University of Illinois at Chicago and has been working there for the past four years. She oversees the marketing and student services team that serves both summer session and continuing education students. She earned her BS in marketing from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and her MBA in integrated marketing communications from DePaul University. What she enjoys about working in summer session is planning and executing a mix of traditional and nontraditional marketing and student services activities to attract campus students as well as visiting students.