

# Discovery and Selection

## A Librarian's View of Student Recruitment and Admissions

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**ABSTRACT** Have you ever wondered about the work of recruitment and admissions? And how it connects to the work of librarians and libraries, especially collection development? Join an insider's view that breaks down the essential tasks of recruitment, admissions, and financial aid while connecting these to the common work of librarians. We will also together explore ways that admissions departments and libraries might form creative partnerships that can advance the work of institution. These could include work around recruiting student workers, articulating research values, and preparing for future generations of students.

As I've reflected over my career of presentations at Atla Annual, this one seems to be the latest in a series that brings the curiosity and collaborative spirit of librarians to collaborate and work within other professions. One of my first presentations at ATLA Annual Conference was entitled "Are we IT" and considered the relationship between librarianship and information technology. For the old-timers here, it was during the 1998 Annual Conference that was held in the Xerox corporate center outside of Washington, DC. Since then, I've followed the curious and collaborative spirit of librarians into several different contexts, including my pivot into seminary administration now five years ago.

In the early Fall of 2022, our Associate Dean for Enrollment Management was about to announce her resignation and it became clear that there was likely to be a gap between her last day in an official capacity and the start of a successor. With admissions, it's essential to have a good handoff. As I brainstormed with the Dean and others, I quickly became the preferred option — not because I was any admissions genius but due to the trust of the current head, the cur-

rent admission staff, and of course, the dean. Plus, librarians are organized, responsible, and mostly friendly.

While starting the transition in October, I was fully in the position by December 1 and a search for new enrollment management leader was well underway. I figured this was a six-month interim at best. Into February, it became clear that the search failed as there were no applicants that the search committee was prepared to invite for interview. We decided to let the search rest while we tinkered further with the job description and title, changing the language from “executive director” to “assistant dean.” We relaunched the search two weeks ago and added a clearer timeline with deadlines and a couple of days in August for interviews. That’s where we are now — receiving applications — and so I suspect that I will be able to relinquish this role around October. I will have had a full year of admissions experience.

Today, I want to share a bit about what I have learned, how it parallels library work, and reflect about deepening connections between libraries and offices of admission.

### **THREE THINGS THAT I HAVE LEARNED**

First, recruitment and admissions for theological education is a tough gig in ways that are worth reflecting about, given the implications for libraries and librarians. The demand for full-time and credentialed clergy is uneven but decreasing. Please understand that not everyone who wants to go to seminary wants to become clergy, but given that it’s a significant purpose for MDiv and some MA degrees, the reduction on the demand side is palpable. You will note my specific reference to full-time and fully-credentialed. At least in my denomination, the United Methodist Church, the balance continues to shift toward part-time, alternatively credentialed clergy — who tend to be less likely to seek a graduate-level theological education for what is ultimately a part-time job. Second, and related to the first point, there is simply less interest in theological education, particularly among young generations who are also numerically smaller than earlier generations. In other words, you have fewer people and a smaller percentage of those are interested in theological education. Third, many of the usual pipelines or sources of prospective students are smaller or broken. Less demand, less interest, and less concentration of prospective students. There used to be churches, camps,

colleges that a seminary admissions recruiter could attend and find a dozen students interested in theological education. One might not get all of them to attend your seminary but there would at least be a critical mass of conversation about the seminary attendance. Now, seminary recruiters must go more places to find smaller numbers of prospective students.

Second, there is a long and complex flowchart from prospective student to actual student. As the Assistant Dean for Enrollment Management, I'm often asked, "how do the numbers look for next fall?" and I realize that there are many, many numbers based on where students may be in the flow. We tend to track inquiries (people who have inquired), applications awaiting submission, applications awaiting materials, applications submitted, decided, admitted, denied, admitted and accepted offer, admitted and matriculated, admitted and enrolled, enrolled at census date. When I was asked back in April to estimate how many new students we would expect to have in the fall, I looked back at historical numbers to figure out what percentage of inquires or applications awaiting submission typically would make it to census enrollment. I also came to find out that only 27–42% of the fall entering class had typically been admitted by the end of April. This makes for some anxious summers!

Third, the bleeding edge of recruitment is marketing. At Perkins, we have made some investment in what is often called *inbound marketing*. In my translation, this is effort to build and engage users with content related to our brand, and to cultivate these persons over time such that some percentage of them would apply and become students. This effort makes use of search engine optimization and keyword strategies. As an example, our marketing firm said for some strange reason, the two-word combination *seminary school* seemed to capture more searches than just the word *seminary*. It was counterintuitive to us; a *seminary* is a school, and while we were used to *school of theology* or *divinity school* or *theological seminary*, *seminary school* is not a phrase in common usage. We followed the data and wrote a blog that regularly using the two-word phrase *seminary school*. Anyway, this in-bound marketing work got us into the world of TOFU, MOFU, and BOFU. TOFU (or *top of funnel*) uses this metaphor of a funnel where you would start with a larger universe of people at the top of the funnel who would be engaging with your content and then end up with smaller universe of people at the bottom of the funnel that would be interested in theological education. The

idea was that we might attract someone into TOFU, or top of funnel, by a blog post or a video. If they found us through Google searching or an ad, we would consider them TOFU but then we would offer “sign up to get this great ebook or longer video that explains more about this thing.” Then, we might consider them MOFU, or *middle of funnel*. They are interested enough to give us their name and email address. Once we would have some of the contact information, we would use that to engage them in further content: to see another video and eventually, we would invite them to attend a virtual event or to learn more about our degree programs. Here, they would be BOFU, or *bottom of funnel*. Sometimes awkwardly, a dating metaphor is apt here. How to do you make the original introductions? How do you begin to exchange or share information, even personal information like phone numbers and email addresses? How do you get to sharing information about a degree program and for them to share their educational/vocational interests? How do you invite someone to attend a session to learn more or be part of a campus visit? How do you get someone to consider and commit to apply (queue the ring!), follow through with the application and solicitation of references, negotiate and accept the financial aid package (dowry), and then overcome any cold feet and show up to classes. And then, persist through an entire degree program (the third anniversary for a full-time MDiv).

## **PARALLELS WITH LIBRARIANSHIP**

### *The Planning and Art of Selection in Collection Development*

For me, this is where I saw the greatest parallels, except we are in a current period of abundance of books and scarcity of students. The parallels are a bit stronger if one considers an earlier period when books were relatively scarce and had to be sought after as well as chosen. One of the exercises I went through with the admission staff and others was to develop the admissions version of a collection development policy. Not that we always get to choose what books are published or in this case, which students will apply but what would be an ideal entering class. For us, this ended up being related to imagining the classroom experience and the critical mass or ratios that might influencing the vibrancy and flourishing of the classroom. For instance, we ideally wanted a certain representation of students who

have been employed in ministry, a certain representation of students who were coming straight from undergraduate institutions, various representations of age, ethnic and gender identities, and minimum numbers and ratios among our degree programs. What's an ideal cohort or classroom size? How is it different for on-campus versus hybrid education? What are reasonable minimums or maximums?

Just as librarians might chose to go to various book publishers, dealers, or fairs, where should we go for recruitment? Just as librarians might seek out publishers that align with their own faculty publishing or use within the curriculum, admissions looks for the contexts that will most likely yield students interested in our seminary and its programs. We are a United Methodist school and so we go to other Methodist-related colleges, universities, and campus ministries. We find conferences and gatherings that include our alumni and those who might influence a prospective student. For example, we have a Baptist House of Studies. There are some kinds of Baptists that would be open to coming to Perkins while others that do not. So, it is important to be recruiting among the right kinds of Baptists or in our case, the left kinds of Baptist.

One of the differences here is that ultimately, in libraries, the library chooses the book — the book or other resource generally doesn't get much say in the matter, whereas in admissions the choice of admission is a mutual one. Still, the selection and acquisition of a licensed resource is perhaps a little bit closer to the admissions process. For a licensed resource, a library can indicate interest but then might be left to negotiate price and terms of the license. Similarly, a seminary and a student can indicate mutual interest but a good bit of the decision for the student is dependent on the financial aid package. Also, like a license, we can put conditions on students in terms of maximum or minimum course load they can take in semester.

Once one comes to agreement about admissions and financial aid, we have a new parallel in tracking the financial aid packages and terms over time (just as a library might track price and license), ensuing that the student arrives in a similar way that library systems might track the arrival or availability of purchases resources. New student orientation is typically the handoff between admissions to academic affairs student life in a similar way that the end of acquisitions involves a handoff to cataloging and circulation.

### *The Scaffolding of Information Literacy*

As alluded to at the beginning, the admissions and recruitment process in many cases involved developing the knowledge and capabilities of prospective students in ways that can be roughly like information literacy. Some prospective students only barely understand theological education, the difference between degrees, the various vocational outcomes, or the fact that a good theological education will not answer all their questions about God but rather only helps them to pose better ones. (Again, sort of like libraries.) As an admissions staff interacts with prospective students, we try to scaffold our messages and interactions to help students better understand these unarticulated but broad principles. At the point of entry, there are also lots of detailed instructions regarding the orientation for entering classes and community. In my days in theological education, new student orientation was often a multi-day affair: there can be a lot to learn to fully operate a degree student in a complex institution within higher education.

### *The Descriptive Nature of Cataloging*

Part of getting the right messages out to the right people at the right time means a vigorous description of prospective students. We do track what emails we send to them, which ones they open, describe the nature of the phone calls or email interactions, which events do they attend, which programs were they curious about, or where they seem to be stuck in their application. In theory, we could identify everyone who has contacted us or responded to our contact in the last nine months but hasn't indicated their interest in a specific degree program and send them a message that describes our degree programs. Or perhaps we do some video profiles of alumni in a diversity of vocations and then we send this to prospective students who have started but not completed an application as a way of helping them envision vocational goals related to their education. So, in similar ways to descriptive cataloging, we have to describe both the prospective students and the content/messages that we would want to send.

### *The Customer Service of Public Services*

Hospitality, friendliness, and welcome are traits for both admissions offices and the public services of libraries. You want both the physical office and the virtual spaces to be welcoming and you want staff to be responsive in answering questions. Like a reference interview,

some questions are going to be quick and factual while others are going to dig deeper and need to take longer. Also, one must keep an updated website, printed or digital guides, and other materials that describe and guide the user toward a particular degree or concentration.

## **CONNECTING ADMISSIONS AND LIBRARIES**

### *Library as Asset and Partner in Recruitment and Admissions*

When doing the campus tour, the library stop helps develop the prospective student's imagination about being a student. What would it be like to have access to such a wealth of digital and print resources? What would it be like to use the library as a place of study? What kinds of rare materials and exhibits could they explore and experience as a student? It's a similar visualization of having student sit in on a class. As someone who has sat at a public service desk when a tour is coming through, it's often helpful to give admissions some talking points about the library that are accurate and factual or provide some training for admission staff/student ambassadors.

With enough advance notice, there may ways of pulling together a sample of resources or rare books when you know its visit day for the Baptists or the sacred music program.

Similarly, the design and usability of the library and the library's webpage has an impact. Does the library seem to have carpet or a website that seems to be from the 1980s? Does the library have welcoming staff and spaces? Is it a place where student might want to be?

### *Libraries as Recruiters*

In some cases, as the library acts as a front door for the seminary — particularly with longer hours than most admissions offices, you may unknowingly host prospective students in your library. They could be external patrons, who have been developing a curiosity about some aspect of theology and regularly come in to use the library. Alumni who use the library are 70% more likely to do a Doctor of Ministry degree. (I just made that statistic up.) There could be student workers, especially when hiring undergraduates or library colleagues working at other schools who say, “you know, I've always thought about going to seminary.”

Partly because the library is thought of as a safe and welcoming space, a library may receive some direct inquiries about the kinds of programs offered at the seminary or the qualities of a faculty or the cost of an education. It's great when you can make a personal connection but not so good if you are guessing or making stuff up about your seminary. Please feel free to refer folks to someone in the admissions office. Or better yet, ask the person their name and contact information so that an admissions person can follow-up.

As a regular librarian in prior institutions, I've served on admissions committees, evaluated applications, helped host and organize orientation days, conducted special tours of the library or rare book room, joined prospective students at meals/receptions, etc. I'm sure many of you have done this and even greater things with the admissions professionals in your schools. I would be pleased to hear your experiences and ideas as well as any questions you might have.