

The Thrivers Study: A Tool for Understanding the Characteristics of Successful Students

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Making decisions in college admission is both an art and a science. With increasing agreement that standardized tests and other criteria often fall short in capturing the complexity and nuance of today's college applicant, admission leaders around the country are on the search for practical innovations. The Thrivers Study is one example.

Although this document offers advice gleaned from implementation of a Thrivers Study at a small liberal arts college, a Thrivers Study can offer valuable learning opportunities for institutions of all sizes and pedagogies. At its core, a Thrivers Study is a form of appreciative inquiry research, research designed to uncover what is working and why. In the admission context, this means studying which students are doing well, and understanding what characteristics those students have in common.

By the end of this resource, you'll have a sense of what a Thrivers Study is, how it might look in practice, and why you might consider doing one at your institution. The resource is organized into two sections. The first part of this document briefly overviews the concept of a Thrivers Study and is designed to build a shared understanding among campus leadership. The second part dives deeply into implementation—what it might look like to actually get a Thrivers Study done.

Overview

What is a Thrivers Study?

Often admission professionals are so caught up in getting the work done that we have little time to reflect on why we make the choices we make and operate the way that we do. In today's competitive landscape, admission teams work around the clock to recruit qualified applicants and encourage their enrollment. But, how do we know who we want to recruit and enroll?

A Thrivers Study is an institutionally-specific research initiative that helps a community understand the qualities of students who “thrive” in their particular environment. This type of research is a great opportunity to bring together leaders from different departments to work as part of an interdisciplinary team. We encourage institutions to define the parameters of “thriving” within the context of their community, but recommend that thriving be defined to include both social and academic measures of student success.

Institutions can choose a scope of research that fits their strategic goals. A Thrivers Study can be scaled down to target specific populations of students that a community seeks to understand better (i.e., rural students), or scaled up to look at the student population as a whole.

Why do a Thrivers Study?

As illustrated above, there are myriad reasons why you might consider a Thrivers Study. The most exciting aspect of this approach is that it is focused on your institution, and can be carried out with the resources your community already has. You might choose to do a Thrivers Study because you are working on a strategic plan and are eager to conduct research that will help center student success. Or perhaps you are in the implementation stage of a previous strategic plan and are encountering some challenges. As an admission leader looking to incorporate holistic assessment of character into your review process, a Thrivers Study can provide invaluable insight into the qualities and

characteristics of students who are likely to succeed at your institution. Regardless of your context, a Thrivers Study will offer an opportunity for deeper insights into the learners at the heart of your community.

Conducting a Thrivers Study also offers a unique opportunity to rally various campus constituencies and foster collaboration between departments around an admission initiative. When community members see a commitment from Admission to understand student success, it in turn makes them more likely to support future recruitment and yield initiatives.

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Although this research methodology does require an investment of resources and commitment (see below), it offers innumerable benefits. If you know the type of student who does well at your college or university, you are much more likely to recruit applicants who you will retain and will graduate. In addition, this process helps to break down the barriers that exist between admission and the rest of campus at many institutions. Ultimately, this type of study is uniquely capable of illuminating insights that allow campus leaders to speak with confidence to donors, parents, and prospective families about the qualities and characteristics that distinguish a student at their institution.

What will it take to do this work well?

Carrying out a Thrivers Study will likely involve movement through the following phases: assembling a research leadership team, distilling research questions and methods, identifying the population to be studied, conducting the research and gathering the data, and finally, analyzing and presenting the findings.

The implementation timeframe of a Thrivers Study will vary institution to institution. However, the example in Part II below is built upon a year-long timeframe.

The result of a Thrivers Study analysis will be a rich, holistic picture of the qualities and characteristics of students who thrive within the context of your institution. With this information in hand, the final stage is to assess the degree to which these characteristics are currently assessed in the admission process, and specifically in the rubric used to review applications. Of equal importance is collaborating with the Communications team to understand how these characteristics can be highlighted in student and alumni profiles, and of course in descriptions of the type of student that the university seeks in marketing and application materials.



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Implementing a Thrivers Study

The power of a Thrivers Study stems from its design. At the heart of the study are research questions, things your community members are eager to understand about student success at that institution. Carrying out a Thrivers Study will involve movement through the following phases: assembling a research team, identifying the population to be studied, finalizing research questions and methods, conducting the research and gathering the data, and analyzing and presenting the findings.

How do we get started?

The implementation timeframe of a Thrivers Study will vary from institution to institution. That being said, there are general research phases that we recommend each institution consider as they design their study. The following illustrates an example of how to implement a Thrivers Study within a one-year timeframe. We encourage you to adapt this timeframe depending on the priorities of your institution and existence of any previous or on-going research on student success. Some institutions may find that they have already identified the thrivers on their campus, and may then want to dive right into the analysis of their admission records. Others may start from scratch. Regardless of your entry point, we encourage you to maintain attention to the thematic concepts from each phase below.

Phase I: Coalition building (Months 1 – 3)

Phase II: Data gathering and analysis (Months 4 – 9)

Phase III: Integrating results (Months 10 – 12)

Phase I: Coalition building

The first step in the implementation of a Thrivers Study is to build a shared understanding among constituencies about why there is a need to better understand student success. A powerful way to illustrate this is through an exploration of application, yield, retention, and graduation trends. If any of these figures have declined over time or are below the institution's strategic goals, this may suggest the need for a Thrivers Study. At any institution, a Thrivers Study is also a way to understand more about who is doing well; this information can lead to informed, strategic discussions about resource allocation and admission decisions and more targeted student outreach and recruitment. A Thrivers Study should be presented as part of a holistic, campus-wide initiative to advance student success.

Step 1: Build a shared understanding of why such research is needed and what resources it will require

Prepare relevant data to make the case for the need to do a Thrivers Study.

- For example, if your first-year retention rate is declining or lower than your peers, this may be an indication that your admission rubric is due for a refresh. Are the things that the rubric measures actually predictive of success? A Thrivers Study can help you answer this.

Present concept to senior leadership team institution-wide.

Discuss possible incentives for individuals who join the project leadership team (project-specific).

- For example, faculty who contribute at least 40 hours to this project might be released from a course obligation. Staff might have an opportunity to attend professional development or training related to qualitative or quantitative research.

Step 2: Cultivate understanding among key constituencies and establish project leadership team

Present concept to expanded campus leadership group including representatives from the following areas: student life, academic affairs, advising, faculty, institutional research, admission, communications, alumni affairs, and development.

Solicit nominations for the project leadership team. The composition of the team should reflect the breadth of skills needed to answer the research questions at the heart of the study.

Step 3: Secure project leadership team and establish criteria for identifying thrivers group

Identify at least one leadership team researcher with strong qualitative and quantitative research skills.

Assemble a leadership team that includes at least one representative each from admission, institutional research, advising, and the faculty. It may also be useful to include representatives from student life, communications, and alumni relations, depending on the scope of the project.

The leadership team agrees on criteria for identifying the thrivers group who have completed at least one

year at the institution. We recommend using metrics that assess both academic and social success.

- For example, a team may determine that thriving students must have a GPA of at least a 3.75, an affirmative endorsement from their faculty advisor, and involvement in at least one student group or organization. Another campus may decide that thriving students will be identified by faculty nominations alone, regardless of their overall GPA.



Phase II. Data gathering and analysis

The second phase of implementing a Thrivers Study is preparing for and completing the research. The length of this phase should be adjusted in accordance with the size of the leadership team and their capacity to balance this work with their other responsibilities. It is important to consider that accelerating this stage may have tradeoffs with the integrity of the research. Thus, attention should be paid to documenting the methods utilized. This will allow for a more compelling presentation of the findings in Phase III, and will increase the likelihood that various campus constituencies will embrace the outcomes because they are able to understand the process.

Step 1: Identify thrivers group

Using criteria selected in step 3 of Phase I, a group of at least 50 second-year students should be identified.

Some institutions may decide to study students later in their education. The advantage of focusing on second-year students is that they will be better able to recall aspects of their college search and application process—data you may want to gather during interviews.

It is important to consider the distribution of these students across different academic areas and the degree to which their demographics reflect the larger student population.

Some institutions may decide to target a Thrivers Study at a particular demographic or academic area they are seeking to better understand.

Step 2: Design interview protocol and survey

Thrivers studies can be designed to support the advancement of various institutional priorities.

The interview and survey questions must be designed with an eye towards alignment with these priorities. Consider the following examples:

- If an institution is looking to do a brand refresh as part of improving their admission metrics, they would want to ask questions in the

interview and survey about why students were attracted to the school and what messages resonated with them in the recruitment and application process.

- If an institution is looking to overhaul their first-year programs, they would want to ask questions about students' experiences in these programs.
- If an organization is looking to make more informed admission decisions based on applicant experience, skills, and character, they might review the nominated thrivers group through the lens of a character assessment. What qualities, experiences, and skills are shared across the group? How do faculty speak about these students' presence in class? How did their teachers or recommenders describe the students' character, skills, or experiences?

Step 3: Complete student interviews and deploy survey

The lead researcher should develop a protocol for interviews and each interviewer should go through training for how to conduct the interview.

- For example, the protocol might suggest that students are assured of confidentiality and/or anonymity. It might also outline the “anchor questions,” that each interviewer will ask and provide parameters for the degree to which follow-up questions should be asked.

We recommend having the interview audio recorded

for data analysis purposes.

The survey should be deployed within a short window of time so that students are completing it around the same time in their academic year.

Step 4: Review interview, survey, and admission data

The leadership team should review admission applications of the thrivers group cover to cover.

In the earlier months of this phase, applications can be given a technical read by a more junior staff member to pull out pertinent biographical data. If the institution uses Slate, we recommend involving a staff member with fluency in Slate.

When doing qualitative analysis, we recommend using an “emic” approach to coding, meaning that researchers allow for common themes to emerge out of the interview transcripts, rather than going into the analysis looking for predefined themes.

- For example, an institution may decide to do a Thrivers Study to better understand what activities thrivers had in common in their high school experience. When reviewing the interview transcripts, the research team may notice that 75% of the interviewees also mentioned having “loved” their tour guide. An emic approach would note this as a common and important theme even though the original research question was focused on high school activities.

Phase III: Integrating results

The final stage of this research involves making sense of the results in the context of existing institutional characterizations of students. If an institution is deploying a Thrivers Study with the goal of improving yield, retention, and graduation rates, examining the research insights in the context of the existing admission rubric is essential. Each quality or characteristic that has emerged as being significantly correlated with thriving should be assessed in the admission process. We recommend doing a comprehensive audit of admission materials and processes to expose opportunities to weave these insights into all aspects of the division. Throughout, it is also essentially important to remove characterizations of students that are not supported in the research findings. Often such characterizations have been added over the years by well-intentioned individuals whose recommendations are not derived from or supported by institution-specific research.

Step 1: Assess insights in context of existing admission criteria

Examine the criteria used to evaluate applications and specifically the application reader rubric.

Audit the admission training procedures and communication materials, especially those that include characterizations of students to be used on the website and application itself, as well as in information sessions, college fairs, and school visits.

Examine other evaluation rubrics used in the process such as the interview rubric.

Step 2: Distill recommendations for admission, communications, and other relevant divisions

In accordance with institutional priorities, the leadership team should provide initial recommendations to relevant division leaders.

- For example, if the study reveals that thrivers had all come in contact with an alumni before accepting their offer of acceptance, the admission office may want to work with alumni relations and communications to consider how more alumni-specific content can be made available to accepted students.

Division leaders should be invited to share feedback and ask for more details about what resources might be needed to implement any recommended changes.

Step 3: Present findings to various campus constituencies

Once divisional recommendations have been finalized, the research team should give a final presentation of results to senior campus leadership.

Before presentation to broader constituencies, attention must be given to how these insights will be received. If the characteristics and qualities differ greatly from how the campus sees itself and its students, special focus must be given to preparing for these responses.

Last reviewed July 2020.

From Ross Anderson, T. & Weissbourd, R. (2020). Character assessment in college admission: A guide of best practices with accompanying resources. Retrieved from <https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu>

Access our full suite of character assessment in college admission resources: <http://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/resources-for-colleges/character-assessment-college-admission-guide-overview>

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