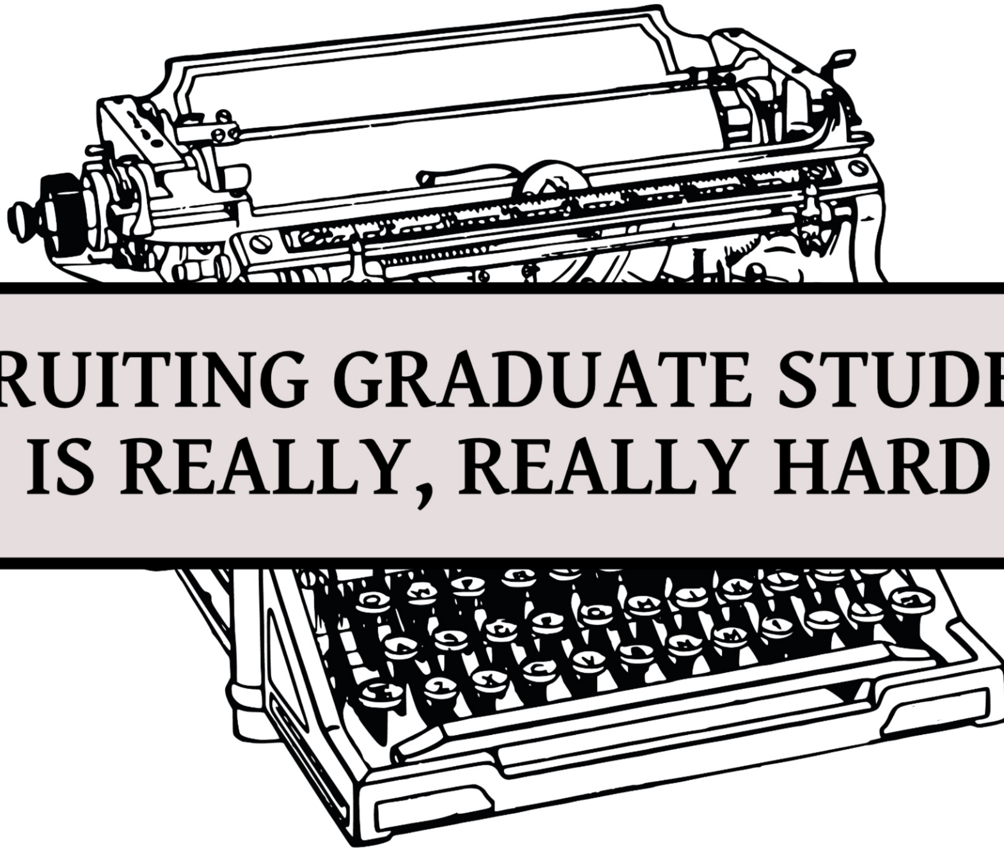


RECRUITING GRADUATE STUDENTS IS REALLY, REALLY HARD

It’s ridiculously difficult, incredibly complicated, excruciatingly labour intensive, nearly impossible to measure in any meaningful way, and frankly I wouldn’t blame you at all if you just wanted to forget the whole thing and go play badminton.

But this book might help, maybe.

by Matt Shepherd, (**AHEM***)

PDF IS BETTER THAN EPUB!

I'm striving to figure out how to format this correctly for ePub, but things just work better in the PDF version. Feel free to download it instead at https://ahemahem.org. The ePub will be a convenient read, but the PDF will have better graphics, etc.

This book was written without the use of artificial intelligence and/or large language models. It uses Canadian spelling.

Table of Contents

Download the Worksheets!

This book comes with a number of resources, conveniently bundled in one Zip file at

https://ahemahem.org/assets/AHEM_Grad-Bundle.zip

Download it! Do it now!

Do not proceed without the worksheets!

Preface

This book might not be for you, and that's OK

This book is for people responsible for recruiting graduate students at the faculty, department, and school levels.

In other words...

- Faculty, department, or school-level academics who find themselves in a role like "Grad Chair" or "Associate Dean, Graduate Studies," and want to grow or improve the graduate studies program in their unit. Or are just curious about what that might look like.
- Staff working in this area that have been mandated to help with graduate recruitment projects.

Who's it not for?

- Faculties/departments/schools that don't run grad recruitment outreach and marketing programs. If you have a large, well-oiled, CRM-backed recruitment machine run by a central office, and a strict "don't do anything on your own" policy in place, you can jump right to the second-last chapter ("Working with on-campus marcomms and recruitment") and skim the rest of this for anything of interest. I'd still recommend Chapters 1-10 and their worksheets as foundational for conversations with the central group.
- Central, university-spanning graduate recruitment and marcomms units. This is really focused on the school/department-scale efforts to get students in the door, and the granular work required to to toe-to-toe with very similar grad programs (or define yourself in a crowded graduate student market). Good news, though, there's a chapter on how to work with y'all the end!

"Marketing doesn't make a difference in grad recruitment, it's only a matter of funding and/or reputation and/or connections. Marketing is a waste of time and money."

If you feel this way, you might be conflating "marketing" with "advertising." Advertising is a component of marketing, but there's more to marketing than just making and distributing ads. Your program may not require advertising — but still benefit from marketing. If you're wondering what the hell that means, guess what, you're holding a whole-assed book about it. Welcome!   Marketing is how you address the following questions:

- How do prospective students that you're trying to attract know what you're offering? Even if information is available on your website, how do they know that it's there, and that it's worth looking at, and how can you be sure they're getting that information at the right time in a way that appeals to them?
- If you think your reputation is enough to carry you with no additional work... where does reputation come from? How is it maintained, over time? How can you be sure new generations of academics and scholars will continue to think you're the best place for grad studies?
- Is every available seat in your grad program filled with students that are a great fit for the program? Or are there empty seats? Are there students who seem like they didn't understand the school when they applied?
- Is your mix of grad students across programs the absolute best mix for goals that have to balance revenue, research generation, and research support?

If you're still convinced this work has no value, well, one day you'll wake up and realize that other schools — even schools that you think are *gasp choke* academically inferior to yours — are doing better at attracting and retaining graduate students. And that's because they have been doing the work. This work. It's hard work. But worth doing.

Holy shit, this is a long goddamn book

Yes. There's a lot to it! Stick with it. It'll be fun, and I'll use swear words sometimes to break up the monotony. See above! Wasn't that fun, when I swore just then?

I've broken it into broad sections, so hopefully you can identify jumping-on and jumping off points depending on your needs — but I do recommend you read the whole thing, even if just to be speaking the same language as other folks in your orbit.

Delegation of duties

We're erring on the side of thoroughness here, getting into the mechanics of marketing including some medium-to-high level overviews of web technology, marketing campaigns, social media analytics, and more.

There's a wide array of supports available to you. Some folks may have an entire grad studies department that takes on all recruitment and marketing, in which case this book will prepare you to accelerate your work with them. In other cases, there's a graduate recruitment department, and a separate marketing department; in still other cases, you're just on your own with this stuff.

The approach is going to assume you're tackling this with some support from staff and student employees (see "Cheap Labour," near the end). Even if that's not the case, and you're backed up by a marketing and communications team, either in your unit or from the central school, this will get you grounded to the point that you can give them clear direction.

You can do it!

I've worked in marketing for a whole-ass career, and I promise you that none of this is outside your grasp. The problem is time and capacity. External resources, I stress, not me. This is not a sales pitch and I don't need the work. External resources can assist in:

- Helping define and refine your needs, strategy, and approach
- Refining your visual approach
- Refining your text
- The sheer capacity it takes to do the work and run the program

The elements that you'll need help with are refinement, capacity and money. All of these are attainable without outside supports (or costs) — it all comes back to capacity and your willingness to dig in.

The ultimate goal of this book is to make you feel like you're captaining your grad recruitment ship; deploying resources to support you as needed, rather than feeling like you're at their mercy.

And doing things incredibly cheaply. You don't have a realistic budget for this stuff! Or anything! ***Higher ed, baby!***

List Your Programs

Your programs are products

It may feel mercantile to define degree types as "products," but... they are. From a marketing point of view, every product requires a set of marketing strategies and tactics. It's not uncommon for somebody in your position to feel like you need to promote X different degrees concurrently, and it can quickly get overwhelming.

One big step that can feel painful is to figure out what product is in the most need of marketing (and why it needs it — see below) and let the others languish while you lock in the first one. You need to be clear to yourself what your priority is, and also be able to make a case to your leadership team of why you're focusing on this program (and why you need a budget to support this).

What's the full scope of your graduate programming?

Sometimes it's just a Master's, or a Master's and a PhD program.

But do you offer more? Make a list.

- Laddering schemes; undergrad-to-Master's pathways, including combined degrees (such as a law JD combined with a business MBA, etc.)
- Specialized training-oriented MAs; an English department might offer a "MA in Literature and Information Science" developed specifically for librarians, for instance.
- Course-based vs. research-based Master's programs
- Master's-to-PhD promotion pathways.

Make a map of all your graduate program offerings. Are they all still active and viable, or are there some that should be wound down?

- Once you've got the list, fill it out with:
- Tuition (domestic, out-of-region, international)
- Funding for students (government subsidies, other funding sources)
- Maximum cohort sizes
- Pipeline or other limitations to the above — the point at which government subsidies, for instance, cut off (if you only have 25 subsidized spots for Program X, for instance, that may set a natural cap/goal for recruitment).

Program profit and loss

Hey, I hate money stuff too. I really hate it! But before you move on to the main worksheet, you're going to need a scratch pad to figure out:

Money in:

- Tuition in the door for each program / student
- Direct government funding in the door for each program / student

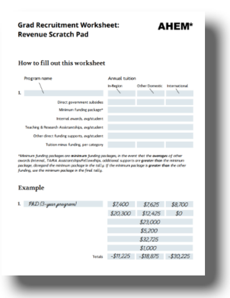
Money out:

- Direct student support (Master's and doctoral stipends)
- Financial awards above and beyond general stipends, "top-up" funds, etc.

This does not include pay for TA or RA work, staffing costs, or marketing costs.

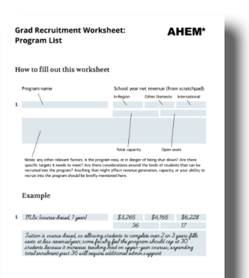
This may take a bit of effort, working with your finance team to pull together numbers on overall awards, then creating per-student averages to use in the tally.

This is not a precise science! We're trying to get at an overall portrait of, when the dust settles, what a student is 'worth' in terms of revenue. It goes without saying that revenue is not a sole or even chief determinant of worth, and there may be "money-losing" programs that are still a priority because of other factors.



COMPLETE THE WORKSHEET – Grad_Revenue

I bet you thought that was enough and you're done with the worksheets. Not even close, me bucko. You're going to carry those tallies forward to the next sheet, which is where you get into the programs from 10,000 feet — revenue (done, above), but also your total capacity and number of empty seats, and notes relevant to admissions opportunities or hurdles.



COMPLETE THE WORKSHEET – Grad_Programs-Overview

Which Program Needs Help?

Grad studies isn't one-size-fits-all, and your marketing shouldn't be either.

You know that your grad programs are different, obviously. But despite that, the received wisdom behind grad student recruitment still tends to be "we'll hang a banner that says *GRAD STUDIES HERE*, students will flock to it, and then they'll figure themselves out."

Which... maybe, if you're Harvard or something. But for most schools, the **more specific you are about what you're offering, the more success you'll see in recruiting**.

For right now, try to identify which of your grad programs needs the most help.

But they all need help!

They probably do! But even if they do, advertising "we have grad studies" like one big generic blob won't serve you well. To use an analogy, if you're looking to get serious about long-distance running and you need a pair of shoes, are you more likely go to the Running Shoe Store or a Dollar General that has several kinds of shoes in stock, or World of Shoes, where there might be a section of a section in a section of shoes that includes "running"?

People who are serious about entering graduate studies are going to have intention and, and matching that intention will help your recruitment efforts.

Just blasting "we do grad studies" everywhere is lossy, and you risk dilution and not really reaching people in an effective way.

Another analogy: if your house has a leaking roof, a drafty door, a broken window, and a busted fence, running around with a set of tools and trying to fix them all at the same time will take longer and give you worse results over time than just focusing on the largest problem first — and while you're working, you'll still have a leaking roof, drafty door, broken window, etc. in varying degrees, instead of locking up one issue so you can focus on the others.

As below, so above

If you focus on a single program to work on, what you discover in identifying what makes that program special, and what makes your school unique, will ladder up into a greater understanding of how to market all of your graduate programs. You'll get photos that work for other projects, turns of phrase that function just as well for other initiatives, testimonials that can be used for other areas.

Programs and projects can, and should, stack in 'rounds'

Later, I'll be proposing that you should think of grad recruitment as a project that takes at least three cycles to address. This isn't something you can hurl a week of work at and fix.

If you've ever been at a campfire singing rounds of "Row Row Row Your Boat" or "Michael, Row Your Boat Ashore" or any other of boat-themed singalongs, you'll be familiar with singing "in the round" — Group A sings the first phrase, and as they move on to phrase 2, Group B starts the first phrase, and as Group A is on phrase 3 and Group B on phrase 2, Group C is starting the first phrase... and so on it goes.

If you think multiple programs need work, consider stacking the work in 'rounds.' Different phases of the work for different programs, so one program is moving from actively being in-market with ads and events to a phase where you're focused on nurturing people through the application process, as a second program slides into the active marketing phase. This lets you juggle budget and energy in a way that can move things forward without being overwhelming.

Don't pick your pony *just yet*, though.

We're going to look at a couple other things first.

Specify your goals and define the problem

Why are you doing this? "We need more grad students" or "we need better grad students" is the common response. But what purpose is having more grad students serving?

This may be a direct answer, or percentage-based prioritization split across the three, but you should answer either way. "All three, 100% each" is a cop-out. Don't do that. Following your program review, you should have a better sense of what your unit's primary goal is:

1. Revenue growth: a combination of tuition and government support. Now you know the cash-in / cash-out situation with every program, and you can take a good look at what to do about it.
2. Research growth: recruiting students who will add novel research and outcomes (more common in the liberal arts / social sciences)
3. Research support: recruiting students who will support full-time academics with their research (more common in the applied and hard sciences; more Master's than PhD)

What's the tangible goal?

Like, a number. A nice, measurable number.

If revenue growth, what's the dollar target — and how does that number break down into increased enrolment across your programs?

If research growth, how many students do you need to recruit in research-focused programs, and in what areas of specialty?

If research support, how many students do you need to recruit into specific labs? Can you create a count per lab / faculty member that captures all of their needs?

Know what your marketing problem is (or at least, what you think it is)

What do you think is keeping you from achieving your goals in graduate studies?

- Your program is relatively new and unknown vs. other options
- Your program is relatively old and is seen as behind the times or uninteresting
- Your program is only known for X and you need to attract students to Y
- Your program is a great program in a school that isn't known for being good in your field, thus overlooked
- Your program is a great program in a less-than-great school and you're fighting against the school's own brand
- Your funding packages are not competitive with similar schools.[1]

Understanding this will be relevant a bit further on when you start mapping out your competition, and your aspirations. Right now, 'gut feeling' is good enough for our purposes.

COMPLETE THE WORKSHEET – Grad_Goals

Now… pick your pony!

Select one program to work on and roll up your sleeves, the next chapter is going to involve some deep dives into data.

1. Funding is a common source of blame in recruitment, but also an easy thing to point at as an "obvious" factor that, conveniently, nobody can do anything about. If your funding isn't as robust as other schools, that means you have to find other ways to make what you offer appealing. Funding is important, but the opportunity to work with the right professor, or attend the right school, can be a factor that trumps funding — and that requires storytelling and marketing. In short — a perceived lack of funding should not end a marketing conversation, but start an even more necessary one.

Check your Stats

Now that you have priority program, take a look at some key statistics. Maybe you've already done this — maybe this is why you're looking at grad recruitment in the first place. But maybe it's just an intuition, or received wisdom that the program needs "fixing." Regardless, the better your data set about program admissions, the easier it is to define an issue — and measure success.

For reasons we'll discuss later, this work is rarely a "one and done" single-term project. Committing to several years of consistent work is required, given the amount of time it takes for somebody to start thinking about graduate studies, looking at their options, and choosing a school.

That means a lot of time in the middle bit to question your decisions, or have them questioned for you. Having baseline stats, prior to doing anything, means having a way to measure successes.

Things to gather (for the program you're working on):

Student numbers over past several cycles

Full-time and part-time. The overall numbers for both FT and PT studies.

Applications started / completed

You may need to enlist your graduate recruitment department to help with this. How many applications to your program have been started as opposed to completed? Significant gaps between people starting and finishing the application flag barriers to entry in the application itself. Do you need to overcome a steep fee to apply? Are students balking at the required secondary materials? Is the application confusing or onerous?

Applications started and not completed are like having somebody come into your bakery, pick up the loaf of bread, stand in line at the cash, then drop the loaf and walk out. What the heck? You've done so much work to get them into your shop, look at the bread, make a choice. If they're not completing the transaction, something's broken.

Overall web traffic and traffic sources

How many hits are your graduate pages getting, and where is that traffic coming from? This is something your web team should be able to get from you from Google Analytics or other site metrics tools. If they don't, or can't, this should be a priority to set up. The entire information ecosystem you're building will be driving people to your site for more information, and you won't know if something's broken if you can't tell if people are making it there.

Traffic from your site to the application site

You should have a consistent "APPLY" button on your graduate pages that goes to the graduate application process. If you don't have such a button, set one up. If you have one, you should be able to track how often it's used. Tell your web team you need to be able to track the link as an action in GA4 or whatever they're using for site metrics.

Completed applications vs. offers sent

You're likely not offering a spot in the program to 100% of the students who apply, but a wide discrepancy in that number may mean your marketing (or absent marketing, just your reputation) isn't attracting the right students to your program.

Offers made vs. offers accepted vs. student starts

How many times do you offer a student a place in your program vs. the number of times they agree to come — and then, actually show up and start learning?

Degrees started vs. finished; completion time for degrees (especially doctoral)

This one won't be on the worksheet, but is worth checking in on. Student retention is key — a student who leaves after their first year represents a loss of future revenue, but also of the labour, time and expense it took to get them in the door. Student retention is also one of the invisible factors in marketing — we'll talk about that in a much later chapter.

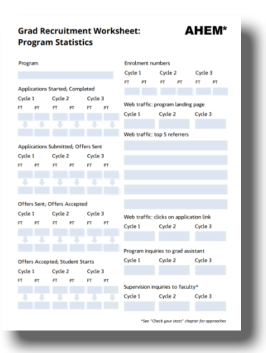
Inquiries to your grad assistant

This is likely not something that's been tracked in the past, but as an end-of-day before-logging-off one-minute action item: how many inquiries has your graduate staff received that day about the program? We'll discuss different ways to triage information requests later, but up top, knowing how many people are seeking to learn more, over time, is helpful.

Direct faculty inquiries re. supervision

Even less likely that this is tracked, and frankly, you may just have to settle for "vibes-based metrics" here — how often (say, times per week) are your faculty directly asked about being grad student supervisors? You'll want to see if that number is going up or down over time.

Even if the reply from faculty is "it's mostly garbage inquiries from students desperate to find funding to move to our country," the trend lines over time are still informative.



Grad Recruitment Worksheet: Program Statistics **AHEM***

Program

Applications Started; Completed
Cycle 1 (FT, PT) · Cycle 2 (FT, PT) · Cycle 3 (FT, PT)

Applications Submitted; Offers Sent
Cycle 1 (FT, PT) · Cycle 2 (FT, PT) · Cycle 3 (FT, PT)

Offers Sent; Offers Accepted
Cycle 1 (FT, PT) · Cycle 2 (FT, PT) · Cycle 3 (FT, PT)

Offers Accepted; Student Starts
Cycle 1 (FT, PT) · Cycle 2 (FT, PT) · Cycle 3 (FT, PT)

Enrolment numbers
Cycle 1 (FT, PT) · Cycle 2 (FT, PT) · Cycle 3 (FT, PT)

Web traffic: program landing page
Cycle 1 · Cycle 2 · Cycle 3

Web traffic: top 5 referrers

Web traffic: clicks on application link
Cycle 1 · Cycle 2 · Cycle 3

Program inquiries to grad assistant
Cycle 1 · Cycle 2 · Cycle 3

Supervision inquiries to faculty*
Cycle 1 · Cycle 2 · Cycle 3

*See "Check your stats" chapter for approaches

COMPLETE THE WORKSHEET – Grad_Stats

Oh my God this is too much, please stop

Ha ha ha *yes it's a lot*. If you have to narrow it down, I'd start at the top and work down.

Absolute musts:

- numbers of FT and PT students in your program as an indicator of overall health
- application completion
- web traffic

Everything else will add nuance and depth to the investigations, but those numbers without the first three aren't ultimately very helpful.

Define your USPs

USPs are "unique selling propositions."

They're what set you apart from competitors. Initially, this means thinking about what makes you different than other, similar graduate programs.

"What are our core strengths?" is another way of tackling this question, but a core strength might not differentiate you from another, similar program.

Grad recruitment — like undergraduate recruitment — is ultimately a business-to-consumer "retail" proposition. Prospective students know they have a lot of options, and you want them to choose yours rather than somebody else's.

As thought-starters, consider:

- Strong reputations in supervision and mentorship, especially if there's a track record of grad students co-publishing with supervisors or other examples that truly set your school apart.
- Strong and unique funding sources — named scholarship funds, etc.
- Lab and research facilities
- Career outcomes, if you have a strong record of internships or job placements post-graduation
- The school's location (downtown in a bustling metropolis has its advantages, but set away from the hustle and bustle in a 'classic' university town has others)
- The school's history and aesthetic: do you have sleek, soaring modern buildings? Quaint limestone edifices? A beautiful library or a reading room with a roaring fireplace?
- Remote options: is the program fully remote, hybrid, or on-campus only?
- Emphatically ***not*** "storied alumni from days of yore." There's a fallacy that "students today want to tread the same halls as Prestigious Person," but in today's career-driven higher ed economy, that's an interesting bit of trivia but not of interest to students who want to know what their careers and job prospects will be like post-graduation. Alumni from 25+ years ago just don't create a compelling argument to attend; they graduated into a different world and different job market, and prospective students will not connect them to your ability to educate them for a career.

If the university has a viewbook or other recruitment material for undergrads, give that a glance — what they talk about as things that attract undergraduate students may also be something you can use for grad recruitment.

Drop the F-BOMB

I like to use the acronym F-BOMB when I'm looking for a way to distinguish an offering. This isn't an etched-in-stone sequence, but generally speaking, in descending order:

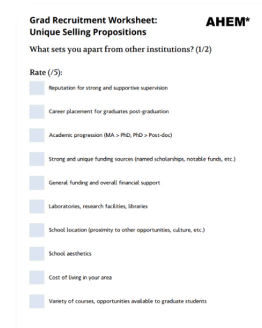
FIRST – is this a brand-new program in this area, with no competition?

BEST – do you have empirical stats showing you're superior in a specific area — career placements, publishing rates, graduation numbers? These should tie back to what motivates your graduate students to apply, which we'll cover later.

ONLY — do you have a unique distinction – lab equipment, location (the broader the better — 'the only X in North America' is better than 'the only X in Canada', which is better than 'the only X in the Greater Toronto Area, etc.), area of specialization, etc.?

MOST – do you have more of something than anyone else? More faculty, more lab space, the biggest library...?

BLUFF AND BLUSTER — if you don't have any of these signifiers, what do you really like about the program? Talk it up like it's the best thing in the world. Even if every other school has career service supports for grad students and you're the only one broadcasting the service... you might as well be the only one offering it.



Grad Recruitment Worksheet:
Unique Selling Propositions AHEM*

What sets you apart from other institutions? (1/2)

Rate (/5):

- Reputation for strong and supportive supervision
- Career placement for graduates post-graduation
- Academic progression (MA > PhD, PhD > Post-doc)
- Strong and unique funding sources (named scholarships, notable funds, etc.)
- General funding and overall financial support
- Laboratories, research facilities, libraries
- School location (proximity to other opportunities, culture, etc.)
- School aesthetics
- Cost of living in your area
- Variety of courses, opportunities available to graduate students

COMPLETE THE WORKSHEET – Grad_USPs

Other Prep Work

Know your university's brand

Your school probably has a central marketing team, who probably has a published brand book. It might be called a "brand book" or a "visual standards guide" or a "visual identity guide" or something along those lines.

It should give you a reference for official colours, fonts to use, and links or instructions on how to get your visual identity / brand in a number of formats for different purposes. All of this will be necessary for design, whether you're doing it in-house or handing it off to an external party, down the line.

Know how the application process works (and try it yourself)

Apply for your grad program.

The best marketing in the world will do very little if applying to grad studies is a nightmare labyrinth of confusing directions, myriad and redundant forms, high fees, slow responses, and so on. I almost didn't pursue my LLM even though I really wanted to do it and I could do it for free because the university I worked for was awesome like that because the application process was such a pain in the ass that I felt like the school kind of didn't want students.

This is a retail business. Students have many options and you want them to choose yours. You want their path from "maybe I should consider this" to "I want to study X program at Y school" to "here I am, a happy student" to be as smooth as possible.

There's no substitute for applying to see how the application process works. Reach out to your graduate admissions department and see if there's a way to get a code or other setup that will waive the fee-paying step so you aren't out of pocket for the application fee.

Then walk through the application process yourself, pretending you're fresh off the turnip truck, a wide-eyed undergrad considering an advanced degree. Note the painful parts, the confusing parts. You may not be able to solve these problems — admissions processes are complex, bureaucracy is slow — but the more you understand what the hurdles will be, the better you can equip yourself and your team to help prospective students navigate them.

Update your grad book

You don't think this is a marketing piece, but it is. Prospective students might look it up, but also — as we'll cover later — happy and well informed students recruit other students. The easier you make their job — to study and grow — by giving them what they need in a concise, well organized, and good looking document, the happier they'll be.

So what you need is something that's simple (good-looking doesn't mean complex), concise, and everything a student needs to know about how to function on campus. If your book isn't up to date, take some time to get it ready before rolling out a marketing project — the work is never wasted, and it's very helpful down the line.

Once it's updated and online, ask your web team about generating a vanity/short URL for it, like https://whatsamatta.edu/department/gradbook. Something easy to remember, easy to put on print pieces, etc.

Sidebar: the Five Types of Grad Student

And how their stories differ

Grad students aren't a monolith. You know this. Let's take a quick minute to share some general ideas around how grad students differ: what they want, what motivates them, and especially what kind of information they want to see.

They break down into five rough groups, split into master's and doctoral studies.

Master's

A professional-certification Master's student is generally:

- already in a field related to the area of practice, or determined to enter it
- wants specialized knowledge to help them get hired or increase their job mobility

Motivators:

- ability to do the degree in conjunction with their current job, or
- speed to degree, if it can't be done in conjunction with a job
- low cost / clear return on investment (ROI) for the time and tuition

Messages:

- career successes from graduates
- statistics on income for graduates in relevant fields
- titles and profiles of graduates in relevant fields

A course-based Master's student is generally:

- seeking a credential
- wants to be hired, promoted, or improve their social/professional status
- more likely to be an international student

Motivators:

- speed and effort to attain the degree
- direct career and income outcomes

Messages:

- simple, direct numbers – how a degree improves lifetime hireability and improves income

A research-based Master's student is generally:

- there to explore areas of academic interest, and/or
- stalling due to an uncertain job market, or personal reluctance to join the labour market

Motivators:

- ability to delve into topics of interest and do notable work
- laddering into a PhD program
- availability of supervisors

Messages:

- success stories — research and projects of note done by Master's students, students who have gone on to PhD studies or interesting careers
- "Lifestyle" – paint a picture of what they'll do, who they'll work with, but also what life on campus and around campus is like

Doctoral

A hard/applied science PhD student is generally:

- seeking a high-impact career in their area of interest
- possibly interested in entering academia, but potentially after spending time in industry
- highly invested in seeing their intellect recognized and rewarded

Motivators:

- opportunities to stand out through research and build a reputation that bridges academia and industry
- leapfrogging starter positions in industry into leadership roles; avoid 'drone work' and move right to running research and projects
- supervisors with strong industry connections and funding, able to direct their work

Messages:

- success stories, especially ones that support industry success, or academic success in starting labs / industry-facing projects
- income improvement statistics

A social sciences / arts PhD student is generally:

- seeking an academic or research career
- passionate about the niche area they were pursuing in their Master's
- uncertain of whether a PhD will deliver the kind of career outcome they need
- contemplating a PhD to follow the Master's, or pursuing it after time (sometimes substantial time) working

Motivators:

- support for research and ability to explore ideas
- available supervisors who support independent thought and self-direction

Messages:

- success stories, especially of academic leadership and recognition, transitions to full-time academia, intellectual renown
- rich supervisor relationships
- "lifestyle" – paint a picture of what they'll do, who they'll work with, but also what life on campus and around campus is like

What to do with this information

Understanding this means understanding how to set a bedrock for a content approach for each of the programs you offer. From your website and printed recruitment material, through to your specific marketing/advertising campaigns, be mindful of what you're trying to do when you reach out to students. A project to attract a PhD student to a fine arts department should look and feel different than what you do to attract students to a course-based Master's.

The academic overlap

Throughout this book, we'll reiterate the importance of thinking of each program as a product that benefits from a singular approach. The one exception is the academic Master's / PhD audiences, where depending on your program and the kinds of students you're trying to attract, the Venn diagrams might fall over each other a fair bit.

Demographics

Who are you advertising to?

This step is essential to subsequent advertising, whether you're handling it directly or not.

So you might as well do it now.

Age and other key factors

Lock in the simple things:

- Age
- Gender (likely not the most relevant factor, but you may be seeking greater equity)
- Race/background (see above)
- Interests & values
- Stage of life

These might all feel self-evident. They may BE self-evident. If you're trying to get people into your Master's program in Economics, and you really only want undergrads to apply, "20-24, interested in economics, finance, policy, pursuing BA in economics, commerce, finance or statistics" might be all you need.

Geography

This will be informed by the per-work you did in Part 1. Where in the world do you want to recruit students from?

- Locally (your state/province/region) > generally gated by funding structures
- Nationally
- Internationally

Tuition (and revenue) will be a driver here. So will your research development interests, your plans for any kind of global brand development, etc.


Grad Recruitment Worksheet: Demographics
AHEM

COMPLETE THE WORKSHEET – Grad_Demographics

Key messages and areas

Key message (per region)

Go back to your USPs from part 1 and start thinking about the one true sentence that describes what you're offering the best. It doesn't have to be perfect, or final, just enough to jump-start some thinking.

You may want to consider differentiating the message if you're marketing in multiple regions. What attracts somebody to your program in your province/state may not be the same as what would make them move across the country — or to a different country — to study with you.

Key image (or visual theme)

Start thinking about what represents your program best, especially in the context of your USP and key message. Is it a student and a supervisor working together? A student working in the lab? An alumni working in their field? A graduation ceremony? Studying contemplatively on campus? Presenting confidently in front of a classroom? You don't have to have the image at this point — but start thinking forward to options of what it could be.

While photos are the broad go-to, there may be other visual approaches that will complement, or replace, an image. A key statistic (the average income of a program graduate, or the number of years of study for an accelerated program, etc.) could supplement an image, or even replace it with the right design.

Topic areas

What specific topics in your general area do you want to focus on, if any? This could be informed by an existing area of strength you want to use to your advantage, or an area you want to grow in, or areas where the most supervisors are available.

This may shift when you start looking at key competitors (next chapter).

Related areas

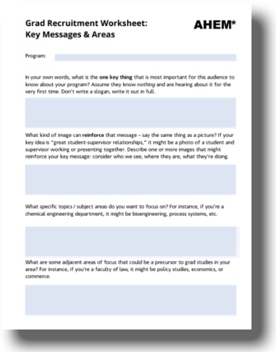
Consider the cognate areas of study that may also lead into the specific area you want to recruit into. For instance, if you want to recruit specifically for graduate studies in labour history, your first stop should be "labour history," but when you're looking at where prospective students might come from, also think about...

- policy studies
- industrial relations
- human resources
- human rights

There may also be others — the key is to think ahead to outreach, and where undergraduate (or

Master's, if you're recruiting for doctoral studies) students might be working in areas where they could see themselves focusing on yours.

Ultimately, you're going to want to build a contact matrix — a spreadsheet of schools, and contact information. We'll discuss that in the "Top of the Funnel" chapter.


Grad Recruitment Worksheet: Key Messages & Areas

AHEM

COMPLETE THE WORKSHEET – Grad_Key-Message-Areas

Who to beat (and who to copy)

Key competitors

What schools would you say you're in competition with for the same pool of grad students?

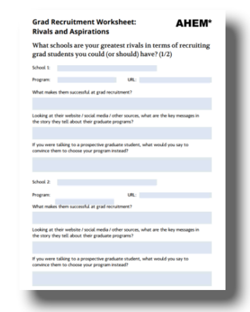
List the schools, and note their web addresses.

Take an hour to visit their websites, especially pages around grad recruitment. Take notes on what you think is effective and ineffective about how they present the program, tools they're using on their sites, etc. If they have social media presences, take a look at those as well to see how they position their program and appeal to students.

Key models to emulate

What schools do you aspire to be more like in terms of recruitment success?

Similar to the above, take some time to note their websites, and spend some time looking at their grad recruitment pages and social media.


Grad Recruitment Worksheet: Rivals and Aspirations

AHEM

COMPLETE THE WORKSHEET – Grad_OtherSchools

Gathering intelligence

Market research starts at home

What do your current students think?

Invest time in gathering marketing intelligence from your current graduate students. They found you, they chose you. Why? A simple survey with a modest cash prize, or some nice merch, or something a bit more out of the box (dinner with the Department Head, make them Dean for a Day, pay Vans $100 to make custom shoes with your brand and their name on them) can give you a good sense of what strengths you can build from. Consider asking:

- How they first heard about you
- What about your school attracted them the most
- A ranking of their priorities when choosing a graduate school (individual supervisor; reputation of school; tuition cost; cost of living; appeal of locale; lab facilities and equipment; career prospects; same school/different school considerations; even convenience — tailor the list, but ensure you're getting a robust idea of the factors).
- What information sources they consulted when choosing a grad program (your website, "where to go to graduate school" type information sites [ask for the names], professors, friends and family, magazines, rankings)
- Whether they'd be willing to be part of a sounding board group as you work on this project

If you're embarking on this project, it's likely because you want to improve on your current successes, so polling only current students and saying "this worked in the past, let's do more of it" shouldn't be the end of the journey. But it's good to know what your current students think before trying to pull in new ones. What do your current students think?

Here's a sample survey:

https://www.cognitoforms.com/Ahem1/GraduateStudiesStudentSurvey

You can rebuild it in Qualtrics, which most schools have, and slightly clunkier versions in MS Forms and Google Forms.

There's only one "fancy" component, which is a fold-out asking about specific faculty members if "Availability of Supervisors" is ranked 4 or 5 — if you have key faculty members drawing students, you should know about this; as 'poster children' or guests on webinars, etc.

You should, from here, be able to do some simple analysis. Even looking at the surveys "raw" and seeing where your 1s and 2s are, and your 4s and 5s, as well as the free-form entries, should help. You can get super-mathematical and start assigning point values to scores and get very analytical, as well, but your goal right now is just a rough shape.

Pat yourself on the back!

You've now done more to understand your program than most. Even if you stop right here, you will be in great shape to talk about the program and give meaningful guidance (and cut significant discovery and development costs) to internal or external marketing bodies.

And yet, there's more!

Screw up your courage, batten down the hatches, stir the mustard, and do whatever other metaphors you must — there's much more to come, and after a quick technical sidebar, we're going to start honing your audience, key message, and visual metaphors.

Sidebar: QR Codes, Vanity URLs, and UTM Codes

Some technical necessities for tracking

> *"Half my advertising spend is wasted; the trouble is, I don't know which half."*
>
> *- Apocryphal, possibly John Wanamaker (US) or Lord Leverhulme (UK)*

If you're familiar with all of the terms in this chapter title, jump on ahead. If not... these are things that you should be at least passingly familiar with.

UTM codes:

When you click a link on an ad, or in an email, you may notice that you end up on a domain with a bunch of... stuff... after the domain URL, like

https://whatsamatta.edu/hello**?utm_source=email&utm_medium=web&utm_campaign=AHEM-grad-studies**

That trailing information after the question mark is information captured in the link, which informs your site of where exactly web visits are coming from. This pairs with web analysis (Google GA4, commonly, but other services exist).

The idea, in general, is to build links that show you how campaigns perform.

So a postcard in the same campaign series might have a QR code or vanity URL (see below) that goes to this link instead:

https://whatsamatta.edu/hello<u>**?utm_source=postcard&utm_medium=print&utm_campaign=AHEM-grad-studies**</u>

(underlining for emphasis).

All of this is in service of (usually) a post-mortem analysis of a campaign, so you can differentiate traffic from a specific campaign compared to traffic coming to your site other ways. If you're not using a UTM code, you won't know if a student visiting your site found it on a search engine, heard about it from a friend, or followed a link on your immaculately designed, carefully planned print piece.

There should be people at your institution that can help you set up campaign UTM codes. They may not be in your immediate orbit — and, depending on how closely they work in relationship to you, and how you and they fit in the hierarchies, might just... not do it. If they can't or won't help, you're a bit stuck, unless you go the vanity URL route (see below).

For everyone's ease of use, be sure you have all your campaign planning done and use only meaningful distinctions when planning UTM codes. Does it really matter if you know if the posters and postcards and flyers had different results, or do you want to mass them all under the UTM code category "print"?

List all of your outreach tools first, then look for meaningful ways to set up analysis to be sure you're bringing people over for the right reasons, and taking care of yourself. You should use these across your entire campaign.

Vanity URLs

You've got a website, but it might not be the top-level domain at your institution. You're making a flyer, and you realize that https://www.whatsamatta.edu/artsandscience/departments/history/grad-studies.html is... not a great thing if you expect somebody to type it into their phone, or their PC at home.

Vanity URLs to the rescue!

These are short URLs that redirect to the page in question; ideally, as you'll see in chapters to come, a landing page for your relevant program.

https://whatsamatta.edu/history/grad

You can append UTM codes to that for QR code and digital applications, but mainly this is a good shortcut for things like postcards, pamphlets, etc. when you just want something that people can type into their phones or laptops if they don't want to use QR codes. These do not have the same tracking potential as UTM codes and QR codes!

Ideally, your institution's web team will be able to help you set these up. If all else fails, you can always book your own domain name through a registrar and point it wherever you want... a colleague, for instance, bought and owned **gradstudies.ca** as a pointer to her grad recruitment page (I think it's dead now, though).

If you book your own vanity URL, that can be a shortcut to UTM code generation if you're stonewalled by a central web team; you can create all links to flow through your vanity URL, and various UTM codes there. But honestly this is really getting into a level of effort and sophistication where you might want to bail and just live with less precise results.

Booking a vanity URL

You can book vanity URLs yourself through most webhosts, or specialized domain registrars like NameCheap.com. Be creative in your search — you can go for something prosaic (at the time of writing, "historygradstudies.com" was available, for instance, which would be a decent vanity URL if you're a History department looking to promote, uh, grad studies). But you can go broader (see the gradstudies.ca example above) or more evocative with your names as well.

Booking "laborhistory.com" (if you're American; labourhistory.ca if you're Canadian) as a way to promote a specific project for graduate recruitment in labour history would be a way to go, for instance.

You can also look at specialized domain extensions; top-level domains (TLDs) like .com, .org, .net, etc. In the engineering area, for instance, ".engineer" is a valid TLD for websites. This TLD sees a mixed use from indivduals and companies, but "gradstudies.engineer" or "study.engineer" would be a valid, bookable URL. Wikipedia has lists of TLDs, including this list of generic English-language domain extensions: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_English-language_generic_Internet_top-level_domains

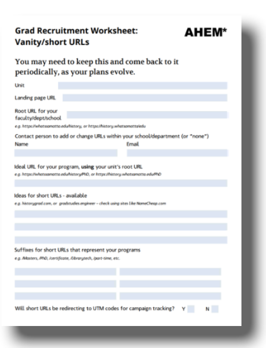
This is not without risk; if you're directing people to a vanity URL you've created, you might be unwittingly undermining efforts by your central team to monitor traffic directly to their own URLs, for instance. Always good to check with them first, and the worksheet for this chapter will have you building out that contact list.

QR Codes

These are the Rorschach tests you see periodically on printed material, or in particularly obnoxious restaurants that refuse to have printed menus. Under the hood, they're quite powerful, and can contain a lot of information, so they're the perfect way to get something out there that people can scan with their phones to visit on the web. The challenge there is that they are pretty much only ever used by people with phones, so your linked material should be built for short attention spans.

They can contain very long URLs, so they're perfect to set up the UTM codes mentioned earlier. There are a lot of QR code generators out there, but be careful — your marcomms team should have access to free ones, if they're not already creating them for you, and the 'free' ones online are often snake pits where the code will be free but suddenly stop working unless you pay $100 a year, or whatnot. Canva generates them for free if you have an account, and there are other services out there — just proceed with caution.

Remember to talk to the boffins in your web department about Google GA4 or other analytics tools; you'll need them, or at least somebody to pull numbers from them.

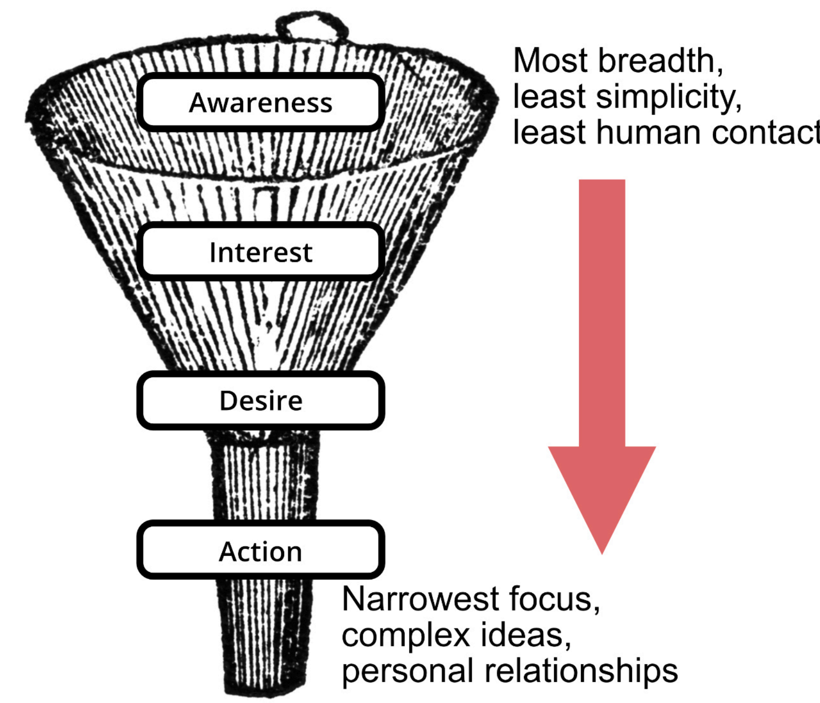

Grad Recruitment Worksheet: Vanity/short URLs
AHEM
You may need to keep this and come back to it periodically, as your plans evolve.

COMPLETE THE WORKSHEET – Grad_URLs-QR-Codes

The Marketing Funnel

How marketing programs work

The "marketing funnel" has been kicking around in one form or another for over a century; it's a very simple hierarchy of messaging. In this context, it spans from "we exist" for a prospective student who has never even heard of you before, all the way to "I'm ready to apply" for a student who has learned about your school and program and wants to work with you as a grad student.



Awareness (Outreach):

At the top of the funnel: mass distribution of a very simple message. This could be:

- A poster on a notice board
- A graphic in a newsletter
- A paid social media ad
- A sponsored search engine result
- A story about your program shared online, or on social media
- A brief announcement in front of a classroom
- Faculty — yours, guesting at other schools, or other academics you can convince (graduates, or friends of your school) — plugging your program with a slide when a guest in classes, or at conferences

The idea, at the top of the funnel, is to let people know you exist and to inspire them to want to learn more. These should always terminate with a call to action — a clear next step, something the person hearing the message can do.

Interest (Prospect Conversion):

When a prospective student visits your website, or send you an email, or reaches out via phone — now they are showing interest.

This is when you want to provide them with more information about your program. Now you want them to:

- Sign up for a newsletter that continuously provides details and news about the program
- Register for a webinar
- Follow / subscribe to your content on a social media platform

Desire (Applicant Conversion):

At this point, you should — through newsletters / email outreach and social media content — be nudging prospective students toward wanting to study with you. It's good to ensure that everything you do has a clear action item associated with it — this is a "what to do next" step. Giving people something to do when they are enthused is key. This could be:

- Starting the application process
- Reaching out to program staff for help applying
- Contacting prospective supervisors (we'll discuss this more in a later chapter)

Action (Applicant Conversion; Follow-Through):

The ultimate action is the application. But it is not the end of the story.

One common failing is a lack of supports for students throughout the application process. This is frequently exacerbated when schools have a centralized application system for grad students, but it's incumbent on the unit actually trying to get the students to support them through the process.

The people behind your university or college's application systems might be excellent, but still not up to helping every individual student to the degree they need. The gap between students starting and finishing an application can be wide, and sometimes a this is the fastest way to gain ground. You may be able to get closer to your goals just by making sure students are supported through the entire application cycle.

This is why it's crucial that you review the application process yourself, and identify all possible points of confusion and stumbling blocks — and ensure that you and your team can help people understand and navigate those.

This may involve a FAQ on your website, or a chatbot trained on (and locked to) admissions information to help weed out simple questions. Setting up a micro-meeting tool (in the Microsoft ecosystem, we use Bookings) for 10-minute calls, with some staff blocking time in their calendars to receive those calls, can go a huge way toward knocking out simple questions and moving students along their applications, especially if you're attracting a lot of students whose first language isn't English, or who aren't familiar with North American higher education applications.

For future reference, **melt** is the term of art for students who register, pay their fees, and never show up to classes. **Attrition** is students who drop out in the first few days of the program (for your purposes, before there's a financial penalty for the drop). **Retention** — ensuring your students stick with the degree — is also important, and discussed closer to the end of the book.

Reaching Out to Other Schools

Different schools, different tactics

As we move down the funnel, several tactics will require you to get help — or at least permission — from other schools to distribute material to prospective students.

Let's take a moment to delineate the kinds of schools you're dealing with, and how your approach might change depending on what they are.

The point of this is to figure out what these schools mean to you, to help you develop messages for them — and then to build a contact matrix to do the outreach.

This is *vital* in the era of low-effort, high-noise AI marketing!

I've gotten three emails in my inbox this morning, as I work on this, from companies who in various ways are promising to help me "scale high-quality, brand-safe AI content" to "dominate the market."

This is, of course, horseshit. There is no "high-quality" AI content. There is only an upper threshold of mediocre; "good enough" content. There is no "brand-safe" AI content; once people sniff out that there's no person at the helm, just machine-generated slop, they'll stop trusting your brand.

The machines being built are machines to spew good-enough content at higher volumes, at higher speeds, than ever before. If you think it's hard to find good information on grad programs now, wait until these engines are really purring.

So what happens when the natural response to infinite reams of low-value garbage marketing is people just... *stop believing* in that kind of marketing?

People. People using human-run methods to communicate with other humans.

Personal outreach to build friends at other schools is a lot of work, and means being vulnerable, putting yourself out there, hearing "no" or being ignored more often than you'd like.

But now's the time to do it. Winning friends and fans of your program, or at least building a base of people willing to share human-to-human information about your program is solid gold. I'd argue it's no longer a luxury, but a necessity.

So what kind of schools are we talking about, when we talk about building a base of schools to reach out to, and through?

"Terminal" schools in-region

These are schools that offer undergraduate courses in the subject you're recruiting into, but not any graduate options that compete with yours. Students can benefit from regional funding, so tuition for them will be less than studying out-of-region. They're probably already on your radar, and hopefully already on your side.

Tactic: This can be seen as a service to their students: you're complementing their undergraduate offering with a reasonable follow-on graduate program.

Caution: Do not compete on price! Students will be doing their own research and math. "Low tuition compared to out of state programs" doesn't make you sound good, just cheap. Students will investigate tuition on their own, you don't need to sell them on "cheap".

In-region schools with competing programs

Schools that offer undergraduate programs and graduate programs in your area. This is the point where inter-school relationships may be "collegial but competitive" — why on Earth would they drive grad students to your school, when they likely have targets of their own to meet?

Tactic: Start with just a straight request to share your materials. Sometimes, collegiality wins, and a confident or generous school might just straight up share your stuff. The fallback from there is exchanging promotion in areas of specialty — we have a leading program in Slavic Culture, you have a leading program in Asian Studies, if you can share info about graduate studies in Slavic Culture here, we'll share your message about Asian Studies.

Caution: A tit-for-tat exchange really only works if you're confident you have more recruitment potential than the school you're trading with. "Specialty exchange" serves all parties, but cross-promotion of grad studies in general won't be useful to you if it ends up just sending more people to their school than you get in exchange.

Out-of-region schools

The inverse of "don't compete on price" — you're going to face a more uphill battle here as your school, without regional subsidies, will be more expensive to attend than a home institution.

Tactic: Regardless of whether it's a terminal school or not, shift right to one or two of the key strengths you offer. If you're truly the best school in your nation for Slavic Culture studies, zero in on that as a way to build desire among students interested in that (or very similar) subjects — you need to get them to want you more than to save money.

Bonus tactic: Consider stepping down to individual teaching faculty — built a list of professors who teach the subject, or related subjects, in your content matrix. Write professors individually asking them to talk to promising students in their class about your program. Keep your door open to them. Do they welcome guest speakers in their classes, or are they seeking guest presenters? If this is a school you strongly want to recruit from, and you can direct some energy to getting your faculty to guest in their undergrad classes, especially with a short closing pitch for grad studies... pure magic.

International schools

Including this for completion, but it's a topic almost too large to tackle here. International recruitment is well worth consideration, but there are incredible numbers of variables, including how graduate programs work in other jurisdictions, academic years, the relative importance of graduate degrees as a status symbol vs. actual educational attainment, etc.

Tactic: Start from direct networks and work out from there — rather than blind-emailing 500 universities in India, start with your out-of-region tactic of looking for strong programs at the undergraduate level that cross over into the area you're recruiting into. Academic output can help here as well — published papers in your area, and outreach to those academics asking them to share your information with promising students on their radar.

Spreadsheet vs. CRM

The giant marketing nerds in your orbit will eventually ask about a "CRM," which is "Customer Relationship Management" software. It's a database that keeps track of people, classically, it tracks them from first contact to customer, and through their journey as a client of a business.

A CRM can add a lot of granular information to a recruitment process. It can also be a shit-ton of work to build and maintain, and add dubious value if you don't have the staff capacity to keep it up to date constantly.

The reason I'm bringing it up now is that the sample grid below is a simple spreadsheet file, but contains columns for "last contact" and "current status." **This makes it a CRM**. Not a full-featured or fancy CRM, but in the strictest technical sense, you're now managing the status of people in your marketing orbit.

If people keep telling you to "get a CRM" and you aren't building and maintaining a contact sheet for marketing outreach like this one, that's an excellent sign that you won't have the staff or capacity to manage CRM software. Not to say it's a bad idea, but it **does not remove work** from an organization (despite what CRM salespeople will tell you).

See below for a link to an Excel spreadsheet you can take, and adapt as you see fit.

Sample contact matrix

Note that in the example, it is not populated with other associate deans of grad studies / grad chairs! These are not the people you need to reach out to — you want to share a message with undergraduate students about your grad program. These folks may want to check in with a grad chair first — or not — but my recommended process would be:

- Email the general contact email, cc department head
- Request to share X with their students about your grad program

The person you want to act is usually found via the general staff list; student services, running a newsletter, or an office administrator who can add a graphic to a screen or a poster to a notice board. The department head (or equivalent) is on CC as a courtesy.

I repeat: if you get to a point where you're saying "populating this spreadsheet and keeping it up to date is too much work," you are not ready for a CRM. This is the exact work you need to do in a CRM, they just have a prettier interface.

Sample workthrough

I am running a top-tier graduate program in history at a school not in most Top 50 USA rankings, but still well regarded. In two or three areas of specialization, arguably one of the best programs in the country. I think any student in the USA at the undergrad level could be a candidate for the program, even via the Ivy League.

So I'm going to add Harvard to my contact matrix.

Step 0: The contact matrix is pre-filled with the US' top 30 schools per the News and World Report ranking system. So Harvard and its URL are already in there.

Step 1: Does Harvard have a history department? Yes, they do. Add the History Department URL: https://history.fas.harvard.edu/

Step 2: What's the general contact email? Via the Contact page: history@fas.harvard.edu. Add that.

Step 3: Who is the most appropriate staff person? Via Home > People > Staff... time to scroll the list. There is a Director of Administration and Operations, who seems like a good person to start with. Her name is (for the sake of this example) Jane Sampleperson, title Director of Administration and Operations, email jsampleperson@fas.harvard.edu. Add those to the sheet.

Step 4: Who is the department head? Via Home > People > Faculty, there is an Interim Department Chair, John Harvardman, at jharvardman@fas.harvard.edu. Add those to the sheet.

Now on to the next one.

This is time consuming and frankly a bit aggravating. See "Cheap Labour" much further on for ideas on how to get this done without going insane or breaking the bank.

The sample document has the top 30 US schools and Canada's U15 pre-filled (name and URL), and tabs for in-region terminal schools, in-region schools with grad programs, out-of region, and international schools (the latter two with a column for terminal y/n). More tabs than you need, maybe, but if your message is going to vary, it will be easiest to keep them separate.

"But I don't want to be pushy or rude!"

Let's get this out of the way right now. The most consistent reason not to do this is a completely imagined reaction from complete strangers to what is actually a pretty reasonable request.

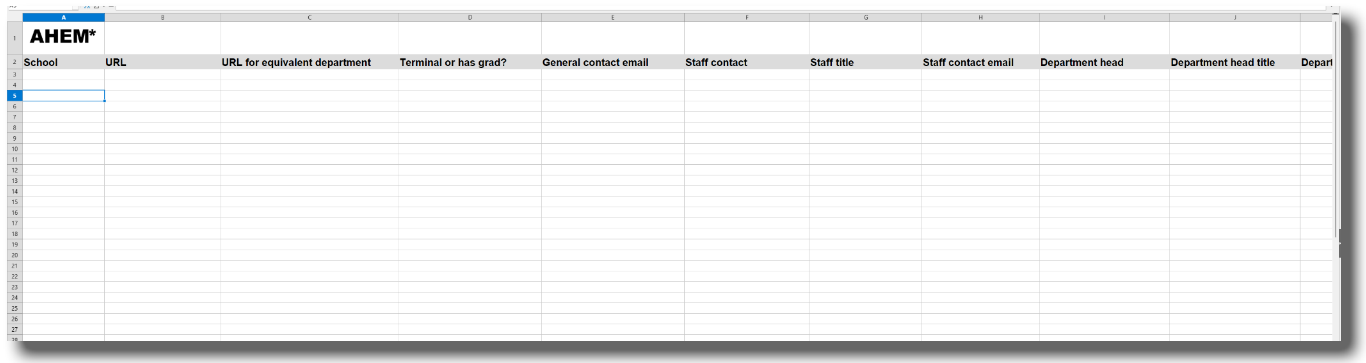
"We're seeking students for our graduate program, and think your excellent undergraduate program will have students who would really benefit from what we have to offer at School X, could you please share the following ______________; if there is anything I can do for you, or if you have any questions, please feel free to reach out" is not a Fuller Brush Man sticking his foot in the door at dinner time. You'd have to be a real jerk to have a *why how dare they* reaction to that.

Your worst-case scenarios are (a) you'll be ignored; (b) you'll be thought of as somebody doing their best for their department's grad program, or (c) some massive jerk is going to be a massive jerk, and who cares what massive jerks think?

And what's your best-case scenario? Great prospective students are directed to learn more about your program! That's a pretty swell result.

At the end of the day, people who ask for stuff sometimes get stuff, while people who never ask for stuff never get stuff. That's just the way of things. So let's nip the "it's rude!" reason to not try in the bud. Trying is worth it, even if you think somebody you have never seen and will never meet might frown briefly before completely forgetting you exist again.

I've made a sample contact template for this in the downloadable worksheet bundle to get you started. Feel free to adapt it to meet your needs.



AHEM*

School	URL	URL for equivalent department	Terminal or has grad?	General contact email	Staff contact	Staff title	Staff contact email	Department head	Department head title	Depart

SPREADSHEET TEMPLATE – AHEM_Sample-Contact-Matrix

The Big Stupid Message

So you want to get the word out, and you're chipping away at figuring out who to contact to do just that.

The thing to remember at the top of the funnel, is that this is a big, stupid message. It's not going to be subtle or detailed.

This is where the worksheets from Parts 1 and 2 will come in handy. Have those on hand.

What are the tools you'll be using? All you want at this point is to deliver the big, stupid message. WE EXIST. And maybe a smidge more. Generally speaking, you'll be trafficking in shallow, broad tactics like:

- A poster on a notice board
- A graphic in a newsletter
- An ad in a print publication
- A paid social media ad
- A sponsored search engine result
- A story about your program on the news page of your unit's website
- A social media post about your program (maybe based on that story)
- A brief announcement in front of a classroom from a current student, an alumnus, or a visiting professor
- Sending program staff to grad fairs or similar "boothing" opportunities

What you want out of this is to **direct attention to the next step down the funnel**.

Building the big, stupid message (BSM)

From the earlier worksheets, you should be able to pull out the following elements:

- Your audience demographics (age range, interests/motivations)
- The region(s) you want to target
- Your key message concept — what's the one thing you want people to know?
- Your key image — what's the one image you want associated with your program?
- One or two extra points to add beside your key message
- The one place you want people to go after seeing this message (usually a landing page; see next chapter)
- The one thing you want people to do after seeing this message (it could be as simple as 'learn more,' but you may want to push a specific webinar, or newsletter, or something else)

Workshop your concepts!

Nobody is an island. If you haven't done it already, consider getting a small group of students together — ideally some new grad student recruits, and if possible, undergrads in your area that may be considering grad studies. Test some the ideas, the message/image combos, and goals with them. We talked about surveying them on their journey to grad school earlier — that's a great opportunity to gather interest in being part of this feedback group.

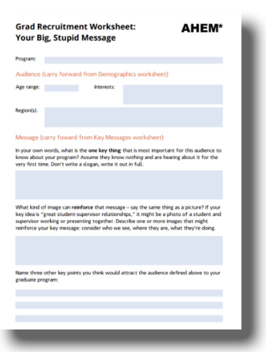
Refining your BSM

You've got a few sets of images and copy you think are the right fit. What's next?

If you have a marketing and communications team, and you haven't looped them into this yet, now's the time. Catch them up on the work you've done to date (they should be pleased that you've put so much thought into it!) and ask them for help iterating and refining your ideas.

If you don't have a marcomms team, or they can't take on any more work, or you're told that what you're doing is simply not a priority, there are eight billion ad agencies out there who would be very glad to take your money. "How to work with an ad agency" is its own topic (and the last chapter of this book), but if you ask around, you might get some solid recommendations from colleagues across campus. The advantage of an external agency is their scope of work could extend to various other areas, particularly expertise in paid social advertising/SEM. Just... take your time getting to know them, and make sure you're framing your needs and expectations very clearly, and that they're giving you a clear up-front quote with deliverables and costs.

You could also Just white-knuckle it! If you're doing this, be very attentive to your university's brand guidelines, and make sure you aren't directly or inadvertently contravening them. 99% of the time this would be you not giving the brand enough breathing room (white space) as defined around its visual identity, and/or deciding to modify it in some way. Don't do that.


Grad Recruitment Worksheet: Your Big, Stupid Message AHEM*

Program:

Audience (carry forward from Demographics worksheet)

Age range: Interests:

Region(s):

Message (carry foward from Key Messages worksheet)

In your own words, what is the **one key thing** that is most important for this audience to know about your program? Assume they know *nothing* and are hearing about it for the very first time. Don't write a slogan, write it out in full.

What kind of image can **reinforce** that message – say the same thing as a picture? If your key idea is "great student-supervisor relationships," it might be a photo of a student and supervisor working or presenting together. Describe one or more images that might reinforce your key message: consider who we see, where they are, what they're doing.

Name three other key points you think would attract the audience defined above to your graduate program:

COMPLETE THE WORKSHEET – Grad_BigStupidMessage

Placing your Big Stupid Message

Where do you put your BSM?

Springing into action, how do you manifest these great ideas in the real world?

A poster on a notice board (letter-sized or tabloid sized)

On your own campus, especially in cognate areas of study (i.e. if you're looking for economics grad students, make sure you're also putting up some posters in the business school, the finance department, etc.)

On other, relevant campuses: this is where knowing where you want to market (regional, national, international) will be helpful. To do this, you'll want to build out the contact matrix from the previous chapter and reach out to these schools. Remember to leave a little bit of room in a budget for postage! Other schools may ask for some reciprocal postering, or other favours; it's at your discretion as to what to do there.

A graphic in a newsletter (aim for 900px wide x 600px high; include short link; send the graphic plus a few lines of text)

On campus, almost all faculties / departments should have some form of internal communication to their students on a regular basis, and if you send them a ready-made graphic and a sentence, it's likely that they'll just put it in their student-facing newsletters for you. If you're feeling ambitious, you can have a UTM code that you ask them to link to the graphic, so when students click on the link, you know what they've clicked on (see our earlier sidebar on this topic).

Off campus, see above re. the contact matrix. It's often as simple as sending your graphic, etc. to a department manager and asking them to circulate as appropriate; some will just do it, others will ask permission, etc. You may, again, end up in a tit-for-tat conversation, especially if you're seeking grad students at a school where they also offer grad studies in the same program. But it never hurts to ask.

An ad in a print publication (size will vary; the print publications will have guidelines)

It's hard to justify — print is expensive, and it's very hard to quantify results (although QR codes and bespoke short URLs help). But for the right program, it can be a great fit: if your graduate program offers X, and there's a student paper at a school that offers precursor undergrad specialty Y, it might make sense. Similarly, if you're offering a specific program such as an MBA in History and Library Sciences, an ad in Library Employee Quarterly might make sense. This is where QR codes and vanity URLs are very helpful to track effectiveness over time.

Generally, however, print is a "filler" — used to complete a strategy and ensure you're not missing anybody. Unless you have an extravagant budget, print is usually the last stop.

A paid social media ad (see also "When Should You Pay?")

(1080px x 1080 px, but double check, as this changes constantly, and may vary per platform)

Paid social media and SEM is its own art, and as social platforms become more and more attuned to the needs of major operators, placing millions and millions of dollars every year and expecting extraordinary flexibility, granular tracking, and myriad options, the platforms to place ads are almost incomprehensible to laypeople.

If you have an in-house marketing and communications team, you should be talking to them already (see above re. your contacts, and one of the last chapters of this book). They should have in-house expertise on how to manage paid social, and can either run something on your school's account, and bill you using account codes (or this expense factors into an overall marcomms budget they manage) — and/or they will need access to your own social media logins to set up and run ads for you.There might be a simple 'no, we don't or can't do that' response, in which case ask if they can make some time to show you, or a delegated student or staffer, the ropes. If you're delegating to staff, be very attentive to their contract terms and whether this kind of work is in-scope — this is specialized work, you don't want to back into an HR issue by accident.

External agencies will universally offer this as part of a service package. Some agencies are more oriented toward this service and offer creative work as a value-add. Again, be sure you're very, very clear on your needs and scope, and get a detailed quote, before making any arrangements externally.

Take it on yourself — or have a student or intern do it for you, see "Cheap Labour" later in this book. If you decide to fly solo here, social platforms have a "boost post" option that's usually much easier to navigate than the "real" advertising dashboard. Results are less fine-tuned than the "real" dashboard option, but it's a simpler workflow.

In all cases, A/B testing is well worth your time. Create a few variants of each ad to try, then see which perform better.

A sponsored search engine result

See above, basically. This is almost always Google, but if you're feeling frisky, Bing is an option as well. Search engine marketing (SEM) is simpler to set up than social media advertising, but not by much.

A story about your program shared online, or on social media (see our next chapter for ideas on how to generate these)

Starting back from your goals, you should be able to identify a few stories that can be slam dunks for the narrative you want to build around your program... a grad student acclaimed for their accomplishments, or a strong student-supervisor relationship (coauthored paper, maybe?), an alumni that has gone on to success and satisfaction in their field.

From there, it should be reasonably easy to put together a short story — one or two quotes per person involved, 500-600 words. That can be shared on your website's News section, as well as your school or department's social media channels.

Always remember to add the story and social posts with an invitation and a link to find out more about your grad program, leading back to an appropriate landing page (see Further Down the Funnel, later).

Up front: photos will be the hardest part of this. Images are also, unfortunately, how stories live or die on social media. Take your time taking pictures, if you're taking them, and try some angles, some different ideas. If you're asking for photos to be provided, don't be shy about asking for multiple images so you can have some choices. Etc.

Video is complex and while it can be done cheaply and well, it's very hard to justify the return on investment vs. using the same time and energy to generate many more text-and-image stories.

These are the posts you can 'boost' for an easier approach to social media advertising, if that's desired (see above). Doubly important, if you're going this route, to be sure everything ends with a clear path back to a landing page / call to action.

A brief announcement in front of a classroom

Adapt your key image/message to PowerPoint slide format and share it with all of your faculty, asking them to slide (ha ha) it into the end of any presentation they're giving at schools, conferences, colloquia. "By the way, we're currently recruiting* grad students..." — even if there isn't a complete 1:1 overlap between where they are and what your needs are, the audience will almost always be connected with other academic institutions and/or potential grad students.

I mean, ads are great, but imagine an Instagram ad or post flitting past somebody for 0.5 seconds versus one of your most charismatic faculty talking live to 200-300 undergrads for a minute about how great your program is, from the heart.

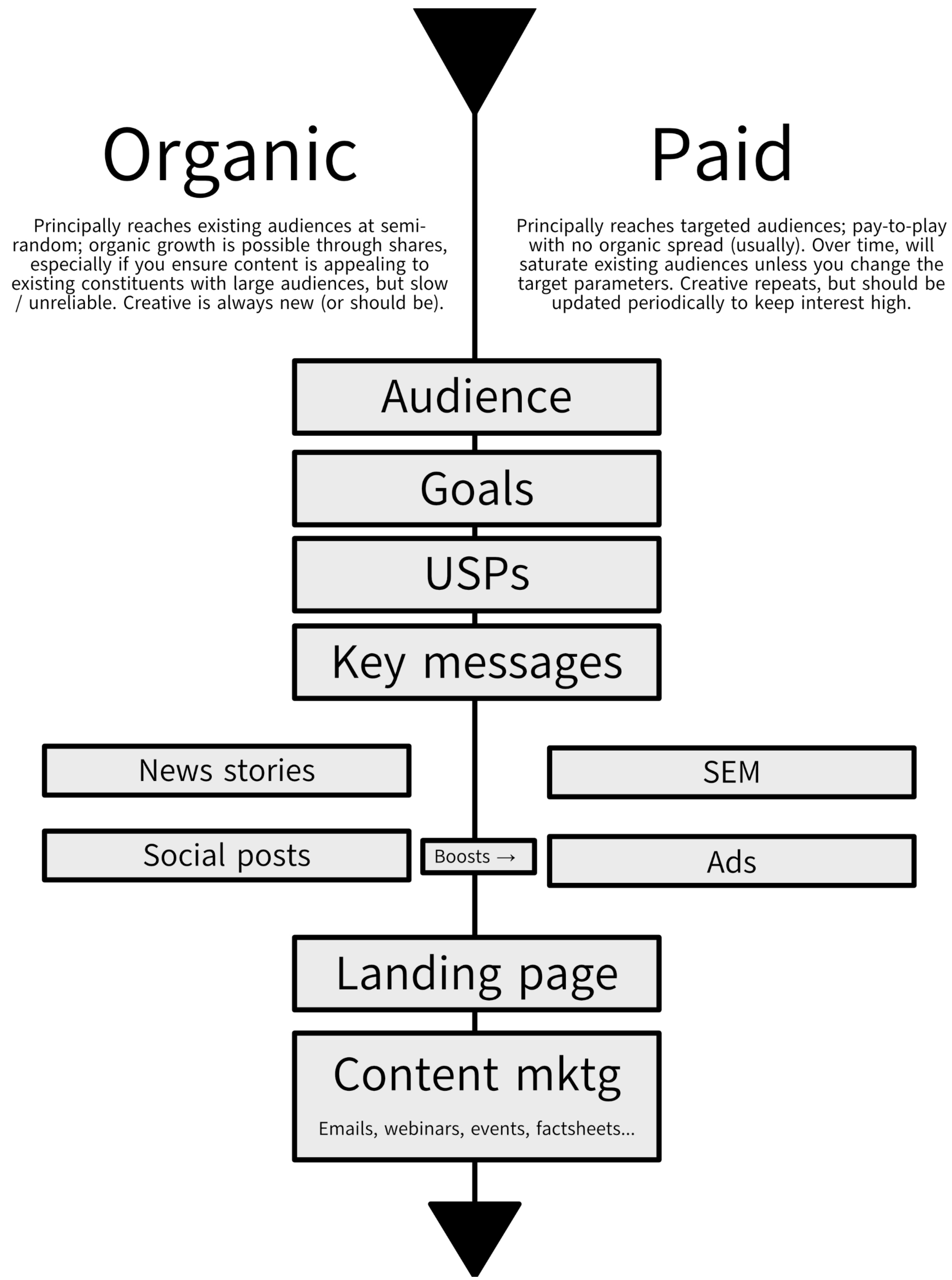
You don't **need** to get a list of who is going where, when, but by golly if you knew it sure would help to bump little reminders to folks.

Make the slide and share it. Don't ask faculty / grad students to make their own slide. It's not as important that you have the world's greatest graphic design skills as that you vault over the "making work for them" step of making a slide. Aim for something that features your key elements — key image, key phrase. Make sure you have a URL and ideally QR code on there. Your university's brand guidelines may have jumping-off points for slide templates, or you can look online for inspiration.

**or "hiring", in some cases where there are funded positions, often supporting grant-driven or industry research.*

Converting strengths to stories

Let's recap with a quick diagram of how organic and paid content are both 'lanes' in your marketing:



Point being, your marketing plan should include both the direct, targeted advertising and also organic content — the human stories that people see and share and provide proof-of-concept of the things you're talking about. This content, in turn, can be featured on landing pages on your site, in your emails, in your newsletters, on your webinars.

Depending on your strength, you should be able to start looking for stories. The stories should align with the strengths you're trying to share.

If your strength is great supervision, stories about grad students working with their supervisors are a good idea. A story about somebody successfully defending their PhD with a quote about how their supervisor helped guide and shape their thinking and research. A paper co-authored by a faculty member and supervised student, showing their partnership, the student's academic prowess, how the school helps students get a leg up.

If your strength is career success for graduates, your stories could be about young alumni making their way in the profession and how they're thriving in their field — good for you, also good grist for their LinkedIn mill. It could be about how your program reflects an upward trend in X as a career field. A story about how a student goes through the job application process and how they choose from multiple employment offers.

And so on.

I don't have time for this, god damn it

Yeah, it's easy for me to say "hey you should also write news stories and craft social media posts," but like all things, finding the capacity to do it is tough. But if you have a clear idea of what your strengths are, and what stories you need to tell, there are two tools that can help:

- Stack the work. Don't wait for an idea to come to you and then write the story. Sit down and generate 8-10 ideas for stories along that theme. Then task a writer (be it a hired gun, a work-study student, etc.) to take them on as one linear chunk of work. Release at your leisure. Be cautious that stories might "age out" — an alumnus might change jobs, etc.
- Semi-automation. At the end of the day, "how is your career going" and "what do you like the most about your new job" and "what's one thing you learned here that's really helpful now" are not questions you need to re-invent every time you're talking to an early-career alumni, for instance. You can create a questionnaire, or even a form, that you can circulate, and save your time for follow-up questions. This combines with the 'stacking' idea above. If your grad program has a mandatory class, such as an "introduction to research methodologies" or something similar, you can investigate whether this could be integrated somehow — a "what have you found most valuable" type question at the end of term, and ask the best respondents for permission to share.

Ensure the story is shared by people also motivated to share it

Consider the following folks as possible ways to spread your organic content even further. The goal here isn't necessarily to have the story spread to prospective students in a 1:1 way, but to broaden your organic channels to get larger audiences. If one of your key "how did you hear about us?" answers is "word of mouth," organic social media is a big driver there.

Post-publication, consider sharing your story via email, DM, or otherwise with people who might be motivated to share it, point to it, and say "look at this great story about this great person":

- the alma mater of your grad student. Would they be excited to share a profile of a former student of theirs who is thriving?
- your student themselves — do they know when the story is being posted, and are they ready to share it with their friends and family directly?
- employers or other organizations they are involved in.

You should create stories based on the best subjects for those stories, but all things being equal... if you have a student or staff member with some capacity, creeping your potential subjects on social media isn't the worst thing to spend your time on. If you're going to have a student share a story about their amazing experience as a grad student on their LinkedIn feed, would you rather it be the student who reaches five people, or the student who reaches 2,000?

There isn't a huge downside

The downside is metrics: if you're reporting on success, and you're aiming for reach (the largest number of eyes possible), a huge audience is great. If you're basing your success reporting on conversion (people clicking through to your site, etc.), a large audience will mean those numbers will be lower as a percentage of the whole. So if a large audience is your goal, reporting in absolute numbers is better than reporting on percentage results or improvements.

Grad Recruitment Worksheet: Strength to Story AHEM*

Program:

Strength

What's a positive attribute of the program that you want to promote?

Story

What's one thing you can talk about that would help illustrate the strength you want to highlight? A student profile, a co-interview between a student and supervisor, a piece on an alumni now thriving in their field, even something on program statistics and records (the Xth anniversary of the program, impressive class demographics...).

What kind of image can accompany that story? In some cases this is self-evident, but more thought might be needed in some cases...

How could that story thrive on social media?

Instagram (focus on compelling images; human impact)

LinkedIn (focus on real-world impact; career or business outcomes)

Other channels

COMPLETE THE WORKSHEET – Grad_Strength-to-Story

Sidebar: human networks are best

As "AI driven scaling" grows, people are your best resource.

Words are becoming worth less.

Not worthless but "worth less." I'm writing this book without any LLM assistance, but the fact of the matter is that anyone who can string a prompt together can get an AI to regurgitate hundreds of words of "good enough" slop, hopefully without egregious factual errors, in seconds.

You'll note, therefore, that in addition to the "regular" tactics of news/social media, and paid social ads, there's a lot of networking baked into this plan. And a strong lean toward using real people and stories as part of the backbone of what you do.

That's very deliberate.

As the man once said, "the key to success is sincerity – once you can fake that, you've got it made." Well, sincerity is about to be mass-produced at a rate of a billion words a minute, while taking up a baffling amount of farmland and ruining the environment to do it.

*Yes, I have **feelings** about AI.*

You can disagree with me on some of the details, but the core fact is irrefutable: "good enough to pass" text and photos are now very easy to generate. So any marketing plan to attract talented students to you must factor in a bulwark against a tide of pay-to-play, inauthentic bafflegab that will flood every channel at the speed with which somebody is willing to pay for it. It's a move that benefits private schools and money-first institutions and hobbles stronger academic players with smaller profit margins.

So as a sidebar midway through all of this, remember that a huge portion of this work is building a human referral network. From the office administrator who agrees to put your blurb in the student newsletter, to the academic presenting a slide at the end of a conference presentation, from the alumni who shares your post on social media.

We're already talking about this, but I just wanted to make sure that's locked in.

A sub-sidebar about LinkedIn

If your faculty are directly posting about funded graduate opportunities on there, consider framing them as "job openings" for PhD students. This helps alleviate a few things — one, the idea that a PhD is just academic frittering; the other, that a PhD is a "side step" from a career. While not as well-paying as an industry job, it's not wrong to frame a funded doctoral spot as a 'job' if somebody is getting money to do it.

When should you pay to advertise?

Probably always. Ugh. I know.

So we, as a society, decided at some point to allocate 90% of our attention to privately owned platforms whose owners now literally force you to pay money to get things in front of people.

We're a bad, dumb society. How can we fix it? I don't know, maybe by educating incredible grad students who will fix this mess for us.

For now, here we are. Sorry.

This may shift with time, as these things do, but at the moment, the options for digital advertising are generally:

- Instagram – Broad, (relatively) cheap
- LinkedIn – Specific , expensive
- Google SEM – not technically social media but worth doing
- Reddit – If there are non-weird subReddits that fit your niche
- YouTube preroll — if there are channels that fit your niche

Beyond that, it depends a little on the profile you built back up in the earlier worksheets, but I would not recommend Facebook (dying platform, mainly seniors being reached by ads), or X.

Search Engine Marketing vs. Social Media Marketing

There is a key distinction to articulate between Google Ads (paid search results) and social media ads.

Search engine marketing (SEM) only reaches people who are searching. You're likely going to want to have terms like "[SUBJECT] graduate studies" or "advanced studies in [SUBJECT]" in the mix. So people will find you in the paid section of search results when they're already looking for you, or something very much like you.

Example: I search for "history Master's degree canada" and get a paid search result for "Study history with excellent supervisors at Whatsamatta U." It's a very tight correlation.

Social media ads, conversely, put ads in the path of people according to the interests you identify. Instagram, Reddit, LinkedIn, YouTube preroll — all will throw your content in front of people who meet your criteria, like 20-25, female, lives in X, is interested in A, B, C. But the correlation may not be direct.

Example: I'm watching a YouTube video about the Fall of the Roman Empire and I see a preroll add saying "interested in studying history? Pursue a Master's at Whatsamatta U." The correlation is looser, but the audience is much broader (a lot more people will be watching history videos on YouTube than specifically searching for a master's program in history in Canada)

Success strategies for search engine marketing

Be patient, evolve often.

SEM can take a couple of weeks to "kick in," and after you've set up an initial foray, give it a bit of room to breathe before adjusting things.

After a couple weeks burning in the campaign, make a point of visiting consistently and checking on keyword performance. Drop the ones that aren't working, and try variants of the ones that are.

Go broad if you need to

Don't be too specific in your search terms. You may want to own "graduate studies in labour history" but if the term isn't used often enough to be significant, the ad won't get served and the 'ownership' won't happen. Unfortunately, this can mean search can be broader than you've intended, with terms that arc outside your niche.

Starting with the tag line of your Big Stupid Message is a good place to orient yourself, but if you're very specific in your message, you may need to revert to something broader in your keywords.

Start modestly and build on success

Don't jump in with a giant budget and big ambitions; start modestly, see what works, and ramp up. Digital marketing is very trackable/testable, if you invest a bit of time in checking on it periodically. A/B testing is very helpful here — try a few variations on your concept, and see which perform better.

Note that we're saying start "modestly," not "start with a nickel." Too small, and you won't see anything because the message simply won't get out with the reach and frequency you need to see if it works.

It's a confounding problem — too big is wasteful, too small might be too ineffective to measure. And the goalposts move over time. Searching for contemporary practices could help you hang a dollar sign on an early foray, or asking somebody in an adjacent, non-competing area that you think is marketing their program what their sweet spot has been could help. We'll be getting to a budget-specific chapter, which should help with overall budget planning.

Once you've found a formula that seems to work, you can dial up the spend until you start to see the returns declining. When you hit that point, that's a good time to try another A/B test — maybe there's a variation on what you're doing that could perform even better, or maybe the slippage is due to the concept getting a bit tired over time.

Success strategies for paid social media marketing

Know what your goal is

One thing you'll need to know up front is whether you're trying to build awareness of your program, or actually convert people into a stage further down the application funnel. You may want to just build awareness of the program in a target market for a while before moving on to more aggressive tactics to get people to click through and explore the next step.

- Awareness-raising is measured in Cost Per Thousand (CPM) — it's a visibility metric. You're measuring how much it costs to get your ad seen by 1,000 people according to the audience parameters you set.
- Conversion is measured in Cost Per Click (CPC). This tracks how expensive it is to get people to actually click on your ad to take the next step.

There's nothing wrong with jumping right to CPC as a tactic, but if it's not working, you may have an awareness problem, and need to soften the ground a little first with a Big Stupid Message about your program that just tells people hey, this exists before you start trying to get them to do something with that information.

Wait, what about newspapers/magazines?

Print is worth considering, if you have the budget for it, but compared to social media is generally:

- much more expensive
- "lossy" — you'll always be paying for a lot of eyes that aren't interested in you.

Print isn't a bad strategy as a "gap filler" — if you really, really want to target students at University X, for instance, and you're geotargeting them with SEM and social media advertising, and you're postering on campus and getting the word out in newsletters — buying ads in the campus paper is part of an overall saturation idea that means you'll be inescapable for a little while.

On the other side of the coin, hyper-specific publications can be a good buy if you have a hyper-specific recruitment goal: if you want course-based Master's students in Mining, for instance, an ad in a niche mining publication talking about this as a way to accelerate your career might be a great fit.

QR codes and custom URLs being essential for print, of course.

Wait, what about sponsorships?

In my estimation, one of the largest leaks of marcomms dollars in higher ed is sponsorships. They happen at the macro level; national conferences and colloquia, student-centric events. They happen at the micro-level: a department sponsoring the national gathering of a related trade association, paying $X to send a faculty member to Event Y.

I don't like sponsorships, with a few notable exceptions.

Wait, no. I ***do*** like sponsorships! I just don't like them as a marketing vehicle! If your institution values and supports Organization X and wants to give them money, and Organization X includes their logo in a bunch of supporter logos, that's cool.

But if the institution wants to support Organization X because of the supporter logo, I'm much less enthusiastic.

Compared to other spend, the marketing value of a sponsorship is vanishingly small. At the lower tiers, you disappear in "logo soup." At higher tiers, if you're a major brand in a field that wants to reinforce your dominance, sure, being the Phone Charging Station Sponsor or the Event Photographer Sponsor might give you some flitting recognition as people move past, but nothing lasting. Think back to the last conference you went to — can you tell me who the lunch service sponsor was on Day 2 of 4? I sure can't.

But. However. But.

There's a certain counter-intuitive value to going all in on a top-tier sponsorship if it gets you direct, speaking exposure to a key audience. This isn't common, but from time to time — such as if you're launching a new blended program with industry overlap, and a Platinum Tier sponsorship at that industry's annual conference means you can deliver a keynote — that may be worth considering.

If, and only if, you have the capacity and presence to play it up. You'll want to be promoting the conference and the talk on social media, issue your own press releases about it, circulate the recording yourselves.

If you have the $3-5,000 it costs for an entirely forgettable sponsorship at some event or another, consider instead that this money could buy some very nice merchandise that you give to your faculty to wear while they big-up your school's grad program through their own talks and appearances. Or a sweet budget to buy merch or goodies to incentivize your own grad students to create and spread the good word of your program on their own social channels.

Wait, what about grad fairs / career fairs?

Ehhhh. This is an area where there's so much inertia behind the grad fair that it might be hard to steer away from them. If it's on campus and doesn't take too much staff time, okay, sure. But students are mostly there for career information and very few are interested in graduate studies. There's a light risk that it might position you as the "failure option" for students who don't get jobs.

If you must do career fairs, try to position yourself as something that belongs at a career fair. Focus on career outcomes post-grad studies, salary figures, statistics around promotions for those with advanced degrees vs. those without.

If you're just "instead of working at X, Y, or Z, pursuing a career, and making real money for the first time in your life, you could, uh, do more of this stuff," you aren't doing yourself any favours.

QR codes with UTMs on print pieces handed out at grad fairs can give you a very good indication over time of whether or not anyone is following through afterward and visiting your site for more information.

There are also dedicated grad fairs, which are rarer. On-campus, this is just a matter of sending a staff member with some of the other materials you've developed. Off campus, it's a difficult question; one starting point is to see if your school's central graduate recruitment office (if you have one) is sending somebody, and just ensuring they have your materials and talking points.

How to set a marketing budget

Ugh! More money stuff? I hate money stuff.

The overall thrust of this plan is to set up both organic networks and paid ads; depending on what you're doing and where, organic may start to be more of a driver over time, letting you relax your paid spend — if you're doing things that are modest in their goals and can be sustained by peer networks over time. If your aims are big and international you may need to look at marketing as a cost of doing business at all and adjust accordingly.

So bear that in mind, first of all. Paid marketing — paid social media ads, etc. — might only be the catalyst you need for a 2-3 year run to force your program into the right places, and you can slacken pace over time as your networking and organic tactics take hold.

A chunk o' time ago, you had the workbook that let you figure out the budget impact of every program on your roster. Time to pull that up again, with a simple initial question: what is your actual goal here? Revenue generation, research generation, or research support?

Remember: your school is already spending lots of money on this!

You're in a weird position here, because you're (likely) in a school or department, trying to justify a spend to a cash-strapped department head or dean.

Your institution, meanwhile, is almost certainly spending $1M+ dollars a year on "master brand" marketing — the big, glossy ad campaigns that should trickle down to solve all recruitment needs, but clearly don't, if you're still reading this goddamn thing.

2023 studies showed that in the U.S., large institutions (>12K FTE students) have 33 full-time marketing people and a budget of ~$4.1M; small schools (<300 FTE students) a staff of 9 and a budget of $1.3M.[1]

My take — as a heretic, no longer working in higher ed marcomms — is that most of this is "cost of doing business" rote activities that just keep the brand pumping out the same kind of message in the same kind of space every year. It's the "big top of mind" stuff that sees a million-dollar booth at an undergraduate recruitment fair. It's absolutely necessary but doesn't really lend itself to the kind of very specific messaging you need to sell your very specific program.

In other words — with all respect to those toiling in the thankless vineyards of central university marketing departments — there's arguably value there for the school in maintaining a "big brand" presence, but the direct benefit to people at a school level — a niche within the institution — recruiting for graduate programs — a niche within a niche — is negligible.

To put it another way, all of this money and energy is dedicated to making sure that when your poster makes it in front a promising undergraduate, they will look at it and say (hopefully) "huh, I've heard of this school, I think it's pretty good."

1. Staffing stats: Simpson Scarborough (https://cmo-study.simpsonscarborough.com/budgets-staffing). FInance stats: Education Dynamics (https://insights.educationdynamics.com/rs/183-YME-928/images/EDDY-Benchmarks-2024.pdf).

But their role is not to help you and your program, specifically. It's to get the entire institution in the zone where your message lands.

I'm saying all of this to contextualize it for your internal conversation with whoever you need to talk to in-house about a budget for this. "The institution already pays for it" is the go-to, but it's apples and oranges.

Clearly you have big feelings about this but, uh, any helpful advice?

Right, sorry, I get worked up about this. Money stuff! It's stressful.

Three-cycle budget proposals; the amount to ask for per cycle:

You will need time for marketing to take hold. This isn't an "in market in June, full classes in September" situation. I'd recommend you commit to a three-year cycle, and a key metric to gauge success at the end, covered below.

Is the program principally for revenue generation?

Professional programs, course-based Master's… there may be defenders of these from an academic background, but at the end of the day these are programs that are more revenue drivers than generators of research.

The starting point for a conversation around marketing these programs is 6% of total desired revenue from the program. This is generally the market-standard budget in the education sector. I'd go as high as 8% if it's a virtual/remote program, as that puts you in a very different competitive set than traditional brick-and-mortar school marketing.

Metric: Have revenue goals been met; i.e. are you at capacity, with a waiting list, for the revenue-generation program being marketed? You should be able to deliver a direct, clear return on investment after several cycles — a marketing budget of X generates an increase of Y in students, resulting in a profit margin of Z.

Is the program principally for research generation?

Research-based Master's, the venerable PhD — you might be recruiting to enhance the overall research strength and output of your school, resulting in slow, but powerful, shifts in your perception in academia, which enhances almost every aspect of the institution over time. Being seen as an academic leader in your field improves grant acceptances, makes it easier to recruit faculty, improves student recruitment across every category. Academic attainment is the lifeblood of any institution's long-term reputation and strength.

The starting point for a conversation around a program to grow and improve your research strength should be half the salary of a pre-tenure professor. Not necessarily the most recent hire, but half the salary of a junior faculty member.

Metric: at the end of the three-year period, are grad students in the program producing at least as much research as a junior faculty member, in aggregate? Papers written (or co-authored with existing faculty for 'half credit'), colloquim and conference appearances, etc. If you're recruiting to improve research strength, the question is as simple as "is research strength being improved?"

You should be able to deliver a direct, clear return on investment after several cycles — this time, showing that you're generating X times more research for the Y cost of the marketing.

Is the program principally for research support?

Great execution on funded research means more funded research, as well as the ancillary benefits of academic reputation, the ability to recruit based on big-name research partners, etc. This applies more in the hard sciences than the social sciences, of course. At the end of the day, your faculty need intelligent, motivated students to support them in large, complex research programs that can sometimes require a dozen or more students in a lab.

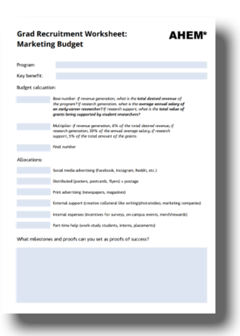
The starting point of a conversation around research support recruitment should be 5% of the value of the grants that require student labour to function. If you want to do something hilarious, raise the idea of a grant income levy to support ongoing student recruitment efforts at Faculty Board, and enjoy your brief tenure as History's Greatest Villain.

But seriously, this one is tricky. Grant money is generally felt by academics to be 'theirs' (and depending on their arrangement with their institution, sometimes it is, straight up, theirs). Pulling money into a common pool to support a strong complement of grad students across the board may not land well with the bigger names, who feel like they don't need the support (and maybe they don't), and don't want to see 'subsidies' for junior colleagues.

Metric: first, butts in seats — have the gaps been filled? Are there still empty spots in research labs? Secondly, and this is trickier, you'll want to set a benchmark pre-marketing and do some qualitative analysis among supervising faculty to gauge their feeling about the quality of students being recruited into their labs, and repeat this process annually to see if the marketing program is moving the needle as expected.

Money based on benefit, and measurable results

In short – try to develop a budget that relates to the outcome you're seeking, seek a longer term than a few months, and institute some measurements so you can see, year over year, how you're doing. You should be able to deliver a direct, clear return on investment after several cycles — this time, showing that you're generating X times more research for the Y cost of the marketing.



COMPLETE THE WORKSHEET – Grad_Budgeting

Recruitment services

Are they worth the money?

I mean, I'm going to say "no." You know it, I know it. I wouldn't be writing a whole-assed book on this if the answer was "pay some company $25,000 a year and they'll solve the problem for you."

With companies like "Smartguy and Brightgal Student Recruitment Ltd.," "International Studies Dot Com," or "Global Student Recruitment Inc.," what you're paying for, ultimately, is convenience.

I'd argue what you're paying for is the ability to feel like and say Something Has Been Done. Because it costs a lot of money, right? So it must be doing something. There are dashboards! Look at all those social media post views! Wow!

But — again, in my experience — the pattern with a large, multinational, student recruitment enterprise is that they will:

1. Promise you the moon and the stars; incredible amounts of exposure, millions of views of social media and display ads and articles.
2. Provide you with a fancy dashboard and a (usually) monthly meeting where they'll tell you how well your campaign is doing, how many tens of thousands of people have seen the ads, etc.
3. Work to get you on a regular contract, where their fees remain the same over time, but the amount of work that goes into maintaining your campaign gradually shifts from "ardent" to "microscopic" — eventually, you're more or less a passive revenue stream, with the same text and images being used month over month, year over year, and about five minutes of tweaking every six months on their end. They aren't your employees. The entire business model is "maximum money for minimum work." If you don't like that, don't blame me, I didn't invent capitalism.
4. Focus solely on the digital — this is a relationship game, and the magic isn't just in online ads, but the on-campus work you need done by real live people that support you and your mission.

The kicker is, to get to the point where the campaign is functional, you will still have to do all the work you've done in the first few chapters of this book. These companies aren't a button you push; you'll be paying them top dollar to frog-march you through a very accelerated version of the workbooks you've already seen.

What's happening under the hood is:

- They're ultimately running ads to drive traffic to material about you on their site, which is functionally double dealing — charging you to run the ads to increase their site traffic, which in turn helps them grow
- Generating a ton of awareness, but with such a broad mandate that the leads don't convert into students the way you want them to

- You're competing with their other clients in the same playing field. If you're an engineering school, you're likely not even their only engineering school client. So you're paying a company to advertise you, using the same ideas, approach, methodology and targeting tactics, as they're also deploying for your competitors.

These companies must be effective, sometimes, I guess, otherwise they wouldn't be in business at all, but what I've seen is mostly companies that are in the business of selling you metrics about how well they're doing instead of companies that actually deliver applicants who then become students.

They will take on the aggravating labour of setting up and managing the digital ad component of this, and the reporting end of it. And these are huge pains in the ass that you may well just want to offload.

But at the end of the day, for the spend, I'd recommend considering creating a contract role for a local marketing professional that can take on the ad placement and reporting elements at your direction. Or seeing if there's capacity in your unit to re-task a talented staff person with a marketing interest with this work. Or any of a myriad number of other things. $20K a year, over three years, is $60K, and for that money, you could hire a dedicated, full-time early-career marketing professional on a one-year contract to literally work through this book and set up a bespoke recruitment program that's unique to you and your needs.

Looping back to the beginning — I think these companies are a great way to spend a lot of money for the ability to get some elegant dashboards, and say you're doing something about the problem. But I don't think they solve the problem, and certainly not in a way commensurate with the cost of the service.

Don't hire me!

As said at the very top, this is not a weird plug to pick me, not them. This is not a "cut them down to prop me up." I don't need proppin'. I just think (again, based on my experience) that caution is highly warranted.

Sidebar: When in doubt, promote academic research

Advertise availability, promote your research successes

"Students choose supervisors, not schools."

This was a truism shared with me when I started in higher ed marcomms, and I think it's still true, to an extent.

On a continuum, the more academically focused the student, the more likely it is they'll be looking for the right supervisor, not the right school. A PhD candidate fully intent on moving on to post-doctoral work and the illusory promise of a tenure-track academic position? They'll be looking for a supervisor. Somebody who wants a combo Master's-and-technician diploma on a one-year turnaround, less so.

Academic profile-raising, thought leadership, knowledge translation, and all things orbiting around those concepts are out of scope for this book. It's a space you need to really think about if your goals established in Parts 1 and 2 are to attract PhD candidates who are passionate about contributing to your research output.

If not — I'd take the truism with a grain of salt. You should really survey your students, including a matrix of rankable items on why they chose you instead of another grad program.

Promoting supervisor availability

There are mixed feelings on this. I'd argue that the "con" side is oriented mostly toward the idea that people will be pestered if it's publicly known that they have capacity to supervise. The counter to that argument is:

1. They're going to be pestered anyway. The mechanisms to help with that (see below) work whether or not you've listed availability on their faculty profile page, or not. The advent of AI/LLMs mean that supervision request flooding is only going to get worse with time.

2. A thought experiment: the *perfect* doctoral candidate is looking for places to pursue their degree. They're brilliant, motivated, and have a lot to contribute. They are exactly the kind of PhD candidate every academic dreams of supervising. Academic A has a short paragraph on their profile page saying that they have capacity to supervise, and a few kind words about grad studies; maybe even a few names and links to past supervised students that have gone on to great things. Academic B has nothing at all — or worse, a terse "do not contact me" note on their page. What school will the amazing PhD candidate apply to? Which school will benefit from their research and eventual notoriety in the field?

You have everything to gain from promoting supervision availability, and nothing to lose except possibly a marginal increase in unserious looky-loo outreach... which will happen regardless.

Once a rubric for adding supervision capacity to profiles is established, it's very easy to maintain. Your school's web team should be able to automate the process if you provide a simple list every academic year; a single, sitewide find-and-replace that correlates names to pages, and flips "is available" to "is not available" appropriately. Literally 30 seconds a year if it's set up right.

Research promotion is a rising tide that lifts all boats

Academic profile-raising, thought leadership and promoting scholarship is a topic for a different volume, but it bears mention that all things being equal, producing material about how your faculty are awesome is a no-fail strategy.

I'm raising it here because if you feel your biggest problem is students aren't finding the genius researchers in your unit that have supervisory capabilities — grad recruitment per se isn't your entire problem, and starting with research promotion in ways relevant to the grad students you want to recruit could scratch two itches at once.

News also serves a secondary purpose. Search engines prefer sites that are updated over sites that are not (if I'm going to recommend something, I'll recommend the more recent information over the stale information). Articles on your research update your site, and also generate all sorts of "long tail" search terms that prospective students can find.

Supervision requests: flood control

This is out of scope for this book to cover in detail. But in essence, one point of resistance to graduate student recruitment is sometimes faculty, who already feel overburdened with a steady bombardment of requests for supervision from hopeful students — most often students who are not a fit, and are taking a mass shotgun approach in looking for supervisors. AI has only exacerbated the problem, with workflows that now let Master's hopefuls spam multiple universities' full faculty lists at once.

There's a fix for this, but it involves a bit of technology, about 20 person-hours of effort, an IT team willing to put in some server-side filters on your email (ideally), and change management to get faculty to buy in.

This is a tool that exists independent of graduate application flows. It exists mainly to solve the problem of faculty who feel overburdened by supervision requests; if the admission flow drives students to seek a supervisor directly, it should push them to step 2 of this process as well.

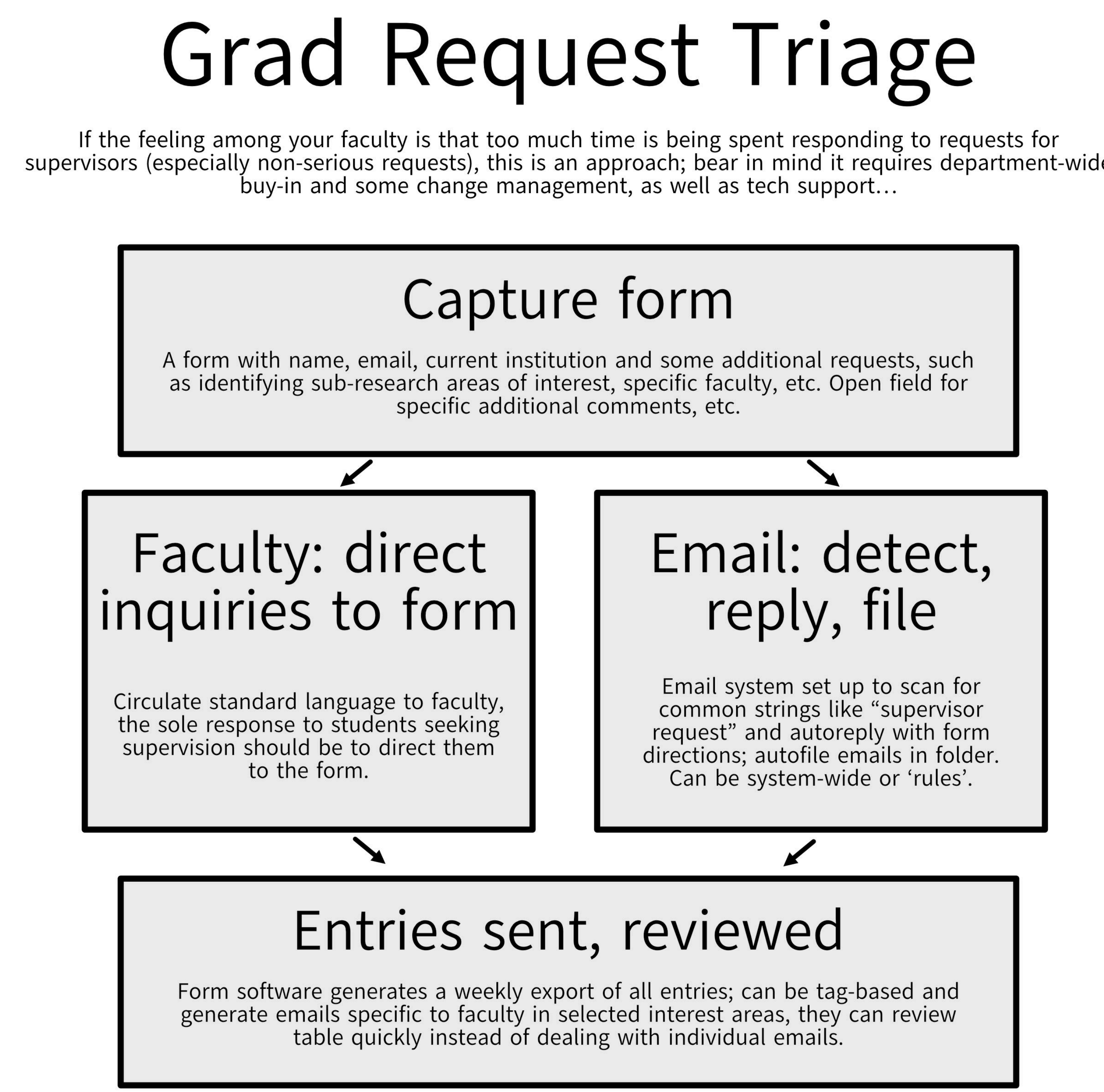
The flow is:

- Server-side, your email program flags keywords and phrases like "looking for a supervisor" or "supervise me" or "be my supervisor", moves that mail automatically to a folder, and pushes back an auto-reply directing the respondent to...
- A global form captures all supervision requests, pulling key data like name and email, degree sought and desired start date, which if any programs they've started an application for. More importantly, there are some specific and pointed questions like identifying which areas of study they're interested in, which faculty they're interested in as supervisors, and some open form fields to describe their interests in the above and possibly more.
- The system killfiles anyone who does anything like tick every area of interest or flag every professor as a supervisor. These are clearly not serious requests. It tabulates all of the other entries into a spreadsheet, and every week, faculty are emailed the entries that they've been tagged in as prospective supervisors.

There's still a manual review step at this point — faculty will need 10-15 minutes a week to scan the sheet for anyone promising — but much less aggravation and time loss than a drip of 2-3 candidates a day that faculty have to clear out of their inboxes.

I might write this up in more detail at the AHEM* website (ahemahem.org) at some point. Stay tuned!

See your worksheet files for a full-size version of this graphic:



Recap: outline, BSM and initial outreach

You've built a marketing campaign, you glorious monster. ***You're unstoppable!***

Let's recap where you're at:

- You've listed all of your programs and understand their finances
- You've got a specific idea of the macro issue affecting grad recruitment overall
- You've got a set of unique attributes and selling arguments for the program
- You've mapped out your supervisor capacity and investigated how to manage supervisor demand
- You've test-driven the recruitment process yourself to understand what obstacles prospective students face
- You've mapped out your competitor schools, and schools you aspire to be more like
- You've got a matrix of schools and programs to reach out to, to help your recruitment efforts
- You've created, and gotten feedback on, some core marketing assets
- You've got a sense of what your budget should be, and may be already talking about it
- Give yourself a pat on the back.
- You're basically ready to go, at this point. Get your message out there. Get those fish on the hook.

Now it's time to make sure you can land those fish once hooked.

The next few chapters will outline what to do with students once you've got their attention. The outreach part of the process is just the first part of recruitment — now we're moving down the funnel to conversion.

Further Down the Funnel: Conversion

At this point, you've grabbed somebody's eyes and mind for a brief, flickering moment. Maybe via a social media post or ad, a search result, a scanned QR code or entered shortlink from a flyer or poster.

How do you keep their attention, and stoke their interest from here? How do you convert them from being interested, to intending to apply?

Landing pages

The key concept overall here is to keep feeding information to your prospective student in stages. You've successfully delivered your Big, Stupid Message (BSM) to get them to click a link or scan a QR code, etc.

The next piece is to give them more information about the program you're promoting — but not so much as to overwhelm. These are people who are going to have (probably) a long consideration cycle.

Even if your desired 'next step' is to have students attend an event or webinar, etc., pushing them to a landing page for registration is key. This lets you convey a slightly more complex message than your BSM, and capture some key information for follow-up down the line (and down the funnel).

What are the building blocks of a landing page?

Headline

You've got ~10 words to convince them to stick around. This may be close to or an evolution of your BSM.

Images

One or two compelling visuals. Aim for something other than the "three and a tree" image that's notorious in higher ed marketing… ideally you want to see people in action, thriving, possibly with a professor or supervisor if that's an area of focus. Some areas (building robots, restoring paintings, going on archaeological digs) are a bit easier to do this with than others (talking about the law, studying poetry, engaging in theoretical physics). For the more abstract ones, consider photos at events like a three-minute thesis competition, where students are presenting ideas to audiences; lightboards or even hiring a live illustrator for a talk can add a lot of dynamics and fun to a topic that's normally quite staid and non-visual.

Trust component

Something that conveys that you're offering real value. A testimonial by a student or alumni; a block of stats showing average income in the profession, job placement rates; anything that says "hey, we're legit."

A clear next step

You want to give visitors something to do immediately. This can change over time; it might be "sign up for our newsletter" as a default, periodically changing to "join us at a webinar (list of dates)" or "sign up for our on-campus event". The important thing is that you're moving them to...

A capture form

Whatever the next step is, you want to get them to give you permission to talk to them more. This is generally a registration or sign-up form of some sort. Keep it simple. The temptation will be to try to turn this into a way to gather stats and other intelligence. This is not the time for that. Name, email, when they intend to start their studies, maybe one other thing. That's it.

Complimentary content

Not much of it. But if there are 2-3 other points to make, succinctly, those come next. Short points. Short short points. Really short points.

That's it!

Your goal at this point is to get them to take the single next step and learn a bit more about you. It's not to tell them every fact about the program, or offer them eight things they can do. Your ideal is one thing they can act on, and very little else — you have the whole rest of your website to give them other information, if they want to move from your landing page to find out more.

Supervisor search tools

A pain to set up, easy to maintain, and a feature, not a bug

We cover this above, in "Grad students choose...", but this is the time to consider setting up supervisor availability as an element of your site. This could be a table in the above landing page, if you're feeling bold — or if you're cheeky, a key stat ('23 professors with supervision capacity" and make them go on the Easter egg hunt).

If the key point of contention is concern that this will lead to too many direct requests for supervision, see the earlier chapter for some responses to those concerns, and a way to set up a system that makes these requests much easier to manage.

You'll have to deal with supervisor inquiries either way, so why not make the search easy for prospective students and faculty, and turn that into a feature of your program — "interested in finding a supervisor, fill out this form!".

Email newsletters

Make no mistake: this is an investment. These are difficult to set up and while they seem easy to maintain, it takes dedicated time, over time, to keep them running. Let me re-emphasize the word dedicated: you'll need at staff person with an inviolable block of time to create and send these. Not a side-desk get-to-it-when-you-can task, but an "every Tuesday afternoon is dedicated to this and barring a building fire or nuclear war that time is sacrosanct" task.

But once it's running, it'll be the most valuable tool in your arsenal. Grad recruitment can be a long consideration cycle, especially if you're targeting professionals who might be coming back for a course-based sprint. Having a way to stay top of mind is incredibly important. Even if people ultimately don't choose to study with you, having your institution promoted to them regularly is still a net gain. Even if they don't choose you, you're on their mind; they can recommend you to others.

The key here is to build something that takes minimal energy to repeat. Your application cycles don't change — so your newsletters shouldn't have to change much either, except for one piece of modular content, which we'll talk about in a second.

Components of an email newsletter program

Platform

Mailchimp, Constant Contact, Sender, etc. etc. Tons of these out there, but the key is to find ones that are CASL compliant (in Canada), or otherwise comply with your region's digital marketing laws. This is usually as simple as ensuring they have fully integrated, functioning, opt-out links.

This may already exist in your unit (try to integrate yourself; your contact list should be supportable as a separate audience in the platform).

Calendar

Map out key application dates on a calendar, then set up a workback schedule. You're going to want at least one email a month, possibly biweekly. Your calendar will ultimately have:

- send dates
- anchor content for each 'issue'
- variable content, for planning

When setting up a workback, start with the date that all materials must be in post-application. From there, set up a workback schedule. For instance, here's a theoretical application calendar:

February 1: application window opens

April 30: application window closes

June 1: all supplementary materials (transcripts, letters of reference, etc.) must be sent in

Your workback schedule could look like:

January 15: Applications open in two weeks / meet successful alumni

February 1: Applications now open / information on funding [possibly forked per audience]

March 1: Tips on how to apply / program webinar invitations

April 1: Success stories from program alumni / more webinar invites

April 28: Applications due tomorrow

May 15: Supplemental materials due / next application window opens in...

May 29: Supplemental materials due tomorrow

The subjects above aren't the totality of your email newsletters, but could be a guideline into what the key subject of each is. After this sequence, your campaign slips into maintenance mode — monthly emails that keep sharing information about the program. Then, two weeks before the next application period opens, the cycle begins anew.

Anchor content

Every newsletter should have a static piece of content, relevant to the application process, that speaks to your stage in the process and conveys key information about the program, deadlines, etc. A piece of anchor content might be a perennial testimonial that you think has years of staying power, a key set of statistics about the program, or just a simple reminder that a deadline is approaching or a checklist to ensure you have what you need to apply.

It should be short, compelling, and graphically appealing. If it's a testimonial, a photo of the person giving the testimony with a pull quote, for instance. If it's a deadline, a nice graphic showing the days remaining. A graphic that links to your supervisor search tool (see a little further up in this very chapter).

When you reset the campaign every campaign cycle, these are the elements that carry over. You should refresh them every once in a while, but these are the components you can "fire and forget" for several cycles.

Audience-specific (tag-based) anchor content

The secret sauce of paid email platforms is they can vary content based on tags. That means if Ari has the tag "international" in his profile, and Yusuf has the tag "domestic" in his profile, when you construct your anchor content on funding, Ari can have different information in his email than Yusuf: Ari sees the information on funding for international students; Yusuf sees information on the same subject, but for domestic students.

Not all platforms offer this; double check, if you want to send tag-based content. There are other ways to manage this, like running parallel campaigns with differing audiences based on tags, but tag-based content is the most efficient if you want to just focus on one set of deliverables, stats, etc.

Variable content

This is the more bespoke content that speaks to where you are in the moment. Fresh testimonials, special events that happened during the school year, an instructor, or student, or alumni featured in the news — all of this is great, short content that makes the newsletter feel current and exciting. If you give out teaching awards to instructors or student awards to participants, this is great variable content.

Variable content doesn't have to follow the anchor content, even though we're presenting them in this order. You might want to lead with it, sometimes.

Opt-out link

This should be baked into your platform, but it's essential to make sure your opt-out system works in order to comply with local privacy / marketing law.

If you're piggybacking on another system and your audience is combined into other audiences, using tags for mailouts (if you don't know what this means, and you're working with another group that runs the mailers, you can ask them about this), you want to be sure your opt-outs are granular. If, say, one person is on your list and also being emailed about another prospective program — or if they're an alumnus of one course and you're trying to recruit them into another program — you don't want one opt-out to remove them from all mail, just mail about the program in question.

Webinars and digital events

These should be timed to start with general information about the program early in the application cycle, and lead to more specific, timed admissions webinars moving forward.

Remember that webinar registration is part of the overall experience! The sign-up page for your webinars should still have key images and information about the program, as well as a clear indication of what the webinar is for, and what value it gives to the participant.

General information webinars

This is generally an academic director / instructor and staff member hosting a session, sometimes with a student or an alumnus, about the program in general. What it's about, what you'll learn, where the program can take you, followed by a Q&A. Like any communication, there should be a clear next step post-webinar.

The specificity of these webinars can vary. If you're recruiting internationally, for instance, you don't need to focus on "being a grad student in X at School Y" as your topic. You can create a webinar on "graduate studies in X in Country," and build a webinar with much broader appeal, using your own students and academics, about studying in your region — but featuring your program and your people.

These kinds of webinars can be promoted more broadly; a webinar on "graduate studies in mechanical engineering" is something that might be of interest to all schools with mechanical engineering undergrad programs (and potentially colleges with mechanical engineering technologist diplomas, depending on your entry criteria for the program in question). Even somebody not considering attending your school is a net win; you're broadening your reach and your network.

Admissions webinars

These are webinars exclusively for people in your admissions funnel, who have signed up for newsletters and/or have started the admissions process. These are very specific, focusing on things like:

- elements of your application (letters of reference, how to apply, etc.)
- funding – external funding sources ranging from government to private loans, your school's grant and scholarship programs
- tips and advice on how to write a compelling letter of interest, if relevant

Topic-based webinars

These might be specific to the program, or part of a broader research / academic promotion initiative.

On the latter point — it's a good idea, in general, to ensure webinars are part of your broad academic promotion rota. If you have a faculty member who's just finished a major research initiative that ties to any kind of topic of ongoing public concern, flipping it into a public-facing webinar is a good idea. An economics researcher has just finished an overview of how high banking fees have a negative impact on the economy? Why not turn that into a round table with her and a couple of other experts to talk about it? And then make a point of inviting every prospective economics grad student to the talk.

If you have the capacity, and if there are relevant topics, consider setting up "loose" webinars on topics of interest, featuring your own instructors, students, and alumni. Presented by your school, marketed to students in your admissions funnel but also more broadly, these are a way to establish the authority and expertise of the people in your program, and start converting students from considering grad studies to wanting to study with these instructors, and/or be part of a cohort of students like these.

Real-world events

It's amazing what an undergraduate student will do for food.

An on-campus get-together is great in theory to introduce undergraduate students to your graduate program and grad studies in general, but you're competing with a lot — from classes to hobbies to video games and hanging out with friends. If you're considering holding something in-person for undergrads on your (and possibly neighbouring) campuses to think about graduate studies with you, work backwards from the draw. What is more powerful than studying, clubs and extracurriculars, video games, and going out with your friends?

Food is a must, but one thing to think about his how to leverage undergraduate classes themselves as a draw. Could an instructor of an undergrad course help you co-create an incentive to attend a grad event?

Consider having a significant special guest; a very specific topic; a panel talk on a hot or urgent topic featuring some of your grad students as expert interlocutors. How can you elevate the status of being a grad student at an event about becoming grad students? Food for thought.


Grad Recruitment Worksheet: Landing Page Planner
AHEM*
Program:
Headline:
Image(s):
Trust component:
Call to action:
Additional points:

COMPLETE THE WORKSHEET - GRAD_LANDING-PAGE-PLANNER

Prospect Conversion

Support through the last steps

Review the application process yourself

We covered this wayyyyyyy up in Part One, but just in case you haven't done it yet — seriously, do it. If you don't understand the hurdles and pain points your prospective students are going through, you won't understand how to help them.

Introduce clear, easy access to instant answers

In almost every aspect of life, I'm anti-AI. I think LLMs are stupid garbage that cheapen the human experience while destroying the environment. They suck.

That said, I'm not averse to having something that resides only on your webserver, trained on a very tight corpus of your own site, and if needed, some live but not menu-linked, not-search-indexed "secret" pages that contain answers to common questions you don't want to be public-facing.

This — manifesting as a chatbot on all your program pages — will save an incredible amount of time for your admin staff, and maybe you, as it plays whack-a-mole with all of the questions that are easy to find, and yet still get asked. "When are applications due?" was the most common question our program admin fielded, despite that being on every page of a program website. Some people just aren't geared to look for and read answers, and instead just want to ask everything. This manages them.

Make your team available via micro-meetings

In a Microsoft environment, we used Bookings. Here's what you do:

- Identify blocks of time that can be set aside for these calls. Don't expect they'll all fill up, but don't open up your entire calendar either.
- Create a booking page for 10- or 15-minute meetings, allowing only those meetings in the calendar, and with a 5-minute spacer inserted after every one.
- in the booking form, ask for the questions people want answered to be identified ahead of time (optional, both as a question, and optional to fill out if adding it)
- Add this to the website, your email signatures, your newsletter, etc.

The combination of this, and the bot-powered "easy answers" chat window, will have an immediate effect on your admissions rates. People are often already kind of freaked out and uncertain about the idea of grad studies — it's expensive, it's time-consuming, and frankly, unless you feel incredibly academically confident, it's intimidating. You need to make it as easy as possible for every roadblock to be overcome with a quick call, and also to make the process feel supportive and personable.

Keep 'em happy and they'll keep 'em coming

As the saying goes, "it's a small world, but I wouldn't want to paint it."

But it ***is*** a small world, especially in some of the niche corners of academia.

And nothing will hobble even the best recruitment campaign faster than **miserable students and supervisors**.

They talk. Hell, they *gossip*. And in the age of social media, nothing can tank your best efforts faster than a Reddit thread about what a shitshow your grad program is, or one faculty member bad-mouthing your program to a bunch of prospects at an off-campus talk.

You can't absolutely control everything, and sometimes somebody will just get a bee in their bonnet, but...

Your best recruitment resource is happy students and alumni.

That's the secret sauce that no paid marketing company or recruitment agency can replicate. That magic, invaluable word of mouth where a student in your program knows somebody a few years younger who is considering it and says "hey, you have got to come here." The academic doing a post-doc at another institution that won't shut up about the great experience they had at your school. The teacher who, a decade-plus on, is still telling every student smarter than a bread stick that they should really think about continuing their studies with you.

You may not want to think of your programs as products, but they are. And nothing sells a product like an unpaid, enthusiastic ambassador-evangelist. An ambassadangelist, if you will.

How to make an ambassadangelist

1. Don't call them "ambassadangelists." That's a secret word just for us. Shhhh.
2. Do things for them. I know that sounds obvious, but frankly, a lot of places it feels like they bring grad students in, assign them a supervisor, then huck 'em out the door to figure it out. Here are a bunch of relatively low-cost, low-effort things you can do for your grad students:

- Student newsletters. They don't have to be massive pieces of deathless prose (although effort would be appreciated). Upcoming key dates and deadlines, congratulate students on successful defenses, low-hanging fruit in terms of department news. If you want to get engagement SUPER high real fast, feature their pets.
- Student awards. Not just the awards themselves, but celebrating them internally (newsletter! see above!) and externally (simple social posts). What should the awards be for? Really up to you — they can be serious (which will require more work and evaluation, if you want to go the route of 'best thesis proposal' or something) or more community-facing and light (mentoring award, leadership award, etc.). "Make them feel seen and celebrated" is the key.
- Web profiles for students, if you're not already doing it. Short biographies and photos on your website. Makes the students easy to find for conferences and research work, legitimizes them when they're looking for publishing opportunities or work. All things being equal, this can even be a deciding factor.
- Social activities! A pizza party once a term. A potluck, for Pete's sake. Tell their supervisors to spring for a drink at the campus bar once a school year.
- Soft supports – can your grad students access the same privileges as your undergrads? Career support, room bookings, etc. Having your Dean have a scheduled, "unscheduled" impromptu drop-in on grad workrooms every few months to say hi and check in.

Direct and indirect recruitment support

An engaged and enthusiastic grad student community will become an organic source for recruiting over time, but things like awards, and material submitted to create and update web profiles, also turns into grist for the marketing mill (see the chapter on turning strengths into stories).

Cheap Labour

You can't do all this, and depending on your dean / head / chair's priorities, even if there's embedded marketing and communications staff in your unit, they may not have time to do it either.

Where can you get help, ideally without paying top dollar?

Campus work-study

Your campus likely has a work-study program; a scheme where Career Services will pick up some of the tab (often retroactive, at the end of term) for on-campus employers who hire a student. Students are approved for 'allocation' at the beginning of the school year, or per term, and employers can seek student hires from the work-study pool. At the end of the period of employment, the employer will be reimbursed a percentage of the wage by the career services unit.

This is a good way to secure a student through a school term or a full school year, part-time (10 hours a week or so).

If your school has a marketing program, that's your obvious port of call. Business, Journalism and English programs are generally good. I've had surprising success with Psychology students, for some reason, but that may not be replicable. Hiring students from your own undergrad pool will give you familiarity with the subject, but not necessarily the writing/marketing skills you're looking for.

Work-Integrated Learning

WIL is common on campuses, often subsidized by federal or regional partners.

Internships, co-ops, and practicums are common WiL schemes. These take more work to set up; many are full-time jobs, and you'll need a proper job description, a place for the student to work, appropriate supervision, etc.

Depending on the WiL scheme, these can run from summer programs of 10-12 weeks to full, year-long internships. You'll be paying much less than what you'd pay a full-time permanent employee, and the contracts are created to expire, which makes them much easier to swallow than asking for a new FTE to support you.

The trade-off is inexperience and the loss of knowledge when the student invariably moves on.

College placements

If you have a marketing and advertising program at a nearby college, they will almost definitely be looking for fieldwork placement opportunities for their students. These are keen, motivated young people who are determined to make a mark, and build collateral to help with job hunts to kick off their careers. Green, for sure, but often coming out of their programs with up-to-date knowledge on things like the mechanics of ad placement and analytics.

Placements like these are generally free to the employer, and if you have a good, well-framed project, these students can get a lot done in a short period with minimal supervision.

Current students

You can also just, like, hire students. If your gap is things like organic social media, consider looking for a student to handle your social media. Have them make a plan for you first, to approve, but handing a student the keys to your Instagram account and asking them to chronicle the best aspects of life at grad school for you can be an easy win.

Contractually, you'll want to check in with HR to be sure you can hire them for a (lower) hourly rate than RA/TA work, which can be very high depending on the campus and whatever collective agreements are in place.

The cost of cheap is time

I don't want to minimize the effort involved in marshalling these resources. Students take time to train, time to supervise, and while sometimes you can find a real gem, you might also pull a dud. You'll need to spend time really articulating the project, steps and deliverables to the point that somebody can take on the work without minute-to-minute guidance.

You'll be investing a lot early, to ensure what they're doing meets your expectations. Don't let a bad habit set when it can still be corrected. But if you get the right resource, over time, it can be a fantastic addition to the team — a work-study student in their second year of undergrad could be with you for three years, or even longer if they pursue grad studies with you.

Be sure to be **very clear** in your expectations and deliverables.

Learning from failure

Assume your marketing is OK. What does a failed campaign mean?

What if you do all of this, and... it doesn't work?

There are a few things to bear in mind if this isn't turning out the way you'd hoped.

Maybe it needs more time.

Ugh, what a sucky piece of advice, I'm sorry. But the fact of the matter is decision cycles for things like grad studies are long. Serious students are thinking about this in their third, even second year of undergrad, and some will be doing work placement and internships that stretch those undergrad degrees to five years.

As a general guideline, the closer to career outcomes, the shorter the decision cycle, but that's not a hard and fast rule. It is true that a program like "learn to be a library technician while getting your MA" will likely land a bit more with people keen to make a life change now, but it's still often a six month, nine month, year, two-year process before people pull the trigger.

The other guideline is the newer the idea, the longer it will take to find a home. Introducing a brand new concept in education might well be the best idea ever, but it might take a long time before it's seen and recognized for its merits.

Three cycles is really a fair shake for a marketing program. The shitty thing is, you have to be confident in your approach over a long time. You really don't want to go three months, freak out, redo everything, and basically start building an audience from scratch.

Metrics are a good bellwether of how the campaign will eventually convert. If you see from QR codes that people are visiting your site when you get posters put up; if your webinar attendance numbers are consistent and rising over time; if your email inquiries are slowly trending up... be patient. You're getting the right people interested, you just need to let their decision cycle run its course.

Slightly different words and pictures won't save you

There are two worst-case scenarios in a failing marketing campaign. The first is giving up entirely, too soon.

The second is the "tinkering vortex." Kind of mentioned above, in the "don't redo everything every three months."

The tinkering vortex is that awful second-guessing space where you — or somebody in your orbit — says "on second thought, maybe we need X image instead of this one," or "we need to rewrite the headline to say A instead of B." An adverb shift won't save a bad marketing concept; it certainly won't save a program that isn't a good fit for the audience you're marketing to.

Language and images should all be finalized in the development and review stage. You need to be confident in a campaign that's out the door. Even an "on second thought..." in the first couple of days is kind of okay.

But you don't want "pull down everything, new images, new text, relaunch" happening constantly. That's a boondoggle and will only exacerbate your problems as your identity and message becomes confusing and unreliable to people who are coming to expect communications from you about your program as they work through a long decision process.

It's also stressful as fuck. The opportunity cost of not doing the million other things you could be doing to improve your graduate recruitment — including spending time with and building community among your existing graduate students — is huge.

Stick to your guns.

Addendum: this does not apply to A/B testing. Testing variations on a theme is healthy over time. If you launch with image A1 and A2, and A2 is outperforming A1 after a few months, it's healthy to test a slight adjustment... put A3 out there for a few months and see how it does.

Maybe marketing isn't your problem.

The Bitter Pill

Okay, so. You're probably an academic, and maybe this won't land really well, but here's the thing.

An academic who has sat quietly and considered a problem, might think the solution is a new program they have come up with, on their own or with other academics. This new program (or a pivot on an existing program) will be then put forth into the world, bereft of any deep market research or field testing of its concepts or content.

Marketing is supposed to sell it.

And when it doesn't sell, some academics will be completely open to the idea that maybe the thing they came up with on their own might not be the right product for the intended market.

Others would rather *eat broken glass* than admit they were wrong.

And they would rather blame "the marketing" than consider returning to the drawing board.

Now is when it is very important for you to take all of the other metrics — the first two-thirds of that funnel — and use them as proof points to say "look, the marketing is reaching the right people and it is bringing them to the website. People in our target group are aware of the program and reading all of the information about the program, and they are not signing up."

And if everyone has agreed with everything else so far — the problem analysis, the audience, the outreach — they'll have to inevitably come to the conclusion that the product isn't the right fit for the market.

At that point, you're outside the bounds of this book — you need to change the product, or re-think who it's supposed to appeal to.

Big Wild Ideas

Other stuff you can do. Mostly fun!

You can also go big. ***GO HUUUUUUUGE!!!***

People *love* the other stuff. The big ideas. The giant swings. And they're great ideas! I love ambitious, different ideas with reach.

They're hard to recommend, though. The reward for the effort is really hard to quantify, and sometimes, frankly, it's almost definitely not worth it in an on-paper, bloodless-accounting, sense. Which doesn't make the big swings worthless, just... differently valuable on a balance sheet.

Here are some:

Podcast

Highlight your strengths through a podcast as well as your traditional stories/social. Give every student a half-hour to talk about their journeys, their research, their supervisor. They'll love the platform, you'll be presenting the humans in your program in a way that makes prospective students say "hey, maybe that could be me," and/or makes other academics take note of the good work being done in your shop.

The problems: broad "let's talk about research" podcasts are good in theory, but academic podcasts fall into a "neither fish nor fowl" problem — they aren't focused enough to reach a specific audience, but they're too deep to reach a general one. A podcast on a specific topic area, like World War II or toy robots or country music, has a good shot at an audience. A huge "let's do a quick dip into a different science topic every week" podcast, same.

I created and ran a law podcast for a while, to promote an undergraduate Certificate in Law program. I thought the concept was a slam-dunk: look at topics in the news, then pull the instructors in to talk about the legal lens. Oil pipeline problem in the headlines? Bring in our Aboriginal Law professor to talk about consultation mandates. Big clash between federal and provincial governments? Bring in the Public and Constitutional Law professor to break down the division of powers. Sex scandal with a high school teacher? Our Criminal Law professor can talk about that.

It did... okay. But over time, what I realized, is that nobody is really interested in "the law" as a catch-all topic. People are interested in issues that affect them, but generally not about the whole scope of every legal topic imaginable.

So what I wound up with is a podcast where specific episodes would find "their" audience, but I could never grow the overall listenership.

Specific plays well with a podcast, but "catch-all" podcasts don't do particularly well. If I had it to do over again, I would have focused on a seasons-based approach: do a series on Aboriginal title, then a series on Criminal Law, etc.

It's possible to do a top-tier academic podcast, but start from your audience and what they want and work backward. Don't assume that because each individual topic is interesting to somebody, all episodes will be interesting to everybody.

Definitely have transcripts made and posted to your site when every episode is done. Even if the podcast doesn't get a ton of listeners, it's generating a massive amount of long-tail SEO on specialized topics that will only help you over time.

A big fuckin' video

Just... just don't do it, man. In every four- or five-year cycle it seems like somebody thinks that dropping $20,000+ on a "recruitment video" will move the needle. It won't. It really won't. It'll get ~300 views on YouTube and sit on your "About" page collecting dust until people realize that the haircuts look kind of dated and the cycle starts anew.

If you want your big fuckin' video to do numbers, you're going to have to pay to market it and at that point it becomes its own marketing campaign, that doesn't lead to conversion, it just leads to a kind of diffuse awareness of the program. For that money, time and energy, you could develop a ton of other things that will speak directly and effectively to your prospective students.

I know I said above that I love big ideas. I hate this idea. Just do little videos, featuring your people, planned and executed well. You don't need big dollars for that.

Micro-video

This, on the other hand, is a good idea, especially if you can get it in the hands of a student who is keen to manage your socials (see Cheap Labour). I'll be writing a wee book on how to set up and run a micro-video program. Basically — make small videos that feel personal and highlight your people.

An essay contest

Okay, I've never actually done this but I think it's a really good idea and whoever gets to it first will score huge. Maybe it's you!

A writing contest; excellent undergraduate papers in your broad topic area. $1000 or $2000 top prize, a few runner-up prizes. Every undergrad department in your topic area will publicize it (they do it for every other essay contest on earth). You'll get to see some of the best UG students in your area bring their best work to the table, and — from a callow marketing standpoint — will be in a position to start permission-based marketing of your grad program (this can even be baked into the submission rules).

This is obviously a bit loosey-goosey — who will triage the best papers, who will evaluate? What will the criteria for judging be? How will winners be announced? All sorts of things to figure out, but my gosh, what a way to get all the best prospects in your country coming to you instead of you trying to get to them.

Leverage other contests

But surely there's a way to get 90% of the benefits of the above contest idea without having to run a contest?

Sure! Take advantage of other people's contests.

In your area, undergrad students are winning awards. They're doing it in droves. Look! There goes one now! Zoom!

In almost all cases, these awards are publicized. So why not look up what schools and institutions are giving out awards, and write the winners c/o those institutions? "Hello Glenjamin; congratulations on winning the Gordon Ramsay award for Best Food Shouting. Here at Whatsamatta U, we have a thriving food studies program, and if you are interested in graduate studies in food studies, we have a few faculty that specialize in Food Shouting. If you'd like to learn more about grad studies with us..."

Paper letters, on letterhead, signed by your grad chair or dean/head/etc. A real paper letter in an envelope with a stamp, c/o their home institution.

A big initial lift to do the research on where awards reside and how they're given out every year, but once you've got it all figured out, it's a half-day for a cheap resource to re-check the lists and re-send what are essentially lightly edited form letters.

Incentivize your students to big-up you organically

Post and tag us to enter a contest. Set up a points system where every post on social about the school gets you X points, and when you get Y points you get the $100 quarter-zip sweater. Challenge academic-student supervisor pairings to cross-post about their work together. There are lots of schemes — find one that works for your culture and get your students to start talking more about the program on their social channels.

Get your alumni influencers to take over your channels

Figure out (with your cheap labour) which of your alumni have decent social media presences, and invite them to do scheduled "takeovers" of your channels. From breakfast through the end of the day, they share what it's like to be a graduate of Y working in Field X. The alumnus is flattered, your current students feel reinforced, and future students see that your program delivers real-world, career-dream outcomes.

Working with on-campus marcomms & recruitment

Everyone is good and wants the best for everyone

Some of the best advice I've ever received is a Wikipedia editing guideline: assume good faith.

Working with other units can at times be frustrating, especially when you feel like your needs aren't being met or you're not being heard. But central marketing and communications units deal with an incredible scope of work. They're jugging brand-building activity, a lot of annual FOMO-type churn (do we need to pay $25,000 to have the inside back cover of this nationally produced university rankings guide? Can we afford not to have that presence in the market?), responsive and reactive campaigning (X has happened, we need to seize the moment and push Y), crisis communications (something has happened at the institution that's making the news and could damage our brand, how do we manage this), research promotion and thought leadership (but which faculty's research do we promote, and why, and when), supporting routine "big" recruitment initiatives, like domestic undergrad recruitment, and much more.

It's a lot. Add to that, that they're being pulled in many different directions by university leaders: the Principal may want X, the provost Y, the advancement folks want Z to support fundraising goals, but the VP Research wants A, B and C promoted heavily. The institution probably has a strategic plan with four or five pillars and the marcomms team has to show that they're making progress in all of them concurrently. Again... a lot.

In that context, your department or school is a niche. Grad studies within your department or school is a niche inside a niche. If you don't feel you're getting the support you need for your specific program, maybe you aren't, but from their perspective there are bigger fish to fry and more urgent fires to put out.

So what do you do with this?

Understand the structure to help your approach

Understanding the structure you're working with is a good first step. Higher education institutions aren't monoliths and there are a few broad ways that this work is divided up.

A. Large central team runs everything (often with embedded staff in units).

B. Smaller central team, and faculty/department-based comms units

C. Medium-sized central team, no faculty units, but dedicated teams for central units (advancement, athletics, grad)

Depending on how your institution is structured, your approach to collaboration will necessarily be different. (A) is more difficulty to align with, as they're almost always up at the macro level. (B) may mean that you have your own autonomous marcomms unit in your faculty/department, and as long as they don't egregiously violate brand guidelines, have the ability to chart their own course and set their own priorities. (C) is a middle-ground scenario where your first port of call might be the marketing and communications team at your graduate studies department or school.

In all cases, when you're approaching a marketing and communications unit to express your own needs and plans, it's okay to:

- ask what their plans are and see what they're planning in the grad recruitment space, including target audiences, regions, messages, landing pages and flow-through
- ask for specific support with your own projects (at whatever level you need support)
- ask about a budget for your own sub-project (sometimes you get a pleasant surprise — at one institution, the university's graduate studies department had a specific budget set aside to allocate money to self-starter activities at the department and school levels)

You might get rebuffed on all fronts, but it literally never hurts to ask.

The clearer you are on your own needs and objectives, the better the conversation goes. There's a whole range here, from "I have identified a program that needs recruitment support, will you help" through to "I've developed an entire plan to solve this problem, and am sharing it so you can identify any potential red flags from your perspective."

Your department head / dean should be aware of all this; it may come back to having them having your back to advocate for your ability to self-serve to meet your needs.

Are you supporting *them*?

As mentioned above — these folks are busy, and stressed, and at any given moment probably being pulled in sixteen directions at once. Like you! You get it.

So the fair question is what you're doing to help them in their efforts, while seeking their help for yours.

- circulating info about graduate/career fairs to your undergrad students
- encouraging students to participate in graduate school activities like Three-Minute Thesis competitions, Pecha Kucha nights, TedX style evenings, etc.
- generally, just being a good collaborator, and helping out where you can to support their efforts.

It's never too late to start being a good partner and showing them you're supporting their goals, so that down the line there will be more of a feeling of reciprocity if you come to them for help. You're all on the same team!

The autonomy and support grid

Once you've talked to the marcomms units, drop yourself in the "Autonomy" and "Support" sections of this here grid.

Autonomy: From identifying your audience and region, to key messages and images, to where to place your marketing and what to spend, can you…

High autonomy: call the shots

Medium autonomy: there are various people you need to speak to / get approvals / can override your decisions at certain points

Low autonomy: you can outline the problem, but can't make decisions about the solution (but you may have sign-off on the decisions that are made)

Support: from capacity to help you scope the issues you're facing, through creative development, through support in outreach, ad placement and the budget to place your marketing…

High support: you feel like you have an ad agency working for you — you've got the vision, they provide the resources

Medium support: you may get some support in some areas, but it depends on their capacity, their budget, and whether you're a priority for them at the time

Low support: you're on your own, kid

Chart yourself on this simple grid:

	Autonomy	Support
High		
Medium		
Low		

Sweet spots:

- low autonomy, high support (not your problem and your job is to complain if you don't like the results);
- high autonomy and high support (treat your internal team like colleagues at an ad agency, and you're both the client and to an extent the account manager);
- high autonomy and low support (you're on your own, do what you want).

Worst spot:

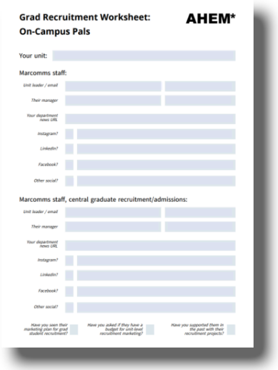
- low autonomy, low support: you're not empowered to do anything, and nobody will do anything for you. This is where you'll need your department head or dean in your corner to either shake resources loose, or make it understood that if you're not going to get any help, you're going to have to DIY it.

Medium is middle-ground hell

Almost any high/low combo is palatable. "Medium" in any category is a sign you need to buckle down and get some very concrete agreements in place, understandings about what is in and out of scope for you, and what kinds of support you can expect… and on what timeline.

The horror of the "medium" is that you're going to get hung up at approval or review stages that you never clear because you are never the priority. Something more urgent will come up, and come up, and come up.

"Medium" is a sign that you need clarity before proceeding.


Grad Recruitment Worksheet:
On-Campus Pals
AHEM*
Your unit:
Marcomms staff:
Unit leader / email
Their manager
Your department news URL
Instagram?
LinkedIn?
Facebook?
Other social?
Marcomms staff, central graduate recruitment/admissions:
Unit leader / email
Their manager
Your department news URL
Instagram?
LinkedIn?
Facebook?
Other social?
Have you seen their marketing plan for grad student recruitment?
Have you asked if they have a budget for unit-level recruitment marketing?
Have you supported them in the past with their recruitment projects?

COMPLETE THE WORKSHEET – Grad_On-Campus-Connections

Working with a marketing company / ad agency

If you have to.

I'm going to advocate strongly here for building your own resources and in-house knowledge of marketing, instead of outsourcing to external companies.

I say this as somebody who has worked in for-profit marketing, and for what I honestly think was, and remains, among the most ethical, honest, and hard-working agencies in Canada, and have worked *with* some of the others. I still think it's better to build a solid core of competency in your own shop, and hire out for the highly specialized stuff.

Here's what you get from an agency:

- Immediate competency in general and catchy writing.
- Immediate understanding of marketing strategy and tactics, storytelling.
- Immediate competency in graphic design and visual production.

Here's what you don't get:

- In immediate understanding of your audience/market
- An innate understanding of your product and its benefits
- Investment in your long-term, year-over-year success

Here's what you lose:

- Knowledge transfer time, on both ends — it's vanishingly rare to retain a marketing firm forever, and you're going to lose the time and energy you spend bringing them up to speed
- Onboarding time — the "bring them up to speed" component is very high, effectively like onboarding a new staffer, but this is lost when the contract ends
- Money — a cheap marketing company is probably going to deliver less value for money than a really reputable (and expensive) company, so you're either going to be spending quite a bit of money on something not great, or extraordinary amounts of money on something good.

How to get the most value possible from your vendor relationship:

Know your product.

I can't stress this enough: you will need to do the work in the first half of this book anyway to get the agency up to speed. If you leave them alone to figure it out, they will need a few tries to get it right... and it's a lot more expensive to spend vendor time fixing it than for you to give them what they need in the first place.

If you don't know what your product is, who it should appeal to, and what makes it special, an external vendor can't do that for you. They need that bedrock to build from.

Know your needs and hire to fill them.

If you're looking for expertise to ensure you're getting the most bang for your buck on social media, hire that agency. If you're looking for fresh perspectives and dazzling creative, hire that agency. Big, all-service agencies aren't really going to deliver value unless you want to give them preposterous amounts of money and back away (see below), and what they will do is constantly pester you to give them more business for 'complementary' services.

Ensure you get the source files.

When contracting, be sure the deliverables include the source files for design and other work; usually Adobe files, but now sometimes (ugh) Canva. At any rate, you'll want to have those just in case you need them down the line.

Ensure you have the IP.

This shouldn't be necessary (or controversial), but ensure the contract states that the intellectual property for the work done will be assigned to you with moral rights waived. Do not allow the work to be 'licensed' to you with the copyright retained by the agency.

Give them room to cook / trust professionals to be professionals.

Whenever I see truly God-awful creative coming out of a notable agency, my immediate assumption is "well, I guess the client got their way." You should absolutely set them up with the fundamentals outlined in this book — audience, goals, key points. But you've also hired them to be experts at one thing (probably) — creating compelling creative that works for the right audience. To override every decision they make with your own ideas is the inverse of what you're giving them money to do.

Conclusion

Do we need a conclusion? We're supposed to have one, I guess.

Well, that was a lot, huh?

Hopefully it does what it says on the tin; a fairly complete roadmap across all aspects of grad recruitment.

I know it seems like a lot of work, but compartmentalized and chipped away at, it's doable. And it will work.

Good luck and have fun!

Ultimately, this is not only a roadmap to grad recruitment, but to building a toolkit that will deepen your understanding of your own programs and your own community in building a marketing plan.

It's also a fundamental education in marketing — 3/4 of what's in here are tools and tactics that can be directly applied to other areas, like undergraduate recruitment and research/academic promotion.

If you have any questions, feel free to reach out to me at

info@ahemahem.org

I can't promise I'll answer quickly, but I'll try my best.

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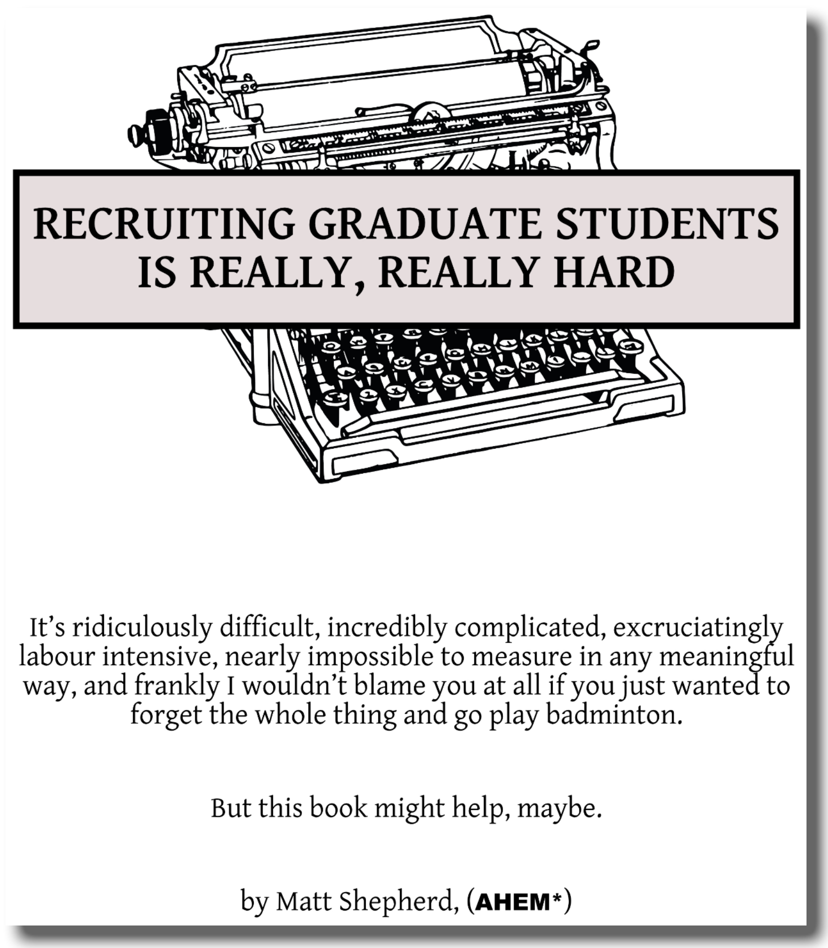

www.ahemahem.org