



TAKING THE GUESSWORK OUT OF NEW PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

By Joel Borgmeier

Grow, grow, grow. It's on the minds of most educational leaders—how can you expand your offerings and enrollments to meet the growth goals of your institution? Certainly new program development plays a large role in attracting more students and meeting their needs, but how do you know which programs have the best potential?



TC

The resources and costs at stake when launching a new program, whether on-campus or online, require multiple steps, data sources and analytical tools. It isn't enough just to identify an opportunity. Rather, it is in the best interest of your school and your students to substantiate it with data through a concrete program feasibility study.

Louisville's ATA College, which specializes in allied health programs, knows this well. While it had a committee and course of action in place to research high-demand careers in the area, the school needed to know more before it went through the rigorous process of developing a new program.

Program feasibility studies allow schools to objectively assess the audience, the site and the program itself. Most colleges and universities can't afford expensive market research, yet they need more direction on where to start when it comes to conducting an in-depth analysis on their own.

The best programs in the world will likely fail if they can't answer these two questions:

- 1) Are there enough students out there to make the program viable?
- 2) How will we market to this target audience, and how much will this cost?

There are essentially five areas of research that will help you draw upon these conclusions. By analyzing and combining the information from each key area, you'll be better prepared to predict which programs can be successful, and why.

THE MOST ROBUST PROGRAM FEASIBILITY STUDIES RELY ON SYNDICATED DATA LICENSES, ANALYTICAL SOFTWARE AND AN EXPERIENCED TEAM.

STUDENT SEGMENTATION

When looking at potential student targets, you'll want to identify what types of students and households would be a good fit for the program. Using a syndicated profiling system, you can determine who your students are, where they are, how many of them there are, and where can you find more of them. A syndicated segmentation tool will allow you to better assess student data so that you can project general interest, likely conversions, and ultimately, the number of students who might enroll.

MARKET OVERVIEW

An assessment of the market will include demographic data from your student segmentation research, in addition to your market definition and general market trends. You'll want to research government data on annual job openings by program/field, unemployment rates, household incomes, education attainment levels, working population counts, current and projected growth rates, population age segmentation, potential increases in population by age, racial and ethnic breakouts, and any other relevant measures.



STUDENT SEGMENTATION



MARKET OVERVIEW



LABOR MARKET & ECONOMIC ANALYSIS



MAPPING



COMPETITION



COMBINE THE INFORMATION

LABOR MARKET AND ECONOMIC ANALYSIS

As we continue to tread in uncertain economic waters, you'll want to be diligent about researching labor statistics, sources of labor, trends by occupation, and other economic indicators to assess the current situation, as well as forecasts for coming years. For example, will IT and healthcare continue to be growing fields for placement, or will other fields show more significant upward trends in occupational opportunities, and therefore greater demand for programs?

COMPETITION

Since competition for students these days is at an all time high, you'll want to know more about the types and levels of competing programs. Consider researching the overall density of competing programs and compare that to the available potential student base for both online and on-campus programs. Additionally, take into account various state and national averages of other programs, as well as key success factors associated with similar concepts taught at other schools.

MAPPING

By constructing detailed maps and map overlays, you can get a visual representation of all key data points to see where the best opportunities reside. You can also map distances from locations for targeted students so you can see where your largest audience resides, demographic information on your target audience, where the competition is located, where you should be marketing your program, and more.

While each study area provides valuable statistical outputs, the best possible use of all of this data is to combine it into a complete program feasibility study. Isolated data points from any specific area can indicate an opportunity worth pursuing, when in fact, there isn't one.

Having been through the process, ATA College relied on the compiled data to make a more informed decision. Heather Brown, who serves as director of admissions and marketing, noted that by using a program feasibility study,

ATA was able to gain insight into both the potential of a new program, as well as the challenges they could face adding the program.

"If you go back and look at the study in light of the decisions we have made, the study was right on in its assessment," Brown said.

Program feasibility studies can help identify and rate opportunities on a relative scale, helping colleges and universities avoid a mismatch of programs and the demand within specific markets. They provide a good basis from which to guide and validate market decisions, especially if the institution has multiple people, committees and approvals involved in the decision-making process.

There are opportunities to drill down even further if you are looking for more substantial recommendations. Additional primary research can dramatically enhance this process.

For example, employer surveys can help you better understand hiring trends and predict the likelihood of placement, while student surveys can better gauge interest levels and career goals. Operational capabilities, economic reality and faculty availability should also be considered and researched thoroughly.

Keep in mind that the most robust program feasibility studies often rely on numerous syndicated data licenses, analytical software and an experienced team to conduct the analysis and arrive at a valid conclusion.

Changing market conditions, stricter competition and added scrutiny from across the board—including internal boards, the federal government and accrediting agencies—make it more important than ever to rely on research to drive new program development. Program feasibility studies can give you the insight you need to objectively select programs that will better serve your students. And make costly mistakes avoidable. **TC**

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