

Harnessing the Power of Your Data to Make Better Admissions Decisions



Where We Are Now: A Look at the Current State of Higher Education

Colleges and graduate programs across the board have been facing significant challenges in recent years. The cost of tuition is going up and with it, the amount of student debt. It's not surprising that many social work graduate prospects are taking a hard look at higher education in general and asking themselves: Is it worth it?

To be competitive in attracting and recruiting MSW prospects, it's critical to have a deep understanding of the state of higher education in today's climate and the challenges that admissions staff and students alike are facing.

SEVEN CHALLENGES FOR TODAY'S GRADUATE PROGRAMS

1 Rising Student Debt

Americans owe close to \$1.5 trillion in student loan debt — that's more than \$600 billion more than the total amount of credit card debt in the United States. In fact, the average class of 2016 graduate left school with \$37,712 in student loan debt — a 6% increase from the previous year.¹²

2 Unpredictable Political Climate

The impact of the current tumultuous political climate in the United States can be seen on everything from international student enrollment figures to budgetary projections. When first introduced, the 2017 travel ban affected those studying in the United States. The revised version introduced in June 2017 offered clarification, labeling students as having a “bona fide relationship” with a U.S. entity, but this did not reverse the negative impact on application numbers. According to *The Atlantic*, “the most significant decline in applicants came from the Middle East, with universities reporting a 39% decrease in Middle Eastern undergraduate applications and a 31% decrease in graduate applications from the region.”¹¹

3 Changes in Educational Delivery

Once upon a time, students attended classes within a physical classroom. Thanks to the expansion of online and mobile technology, the entire classroom landscape has changed dramatically. The introduction of free massive open online courses (MOOCs) has helped make higher-level classes available to anyone with Internet access. Organizations such as Khan Academy provide a wealth of educational resources to help students learn at their own pace from anywhere.

Then there are initiatives such as credit for life experience, which allows students to turn life skills and experience earned IRL (in real life) into appropriate course credits.

Even some traditional laboratory-based kinds of programs — pharmacy, for example — are offering primarily online options with a laboratory component.

There is growing demand for programs to offer alternative delivery options that can make it easier for students to fit their educational goals more easily into their lifestyles.

4 Budget Allocations

At the end of 2017, the Trump Administration released a budget proposal for the 2018 fiscal year that would cut federal education programs by more than \$10 billion.⁹ These programs include TRIO and Head Start, which help support the progress of low-income individuals, first-generation college students and students with disabilities.

Under this budget, the National Institute of Health (NIH) faced a budget reduction of 18%, bringing their overall budget to under \$26 billion — the agency's lowest budget in 15 years.³ There is no doubt that this, or any budget cuts of this type, will have a major impact on programs that rely on NIH funding for research and lab work.

Meanwhile, states continue a 10-year trend of cutting spending on higher education although college tuition and fees have risen 1,120% since 1978 — that's compared to a 244% increase in the price of food and 601% increase in the cost of medical expenses.¹⁵

Given these budgetary considerations, expect to see a further impact on financial aid, student debt and diversity in classrooms over the next few years.

5 Decrease in the Number of High School Graduates

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the number of high school graduates is on a downward trend across much of the U.S. The largest decreases are projected for the Northeast, with Massachusetts going

down by 6.3%, New Jersey by 14.9% and Connecticut by 7.8%.

But it's not all bad news. A few states are seeing significant increases; for example, high school graduates are up by 20.5% in Texas, 5.9% in Georgia and 10.7% in Florida. Graduations in Western states are projected to grow 5%. There has also been a hugely promising 64% increase in Hispanic high school graduates.²

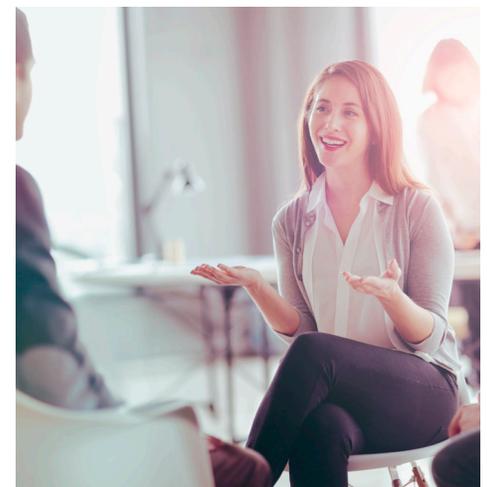
6 Concerns about Meeting Enrollment Goals

A 2017 survey by Inside Higher Ed found that 85% of admissions directors are concerned about reaching their institutions' enrollment goals this year.¹⁰

7 Problems With Retention and Attrition

Here's a startling statistic: 40% of people who start a science, technology, engineering or math (STEM) program at the master's level do not finish.⁵ That percentage goes up to 50% for those who start a STEM PhD program.⁴

Of course, there will always be factors beyond program control that could prevent students from completing their graduate work, such as life changes and financial stresses. But these factors are likely exacerbated by the volatile political climate that higher education as a whole is facing.



A Closer Look: The Current State of Social Work Graduate Programs

According to the 2016 CSWE Annual Survey of Programs, among enrolled master's-level social work students, 41.4% come from historically underrepresented groups. Although there is certainly room for improvement toward a more diverse student population, that percentage is a good beginning.

CSWE reports that 84.5% of master's of social work (MSW) students are female.⁸ This imbalance points to another opportunity for developing more targeted recruitment and enrollment strategies.

There has been a jump in the number of MSWs awarded as reported by social work programs nationwide, from 17,209 in the 2005-2006 academic year to 27,659 awarded in the 2015-2016 academic year. That is an impressive increase of 60.7%.^{6, 8}

Greater availability of master's-level courses online has also increased accessibility of social work programs. In fact, 17% of MSW programs reported they offer a fully online program and almost half (42.9%) offer a hybrid or partial-online program.

In terms of student debt, the average amount for MSW graduates is \$41,334.84, which is equivalent to approximately one year's salary in the field shortly after graduation. An average of 80.2% of MSW graduates carry some amount of debt.⁸

MSW STUDENTS

84.5%

(54,475) female

43.3%

(27,929) age 25-34

41.4%

(26,667) from historically underrepresented groups

PURSUING INNOVATION: INCREASING EFFICIENCIES AND EFFECTIVENESS IN GRADUATE SOCIAL WORK ADMISSIONS

What is the graduate social work admissions world — and the graduate admissions world as a whole — going to look like in 5 years?

Most experts agree that the process of graduate school admissions will look different. Programs are already beginning to experiment with enhancing traditional requirements such as letters of recommendation and personal interviews — not doing away with them entirely, but learning how to use them more effectively.

Here are six ways that a program can begin to do this right away.

1 Know the difference between attributes and talents.

It's easy to mistake a prospect's experiences in school and life as evidence that they possess particular attributes. In fact, experiences and attributes are not the same and confusing them can have consequences for the success of students and programs alike.

The following examples demonstrate how this type of error gets made and why it can lead to problems for programs.



EXAMPLE 1:

Jack is captain of his swim team in high school. An admissions counselor might assume from that fact alone that

Jack is also a good leader. But what the counselor doesn't realize is that the captain role included the responsibility of driving the team van to meets and Jack's fellow team members simply didn't want to drive. In this case, Jack's leadership title does not necessarily mean he also has the leadership qualities that an institution might reasonably expect to align with leadership capability.



EXAMPLE 2:

Heather, who has a military background, applies to a certain medical school that gives a great deal of weight to military

experience because it believes that experience also indicates an applicant's ability to be disciplined and organized. However, after acceptance to the program, Heather finds herself struggling to perform as well as her nonmilitary peers. Why? Because the school's actual curriculum and program style is unstructured, without clear, rigid schedules — the opposite of Heather's carefully managed, authority-driven experiences.

These examples illustrate how critical it is for each program to assess its own unique set of values, communicate clear expectations and devise ways that will accurately gauge how well prospects align with its goals. Not only does this benefit the program, it also benefits prospects because it helps make sure that the students who are accepted have the greatest chance of success.

2 Stay up to date with the latest online and mobile technology.

According to research by Pearson, one in three college students self-identify as "early adopters" of electronic devices.¹⁴

This means that mobile optimization is not a luxury but a necessity. It's critical to ensure that prospects can navigate, fill out and submit their applications as easily on their mobile device as on their desktop. Otherwise, a program risks losing out on desired prospects who will gravitate toward the programs that make it as easy as possible for them to apply.

3 Unlock the power of Multi-Mini Interviews and situational judgement testing.

Developed at McMaster University in Canada about 15 years ago, the Multi-Mini Interview (MMI) is fast becoming a powerful tool for admissions decisions. In contrast to the traditional unstructured interview, MMIs allow applicants to demonstrate their skills through applied situational testing. Programs create prompts that revolve around scenarios that would help demonstrate a student's proficiency in the attributes that are most pertinent to the institution, whether that's leadership, empathy, communication, critical problem-solving or another value.

To get the most out of the MMI method, programs are encouraged to come up with at least six situational prompts for a more well-rounded understanding of an applicant's abilities.

4 Think holistically.

An emerging trend that is already having great impact on the way programs handle admissions is triangulation, or the ability to figure out what's truly important in applications and then devise methods to get that data from more than one source.

The more data points a program can tap into, the better the results are likely to be.

This idea is also contained in the concept of holistic review, which shifts the program's focus to include an applicant's nonacademic and personal attributes in addition to their standardized test scores and grades.

5 Prioritize diversity.

According to the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS), "diversity and inclusiveness for graduate students" remain top priorities for graduate deans.¹³ Although it's true that pursuing diversity goals may feel challenging in these times of budget cuts and shrinking resources, there is no doubt that this issue will continue to have a big impact on future decision-making in graduate admissions.

6 Join a Centralized Application Service (CAS™).

Liaison's Centralized Application Services (CAS™) represent a critical first step toward the future of admissions. A CAS provides exactly the kind of technological optimization that today's savvy prospects are coming to expect, as well as hands-on customer service and support for prospects, students and program staff.

In addition to providing a single application portal for multiple programs, the platform also includes vital features to help institutions quickly identify underrepresented groups in their program, compare populations to similar institutions and gather and analyze important data to help drive enrollment strategies.

Council of Graduate Schools "First Principles" for holistic review

1. Diversity is essential to the overall success of graduate programs.
2. It is critical to think beyond the admissions process when developing strategies for diversity and inclusion.
3. Holistic review processes are most likely to be successful when well-aligned with a graduate institution's mission and with the goals of specific master's, doctoral and professional graduate programs.¹¹

LEVERAGING DATA TO MANAGE THE CHALLENGES

SocialWorkCAS™ was designed to address the challenges facing today's social work graduate programs. The CAS for graduate social work programs can greatly help participating institutions:

- 1 Increase student diversity of applicant pools, including geographic and financial diversity.
- 2 Improve the strength of applications by guiding applicants to include critical, relevant information in their applications.
- 3 Optimize online and mobile accessibility starting with a more streamlined application process.
- 4 Facilitate enrollment projections to help guide creation of data-driven recruitment strategies.

CAS member programs have access to a powerful tool called WebAdMIT, which allows staff to set benchmarks that can help measure how a program is doing compared to the national database — including identifying similar areas of struggle among comparable programs.

For example, if an extreme male/female gender imbalance among graduates is a common theme for social work programs, this indicates a possible opportunity to improve recruitment messaging toward males.

Conversely, if a single program finds that it has an overwhelmingly female population but similar programs are more balanced, it may point to the need for that institution to evaluate its program offerings in addition to undertaking a marketing audit to strategize for better results. Programs may even begin to

share knowledge and strategies to help make sure students have the optimal experience.

SocialWorkCAS offers benefits to prospective students as well by requiring them to fill out only one application that can then be submitted to multiple programs of interest. Having a centralized repository for all application documents helps drastically reduce the possibility of errors and allows for faster, more accurate reports and data analysis. Applicants can also track the status of their applications from beginning to end through online accounts, so they know where they stand through each step of the process.

These are just a few of the ways that a CAS can be used to leverage critical data effectively to better target a program's recruitment and retention efforts.



THE TIME IS NOW FOR DATA-DRIVEN DECISIONS

When it comes to admissions processes, too often best practices remain rooted in outdated systems and outworn methods. But as technology continues to expand and provide unprecedented opportunities for targeting recruitment efforts and gathering data, program staff must become more innovative about how they put their technology and data to work.

The more strategically informed a program is, the better their decisions

and processes will be and the more the program will increase the likelihood of retention.

As the first and only CAS for social work programs, SocialWorkCAS benefits prospective students and admissions staff alike through easy-to-use features such as:

- A single application portal that allows students to research and apply for multiple programs of interest.

- 24/7 access to real-time status updates via the device of the applicant's choice.

- Automation of key admissions tasks so that counselors and staff can focus on authentic engagement with prospective students.

- Streamlined collection and targeted delivery of critical data to help drive better admissions decisions.

**Find out more about
how SocialWorkCAS
can make a difference
to your program.
Contact the
SocialWorkCAS
team today.**

Visit: socialworkcas.liaisoncas.org

E-mail: SocialWorkCAS@cswe.org

Call: 703.519.2077

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