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Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) Enrollment Marketing & Recruitment Model - 2025/26 through 2027/28

The enrollment and recruitment higher education landscape in California continues to be more competitive each year. During the next decade, the number of high school graduates in the state will continue to decrease. At the same time, CSU campuses are experiencing increased competition from each other, the UC, and our community colleges. In addition, more private and out-of-state institutions are actively recruiting in California.

Implementing multiple strategic enrollment initiatives, Sonoma State stopped the extreme enrollment drops that university experienced during the past several years. The current budget crisis and associated cuts, however, are now impacting the university's ability to continue to grow enrollment. Within this challenging environment, the Strategic Enrollment Management division at Sonoma State is building a new model of recruitment to position the university to recover from budget cuts, continue to grow enrollment, and be more competitive in the future.

Sonoma State is transitioning from an Outreach and Information model of SEM (a popular model when applications are plentiful), to a more competitive Enrollment Marketing and Recruitment model. To complete this transition, the university is implementing a series of new strategies with an associated budget model from 2025/26 through 2027/28. Those strategies and associated costs are outlined in this proposal.

1. ReBranding and University Marketing

Sonoma State must overcome three substantial obstacles to more effectively compete for students in the current and future market. First, SSU's current branding is outdated and non-engaging. Second, the university's marketing capabilities were extremely limited from 2000 through 2024 and there were almost no assets for enrollment marketing. Third, the University's website is not easy to navigate, full of outdated and abandoned pages, and poorly structured to support recruitment and retention.

To address these challenges, President Cutrer submitted a proposal to the CSU Chancellor's Office for a one-time grant to support the university's re-branding and marketing challenges. The grant was approved for \$2.5M. She also moved Strategic Communications and Marketing to report to the Vice President for University Advancement.

With the CSU grant and new Marketing structure, Sonoma State is embarking on a two-year initiative to address the three challenges outlined above. The Rebranding and Marketing Proposal (with associated budget breakdown) are provided in Attachments A & B.

2. Diversified Lead Generation

Sonoma State, like many universities, has traditionally generated prospective student leads through strategies like buying names from the College Board and generating inquiries from college fairs and high school nights. However, as evidenced by the drop in enrollment for the past several years at Sonoma State, these kinds of strategies are inadequate when the prospective student market changes (as happened after the NorCal fires and the recent pandemic). The geographic sensitivity of prospective student markets is a critical factor to consider for institutions who are not surrounded by a large population base and who have a substantial on-campus housing inventory (like Sonoma State).

To address this challenge, Sonoma State is moving from a more traditional outreach model to an active recruitment model. To support active recruitment, SEM will generate leads by partnering with vendors who work to match students with universities. This transition is detailed below:

For the 2024-25 year, high school names were obtained directly through the vendors based on academic and geographic criteria. These prospective students are added to the Communication flows in Slate with no prior connection to the university; these names are considered *cold leads*. The university obtained 85,000 cold leads for the fall 2024 and 2025 recruitment cycles. The majority of these costs were paid by the Chancellor's Office.

- **College Board** Names - \$27,000/Year for 25K Names for a Yield < 3%
- **EAB Appily** Names - *\$189,622/Year for 50K Names and Recruitment Services for a App/Admit Yield to date = 2.5% (695 Students Admitted as of 2/20/25)
- **Deloitte** Names - *Unknown Cost for 10K Names for an App/Admit Yield to date of 0.0%. Deloitte is also providing a predictive analysis dashboard which should prove useful in subsequent years assuming the Chancellor's Office will continue to contract for this service.

*EAB and Deloitte costs for 2024-25 were paid by the Chancellor's Office

For 2025-26 through 2027-28, Sonoma State will through a different set of vendors. Prospective student leads for high school and Community college students with a connection (and/or interest) to the university are considered *warm leads*. Warm leads have expressed interest in the university and typically yield between 5% and 10% vs. cold leads at less than 3%.

- **Collegvine** - \$145,000/Year for 50K Leads and 20K Connections. \$50,000/Year for the Collegvine AI Recruiter. Due to delays with the Web Site and retraining required by the budget reductions announced in January, 2025, the Collegvine leads are being recruited late in the cycle. Thus, SEM will focus on yield for Fall 2025 admitted students and then expand the use of the AI Recruiter for spring and fall 2026.
- **EdVisorly** - \$25,500/Year for unlimited connections (13,287 to date). EdVisorly focuses solely on community college transfer leads. SEM did not have a recruiter assigned to manage campaigns for the 3,927 EdVisorly prospects in Fall 2024. There will be specific recruiters assigned for Spring and Fall 2026 campaigns.
- **Niche** - Proposal = \$44,990/Year (three-years) for unlimited connections, detailed lead management and analysis. Niche is currently the largest supplier of prospective student names in the country and continuing to grow at a rapid rate. To date, 189K prospective students have viewed the Sonoma State profile on Niche (967 in January 2025). Without a contract, we are unable to communicate with these prospects.
- **Encoura** - Proposal = \$34,200 for 30,000 connections, detailed lead management and analysis.

Using different vendors, Sonoma State should be able to obtain 100K+ warm leads annually for an investment of approximately \$300K/year. These costs could come from the CO Marketing and Branding grant for the next two years. Then, Sonoma State would have the opportunity to analyze yield and ROI to determine if costs would be continued after the grant is expended. Contracts should always include a 90 day out clause.

3. Paid Advertising

Throughout the pandemic, Sonoma State lost considerable name recognition among high school students (and their families) who were not introduced to SSU through regular outreach and recruitment activities. To increase brand recognition in critical areas of recruitment throughout the state, Sonoma State initiated two paid advertising campaigns focused on geographic regions and recipients likely to include college-bound students and their families.

- **Paramount+** - UA and SEM partnered with Paramount+ for two ad campaigns: 1) to increase Fall 2025 applications and brand awareness; and, 2) to increase Fall 2025 admit yield during Spring 2025. SSU paid \$80K for both campaigns. Ads ran in geographic areas throughout Northern and Southern California and focused on two age demographics (35+ parents/grandparents of college intenders in high school, and ages 18-24 identified as “in market” for associate’s or bachelor’s degree. In Fall 2024, the campaign delivered 1,098,124 impressions. Individual viewers saw the ad on average six times throughout the campaign with a 95.8% video completion rate. The greatest share of responses (20.72%) came from Pause Ads served in Marin, Santa Clara, Alameda, & San Francisco zip codes (Ages 18-54).
- **Sonoma Media** - SEM also partnered with Sonoma Media (owned by the Press Democrat) to place digital ads on their site, social media, and YouTube in SSU’s service region to increase applications during November and December 2024. SSU invested \$11,883.81 for this fall ad campaign. In Fall 2024, the campaign delivered 962,839 impressions generating 2,678 click throughs to the SSU web site (28%).

4. Lead Management and Recruiter Responsibilities

The most important aspect of the transition from passive outreach to active recruitment is strategic lead management. An outreach model provides information in the hope that students will apply and enroll. Active recruitment uses multiple lead management strategies to actively convert students through the different stages of the enrollment funnel (app, admit, deposit, orientation, and ultimately enrollment). Sonoma State has been using communication flows (commflows) and drip campaigns (regularly spaced comms from Slate) to send information to prospects, applicants and admits on a regular basis. To date, however, recruiters have not been assigned to different vendors to manage leads and create campaigns specific to each vendor.

Lead Management Strategies

- **Slate Import and Initial Welcome** - All leads, regardless of source, are imported or entered into Slate. Leads are then added to the appropriate commflows for their entry term (e.g. Fall 2025) and welcome them to Sonoma State. If no entry term is provided, SEM staff and students will initiate an introduction (email or call) to welcome the prospective student and obtain missing information (e.g. entry term, desired major, housing interest, etc.).
- **Slate Campaigns, Events, and Follow-Up Recruitment** - In addition to adding prospective students to the standard commflows, recruiters use Slate to conduct campaigns, advertise events and campus visits, and follow-up with students they are recruiting.

- **Lead Management and Campaigns by Vendor** - In addition to Slate, most vendors offer multiple ways to communicate with prospective students and initiate campaigns through their software platforms. Using these strategies is a good way to convert prospective students to applicants. Through the platform, prospective students have already indicated an interest in Sonoma State, provided information through their student profile, and often joined a community of other students. Beginning with the 2026 recruitment campaigns, each recruiter will be assigned a vendor partner. Recruiters will manage leads through that vendor, learn the analytics & dashboards available, and provide reports on the strategies used and associated conversion rates for their leads.
- **Recruiter Support Teams** - Recruiters need help following up with leads that have attended one of their events or who they have connected with through lead management activities. Our TourGuides/Student Ambassadors in the Welcome Center will form Recruiter Support Teams to ensure that we continue to connect with prospective students and keep them engaged with the university.
- **Strategic Analyst** - Recruiters have limited time. They are typically younger professionals who will likely turn over in two to three years. To support recruiters with Slate and lead management through different vendor platforms, it will be critical for SEM to employ a strategic analyst. This position is more than a typical analyst. They will help develop strategies for recruiters, analyze outcomes and vendor ROI, monitor and manage activities in Slate, and provide continuity when a recruiter position becomes vacant.

5. Leveraging Technology to Expand Reach and Automate Processes

Slate Customer Response Management (CRM) System Optimization

To help the recruitment team manage thousands of leads and help convert prospective students through the enrollment funnel, Sonoma State purchased a CRM (Slate) in 2022/23 and has been implementing this new system. SSU invests \$100K/year for Slate. However, Slate is a complex tool and the recruitment team has been challenged to learn the system, integrate it into their daily activities, and explore the powerful features they are not yet using. Recruiter turnover has also hampered progress in this area as each new recruiter starts from the beginning to learn the CRM.

SEM has created a Slate Squad and partnered with IT to expand the knowledge and effective use of the system. IT has assigned a consistent resource to assist with the Slate implementation and work on new enhancements (e.g. moving Orientation to Slate, implementing lead scoring, etc.). Sonoma State must continue to invest time and resources to optimize the use of Slate throughout the university. A Strategic Analyst position will be critical to the successful use and management of the institution's CRM.

Collegvine Recruiting Agent

To further expand the recruitment team's ability to offer meaningful engagement to thousands of prospective students, Sonoma State purchased the Collegvine AI Agent. This new technology uses generative AI to provide a "human-like" interaction with prospective students and their families. The product supports text, chat, email, and voice connections (in 30 languages). The AI Agent for undergraduate students is named Livy and for graduate and international students is named Eddy.

Originally scheduled to go live in December, 2024, the launch was first delayed by technical issues related to the university's Drupal 10 website upgrade. Then after the budget reduction was announced in January, 2025, the Collegvine team had to retrain the AI agent removing all references to NCAA Division II Athletics and several academic majors. The AI Agent (Livy) went live on 2/28/2025. The late launch date impacted SSU's ability to increase apps for Fall 2025, but will be used to increase yield for Fall 2025 and as part of recruitment campaigns for spring and fall 2026.

EdVisorly Transcript Process Automation (EddyAI)

Like most universities, Sonoma State is challenged to receive, process, and articulate official transcripts for new and continuing students in a timely way. Delays in the largely manual processes often cause issues for students during orientation and academic advising. In addition, the current process does not facilitate pre-admissions transfer credit evaluation (TCE). To address these issues, Sonoma State partnered with EdVisorly to implement their EddyAI Transcript Automation tool in spring 2025.

Automating much of the TCE process, EddyAI can read an unlimited number of transcript formats, course descriptions and numbering systems, and apply transfer credit articulation rules. The results of the AI TCE will be imported into PeopleSoft greatly reducing the manual effort involved in TCE processing. Not only will TCEs be more timely and more accurate, the time saved will allow staff to focus on increasing the number of course articulation rules, performing more efficient quality control on TCEs, and working more directly with students and faculty to enhance transcript processing. Once this project is completed, Sonoma State could expand the use of AI to perform pre-admission transcript evaluations for potential transfer students.

6. Partnerships, Promise Programs, and Dual Enrollment

To date, Sonoma State has developed Guaranteed Admission partnerships with seven local high school districts representing 22 high schools and academies. In addition, Sonoma State has signed partnerships with Pivot Charter, (four high schools) and AIMS Prep in Oakland. The university is currently in conversation with Stockton Unified, Lincoln Unified, Napa Unified, Calistoga Unified, and several other high school districts in Northern California.

Sonoma State has signed guaranteed admission agreements with Santa Rosa Junior College (SRJC), Napa Valley College, College of Marin, Mendocino College, the Los Angeles Community College District, and is working on an agreement with Solano Community College and Sierra Community College.

Working with the school districts and community colleges, Sonoma State is establishing several promise programs. For example, the Petaluma Promise with the Petaluma City Schools to establish a pathway from 8th grade through guaranteed admissions at Sonoma State. This program includes dual enrollment. Another example is the Early College program with Rancho Cotate High School which connects 9th and 10th grade students to Sonoma State through the AVID program and then offers dual enrollment in 10th and 11th grades (again ending in guaranteed admission to Sonoma State). Finally, the Marin Promise is a partnership between Marin Unified School District, the College of Marin, 10,000 Degrees, and Sonoma State to create teacher pathways for students.

Several of the guaranteed admission agreements with high school districts include Dual Enrollment Programs. Sonoma State is focusing on offering dual enrollment opportunities in A-G courses and AP courses. Thus, the university is not competing with local community colleges primarily offering courses through their career technical pathways.

Expansion of partnership and dual enrollment agreements will need to be strategic and assigned specific resources. It is critical for partnerships to be actively maintained (work that is often postponed or even abandoned when administrators are busy or their positions turnover). Sonoma State could utilize a retired annuitant or other part-time resource to manage and maintain these partnerships. The individual must be experienced and able to travel to the partner locations at least once per term.

In addition, the Dual Enrollment process is currently completely manual and highly cumbersome. To ensure that Sonoma State can provide a positive experience to partner schools and support

processing efficiency in the Admissions Office, it is highly recommended that the University invest in DualEnroll. This software product automates the DualEnroll process between the school and university and within the Admission Office. DualEnroll is relatively inexpensive (\$20K/year with \$17K start up cost) and could be covered by increases in the \$36 administrative dual enrollment fee. Current dual enrollment partnerships are already overwhelming staff resources in Admissions. If additional partners are to be pursued, DualEnroll should be purchased and implemented in summer or fall 2025.

7. Campus Tours, Orientation, Virtual Tour, Events, etc.

In 2023-24, Sonoma State revamped the campus tour, orientation, and on-campus yield events. Tours are now offered twice on weekdays and once each Saturday. On average, 400 students and families tour the campus each week (many as part of school visits). A new virtual tour will be created during the 2025-26 year. Summer Orientation was moved back on-campus (it had remained virtual after the pandemic). For transfer students, a special orientation date is offered each semester allowing new students who have deposited to register at the same time as continuing transfer students.

The Fall Preview Day and Spring Decision Day events were also restructured to enhance the participant experience and offer special incentives (early admission decisions for Preview Day and early registration for new transfer students at Decision Day). Additionally, the Admitted Student Welcomes conducted the past two years are being restructured to minimize expense and increase yield from partner schools and pipeline regions.