

encoura™

Case Study



Cairn University

On a Mission to Serve Better

/kern/ noun: A pile of stones that serves as a memorial or landmark.

Cairn University inspires its students to “walk a different path,” building cairns of their own that point the way for them to serve Christ and make a difference in the world. These cairns help students navigate their educational journeys, sending them forward with competence and character.

A private institution in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, Cairn University attracts students from across the country to be challenged personally, professionally, intellectually, and spiritually. Founded over a century ago, Cairn now offers over 70 academic programs and specializations, graduating students in a variety of disciplines to go out and serve the world.

Cairn’s Assistant Vice President of Admissions, Tom Sherf, shared that adherence to the mission is what drives faculty and staff to best serve students. “We want to create an opportunity for students to not just be professionally developed. They are going to go out and invest in the church, society, and the world with a strong, integrated worldview that will compel them to have a healthy impact in any sphere they enter.”

This is what draws students to enroll at Cairn. “Students want that missional experience that challenges their worldview and thinking,” Sherf explained.

Challenge

- New admissions team & ambitious goals from executive team
- Current CRM ineffective for recruitment reporting needs

Solution

- Encoura™ Data Lab
- Smart+™ Predictive Model
- ACT® | NRCCUA® Digital Services

Benefits

- Increased enrollment over the last 2 years (up 17% in first year)
- Created visual graphics and reports to drive recruitment strategy
- Effectively equipped staff and ownership of recruitment territories

A FRESH START

Sherf began his professional career at the university as a Resident Director. After years in Residence Life and then serving as Assistant Dean and Dean of Students, Sherf was asked to lead the Cairn admissions team in 2017.

Although new to admissions with a lot to learn about recruitment, Sherf was confident in his abilities to engage students and lead teams. He pointed out, “The biggest challenge was learning on the fly. I was given a plan and constantly had to manipulate and adapt that plan throughout the year around what the

DIVING INTO THE DATA

Sherf’s previous supervisor had advised him, “Recruitment is all in the data. Know your numbers in and out and understand them in order to move ahead.” Accepting that guidance, Sherf immediately dove into the data himself.

However, Sherf quickly realized that the CRM that his team used did not provide satisfactory data presentation. He teamed up with another staff member to manually use Excel to help analyze the student data from the CRM, but he knew that there had to be a better solution.



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data suggested. The challenge wasn’t just when to lean in where, but learning the nature of the cycle.”

Upon acceptance of his admissions leadership role, Sherf faced an array of difficulties. In addition to being a new Assistant VP of Admissions, Sherf had a mix of new and seasoned counselors to lead. With a recently-assembled team, the Cairn admissions team was constantly changing recruiting strategies as well. Counselors transitioned from working a program-based model to a territory-based one.

Sherf knew that success with his team was dependent upon his counselors taking ownership of the recruitment strategy in their new territories. He described how he wanted them to assess the current state of each territory’s recruitment strategy and then envision where it could be, rather than recruiting based off what they had done in the past. “My challenge is to get the counselors to understand the data. I have to push them to understand and utilize the data in a smart way and still get that yield.”

That’s when Sherf turned to Encoura™ Data Lab, an enrollment management technology platform that combines student intelligence data, advanced analytics, and education-specific research so institutions can make informed decisions that optimize fit and create the highest probability of success. This platform, accessible to Cairn staff through their partnership with ACT | NRCCUA, provided robust data to Sherf in a format that equipped him to make confident recruitment decisions.

He shared, “Encoura Data Lab was a great way to visualize things. I had been doing most of our data analysis in Excel. The CRM that we’d invested in did run reports, but not in the way we wanted. We created a huge spreadsheet to focus on historical yield and more, but Data Lab visualized everything for me. I can utilize the resources I have through ACT | NRCCUA to truly enhance the data in my CRM. It clears up a lot.”

RESOURCES THAT MAKE A DIFFERENCE

In conjunction with Encoura Data Lab, Cairn employs additional ACT | NRCCUA tools to enhance its strategy. Specifically, the admissions team has been maximizing recruitment efforts through utilization of the ACT | NRCCUA Digital Services. Sherf described, “Our recruitment strategy centers on geography, fit, and targeted marketing. We had been using online ads to reach prospective students, but now we are strategically targeting best-fit students with geo-fencing. I used this to recruit for summer, transfer, and strategic regions we wanted to grow. It has empowered me to use the data I have in the funnel more effectively.”

After implementing the ACT | NRCCUA digital tools, Sherf’s team has seen direct results, especially in their transfer recruitment – an essential audience for non-profit institutions of Cairn’s size. “The transfer marketing was perfect. Our click-through rate was great.”

BUILDING THE DREAM TEAM

Building a strong admissions team with these enrollment tools was Sherf’s top priority when he transitioned into his VP role. He knew that successful leadership meant equipping his team with the knowledge and resources that would help them serve as better counselors. “The biggest benefit for me of Encoura Data Lab is not only getting a bigger perspective on my recruiting territories, but also allowing me to really invest in my staff,” Sherf said.

Sherf articulated that his goal was to professionally develop his counselors to know how to interpret data to skillfully manage their recruitment territories. He wanted to build a team that knew how to most effectively use the time they invested in recruiting. “With our last tool, our staff could pull numbers through our CRM, but now they are able to see sourcing and visualize the data graphically. For them to be able to understand yield rates of students



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In addition to digital services, the ACT | NRCCUA Smart+™ Predictive Model - which quantitatively predicts which prospective students are likely to enroll at a university – also boosted Cairn’s recruitment efforts. “We have been seeing improved engagement and high interest. I use my call nights to strategically target students early on in the cycle to push them to the next step – to tour campus or attend an open house. It’s definitely been effective for us,” Sherf noted.

in their territories at given points in time is invaluable. They no longer have to target every event that has historically yielded students, but they can recruit strategically, especially with ACT | NRCCUA’s regular uploads continually providing new data.”

He elaborated, “Encoura Data Lab helped me effectively train counselors to recruit based upon data. For me, that is the most critical piece. I can have counselors go out and recruit, but they need to know where to go. Encoura Data Lab made that possible, which has helped our team incredibly. It increases my team’s yield and it helps me develop them

into better counselors. My hope is that if they have an opportunity to work in admissions at another institution, they'll have this skill set that outpaces their peers.”

However, one of the greatest benefits to Cairn from its partnership with ACT | NRCCUA, Sherf confirmed, is the collaboration with Encoura Enrollment Services' knowledgeable representatives. “My Encoura rep gives me fresh perspectives on nuanced areas that I just wouldn't think about while also helping me to refine the data. The strategies he provides in these areas are spot-on.”

Sherf specifically appreciates the higher education experience and knowledge that the ACT | NRCCUA team brings. “The strategic emphasis has been great. I believe that much of the success of our efforts in communication

flows and yield has been directly related to the conversations I've had with my representative. He gets it. I know that when I'm talking to him, he understands and can speak to a strategy for what I need.”

As the new Cairn admissions team continues to grow and build cairns to point the incoming class forward, they encourage other newly-formed enrollment teams to consider a similar partnership with ACT | NRCCUA. Sherf emphasized how the collaboration has truly made him a better leader for his new team. “The consulting meetings and Encoura Data Lab have just been gold for me. Other new managers should consider this partnership. It's definitely worth it. The service ACT | NRCCUA provides has helped me as a new manager to be better.”