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## Small College Goes Big in Research for Recruiting

By Eric Hoover

Lincoln Memorial University is small, but its leaders have big plans. Located in the Appalachian Mountains of eastern Tennessee, the private institution opened the state's first college of osteopathic medicine in 2007. Last year the university established a law school in nearby Knoxville. Pete DeBusk, chairman of the Board of Trustees, has described his hope of making Lincoln Memorial "a little Duke or a little Vanderbilt."

To raise its profile, the university also set a familiar goal: to become more selective, and to enroll more high-achieving students. But how?

That's what Cindy Skaruppa had to determine last year, after becoming vice president for enrollment management and student services. Lincoln Memorial had been struggling to hit its enrollment targets, and Ms. Skaruppa concluded that it needed to overhaul its recruitment strategy. As she considered possible changes, however, she asked a question that enrollment officials have been known to ponder on sleepless nights: "Do we ever really know what's helping us, what's making a difference?"

Ms. Skaruppa and her colleagues sought answers in advanced statistics. Last year they hired QualPro Inc., a Knoxville-based consulting firm, to help design and run a large admissions experiment. Since 1982 the firm has used a statistical method it calls multivariable testing, or MVT, to improve business processes in various industries, including manufacturing and retail.

MVT is one variation on a longstanding strategy for increasing quality and efficiency. It derives from experiments by two British statisticians, R.L. Plackett and J.P. Burman, who developed multifactor tests in the 1940s. Such tests allow companies to simultaneously assess the effectiveness of many factors, saving time and money, say proponents of the method.

Last fall, Lincoln Memorial officials started the experiment, seeking changes they could make right away at no cost. After analyzing enrollment data, QualPro collected more than 100 ideas that administrators, staff, and students had proposed during brainstorming sessions. Many of those suggestions were too expensive or impractical; the most feasible were simple additions or enhancements.

Eventually the university and the company settled on 22 strategies for attracting more applicants. One idea was to call students who had inquired about the university and talk with



*Patrick Murphy-Racey for The Chronicle*

Cindy Skaruppa, vice president for enrollment management and student services at Lincoln Memorial U., helped run an admissions experiment there that tested 22 strategies for attracting more applicants.

them about financial aid. Other ideas included sending prospective students T-shirts listing the top 10 reasons to attend Lincoln Memorial, creating a letter for parents of potential applicants, and sending a DVD about campus life, along with a calendar of events.

Each of those 22 ideas became a factor in the experiment. QualPro then created different combinations (or "recipes") of those factors, which the company tested among 24 groups of high schools in the region. That allowed the university to determine the effectiveness of each variable, measured in terms of applications received.

"The beauty of the design is that it has all kinds of mathematical possibilities," says Charles Holland, QualPro's founder and a member of the university's Board of Trustees. "We end up determining the effects of each and every factor, independent of other factors."

### More Numbers, 'More Science'

For this year's freshman class, Lincoln Memorial saw an 18-percent increase in applications over the previous year. This fall the institution enrolled substantially more students with ACT scores over 24, out of a possible 36.

Although Ms. Skaruppa credits some of the new strategies for those increases, the results of the experiment surprised her. Some ideas that she had pegged as sure-fire strategies did not seem to work.

For instance, the results suggested that the “top 10” T-shirts had deterred applicants. Ditto for faculty members contacting prospective students, letters sent to parents, marketing materials emphasizing the university’s distinctiveness, and a presence on Facebook.

What helped? Recruitment outreach by the students themselves, for one thing. Lincoln Memorial also saw positive effects from more-frequent recruitment visits to high schools, calling students within 24 hours of their first inquiry, and including a letter about financial aid in a follow-up mailing to prospective applicants.

The findings prompted Ms. Skaruppa to further adjust her office’s strategies. This year, for instance, Lincoln Memorial is sending parents of prospective students a link to the Web site of its parent club. In addition, instead of sending them just the one letter, the university is communicating more

frequently with parents, and sending them tickets to athletic events.

“MVT helped us bring more science to the operation,” Ms. Skaruppa says. “It also gave me some credibility. We spend a lot of dollars on postage, but did we need to be spending so much? Now I can answer that question.”

Lincoln Memorial’s experiment affirms that institutional aspirations often go hand in hand with a desire for more-sophisticated ways of analyzing data.

And, as understanding return on investment has become more crucial, a growing number of third parties are eager to get in on that business. QualPro, which had not previously dabbled in higher education, hopes to attract additional clients among colleges.