

encoura™

Case Study



University of Houston

Weathering the Storm

The University of Houston (UH) has a mission to offer nationally competitive and internationally recognized opportunities for learning, discovery and engagement to a diverse population of students in a real-world setting. And, with 45,000 students and over 250 undergraduate, master's, doctoral, distance and continuing education degree programs, it's no wonder the institution attracts a highly diverse student population to its location deep in the heart of Houston. Ranked among the best colleges in America, the university boasts an award-winning faculty, myriad awards, including #2 Best Undergrad Programs for Entrepreneurs and #5 Best Online Graduate Education Programs, and alumni who have gone on to become international leaders.

Mardell Maxwell arrived on the University of Houston scene in early 2017 as Executive Director of Admissions. He was attracted to UH by its diversity, momentum, location, and dynamic, inspiring president. Maxwell got his start in education as a campus tour guide at his alma mater, Kansas State University. There, he quickly realized a deep passion for helping students get to college. As a first generation college student himself, he was motivated to discover ways to influence policy and practice, and thus began his trajectory toward a leadership role in admissions.

Challenge

Already challenged by aging systems and processes, the University of Houston's admissions department was thrown for a loop when Hurricane Harvey hit the city. Applications and campus visits were well below its goal and the previous years' benchmarks.

Solution

- Encoura™ Data Lab Class Planner module
- Declared Student Connection™
- Inquiry Cloud
- Digital Marketing

Benefits

- Flooded with applications 3-4 weeks after initiating the campaign
- 3% increased applications above the previous year from prospective students in Dallas
- 2% increased applications above the previous year from prospective students in Austin
- Returned them to being on-track to meet enrollment goals in 2018

A Plan for Advancement

As soon as Maxwell arrived at UH, he found that the university had fallen behind in some of its systems, technologies and processes. Those shortcomings had the potential to negatively impact their service to students and families. For example, even with 40,000 applicants and the need to recruit from all over the world, they didn't have a CRM system to help them with outreach or to help with being more responsive regarding admissions decisions.

Maxwell could see that his staff had been working to move their department forward, but they needed help from a strong leader to accelerate their progress. He saw a way to have a positive impact and went to work creating a scalable plan to improve their systems and processes and to invest in his staff. He didn't just want to reach status quo, but to take his department to the next level.

Ready, Set...Oh No

Head down and ready to charge into the new plan, disaster struck. Hurricane Harvey blew into Houston and put Maxwell's good intentions on hold. Hurricane Harvey was a Category 4 storm that made landfall on August 25, 2017. Though it did weaken after hitting land, it lingered over Texas, dumping 40-60 inches of rain on the already saturated area. Engorged bayous overflowed and 500-year floodplains were overwhelmed. In short, much of Houston and the surrounding areas were devastated.

Maxwell remarked, "It affected everyone so much. On a purely human level, it was incredibly difficult. Our staff didn't even get a chance to deal with their own emotions and personal challenges because they were so committed to UH students." Although the UH campus wasn't yet open for the start of the fall semester, most students had already arrived. Students were also coming in from system campuses in Victoria and Clear Lake seeking shelter. Faculty and staff, many dealing with catastrophic personal losses, began working to ensure students were safe and had a place to go.

The entire city seemed to grind to a halt, and going to college was the last thing on anyone's mind. Maxwell said, "Historically, we had gotten 80% of our applications from inside the city of Houston. But Houston's high schools were closed and so damaged, many didn't reopen for months. None of those kids were thinking about applying to college in that moment. Everything came to a standstill."

Then, there were the purely logistical and operational challenges to manage. "We had students who were trying to apply, but couldn't get their transcripts because their schools were closed down," said Maxwell. "Or imagine that you have a student who's supposed to be at one high school, but is now taking classes from another school because his is closed - how could we reconcile the information coming in? It made evaluation very difficult."

While being mindful and respectful of everyone's recovery, Maxwell knew they needed to act - and fast - to get high school students back on track and thinking about school and college.

His work was made more challenging by the images coming from the media. He said, "One thing the media does really well is show the most dramatic images. All the images coming out of Houston were awful. They showed all the damage, destruction and devastation, but not the recovery. Everyone saw a wet Houston, but no one saw it as it dried out. If you were IN Houston, you knew, but if you weren't, you had no idea."

This maligned view of Houston concerned Maxwell, as many of their target areas, such as Dallas, Austin, and Chicago would have little insight into the repair, renovation and rebirth of the city post-storm. This was underscored at campus fairs held outside of the city. Maxwell said, "One of the first questions we'd get every time was, 'Are you still underwater?'"

Creating a New Image

Running far behind in applications, and trying to fight back from the real and perceived issues caused by Harvey, Maxwell knew they needed help. Maxwell said, “We needed help telling a different story and getting it out there. That’s where NRCCUA® came in for us. Their team gave us access to different communities of students and helped us show them another side.”

NRCCUA and Maxwell identified the areas they wanted to target using Encoura Data Lab’s Class Planner module - a heat map, of

we were trying to do to the NRCCUA staff and they provided strategies, tips and feedback, as well as things they knew had worked for other institutions. Together, we pulled together a quick action plan.”

This was all a new ball game for the UH team. They hadn’t done digital marketing before and decided to dive in head first. Initially, there was a short period of testing and tweaking, and then, about a month into the campaign, applications started flooding in - pun intended. Maxwell and his team were elated. He said, “Students were applying from places and



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– Mardell Maxwell,
Executive Director of Admissions, University of Houston

sorts, showing geographic hot spots to target. Then, Maxwell invested in NRCCUA’s Inquiry Cloud and Declared Student Connection™ - prospective students who had previously indicated an interest in attending the University of Houston. Prospective students on the Declared list are those who write-in their institution preferences unaided - meaning there’s no drop-down list or suggestions made - while completing the myCollegeOptions® survey. Declared students are up to 8x more likely to apply and enroll.

Maxwell and team also opted to get NRCCUA’s help with digital marketing to precisely message and engage the students they thought were a best-fit for their institution.

Maxwell said, “We wanted to make sure that the communities outside of Houston knew what was happening here. We relayed what

schools we were intentionally targeting using digital marketing from NRCCUA. We saw significant results in about 3-4 weeks.”

In addition to an increase in applications, campus visits were also up. Maxwell said, “People were making the trip to Houston right from the areas we targeted using NRCCUA’s tools.

As a result, we’re right where we need to be to fulfill our enrollment goals.”

Prior to running the NRCCUA campaign, the school was down about 1,500 freshman applications, and the feedback the team there was hearing was downright awful. Students weren’t sure if UH was safe or if the institution had the infrastructure to support an incoming class.

Maxwell confirmed, “We have seen an incredible turnaround since implementing the campaign with NRCCUA. When compared

to last year, our applications from Dallas are actually up 3%. From Austin they're up 2% over last year. It's one thing to just meet our goals, but to have actually grown after one of the most challenging periods in our city's history is just remarkable."

Having worked at other institutions in his career, Maxwell knows that every school has its challenges. UH is no different. Even in the best of times, UH is immersed in the city's Third Ward where college-going rates are low and economic challenges are significant. Tack on a Hurricane and a 500-year flood and the turnaround created by NRCCUA and the UH team is striking.

As Maxwell said, "If we can come out on the other side of those conditions by using strong, innovative tools, like those provided by NRCCUA, I'm confident that whatever the challenges an institution is facing, they too would benefit from working with NRCCUA the way we have."

The Best Decisions

Maxwell had a mentor who once told him, "As a leader, you aren't being paid for how much you personally get done. You're being paid for the quality of the decisions you make." That's one reason why Maxwell knows that making smart choices is critical to his success.

Maxwell said, "I have a whole organization of people who are focused on getting things done. They're relying on me to make great decisions that are leading them in the right direction. What NRCCUA has helped me to do is make better, more informed decisions that help us be more efficient. And efficiency is the name of the game in higher ed."

He concluded, "I'm able to lead and guide my staff with confidence and conviction because of the information I now have at my fingertips. Partnering with NRCCUA and leveraging its products and services has probably been the best decision I have made in my first year as a new director."