



A Seven Step Guide To Geographic Expansion of Your Online Programs

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THE ROLE OF GEOGRAPHY IN ONLINE LEARNING

One of the most-touted benefits of online education is that the programs can be completed at any time, from anywhere in the world. Because online programs remove geographic barriers in terms of who can enroll, your institution should ultimately have more opportunity to grow and scale enrollment worldwide.

So why isn't that how it actually works? The [eighth-annual Online College Students report](#), published by Learning House in June 2019, shows a full 67 percent of students live "within 50 miles of a campus or service center of the college where they are studying." That percentage has increased dramatically, up from 42 percent just five years ago. Why?



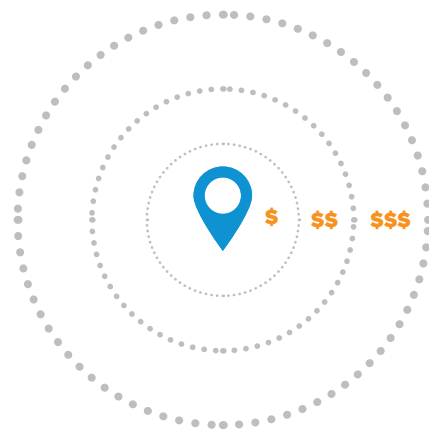
For students, enrolling in an online program at a local college or university can have a variety of benefits, like proximity to on-campus resources and the previous experiences of people they trust. As the author of Online College Students put it, "the growing number of schools offering online programs provides students with more options closer to their home. Local schools have greater visibility among employers and others in the community, which is valuable to students."



For institutions, focusing on local prospects is rewarding, because marketing dollars are often most effective close to home, where the population is already familiar with your brand. As more and more students are enrolling closer to home, however, a geographic expansion strategy becomes even more important than ever.

Your institution may not be able to scale enrollment growth past a certain point by only focusing on only your local market. When you're looking to increase enrollments for your online programs, it may be time to look beyond your local market.

The farther from home you market your programs, though, the more it will cost to recruit students. Often, the idea of this increased cost means that institutions avoid expanding geographically – which in turn may contribute to the high percentage of students who enroll in schools close to home and limit schools' enrollment prospects. Don't let the increased investment scare you away without investigation: in many cases, the return is well worth it.

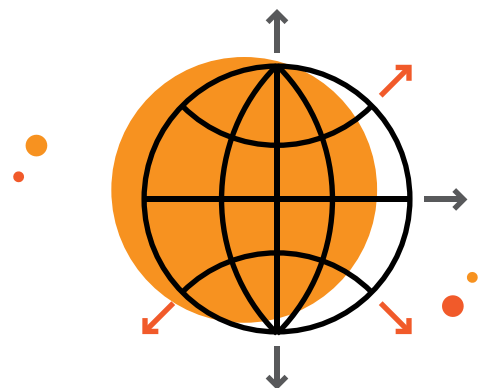


UNDERSTANDING WHEN AND HOW TO EXPAND YOUR GEOGRAPHIC REACH

While expanding geographically can be a logistical and financial challenge, the effort can result in a huge opportunity for continued growth – if, that is, the following three conditions are met: the timing is right, you’re willing to invest, and the expansion is approached thoughtfully and strategically.


Before pushing resources toward the effort, though, it’s important to know whether geographic expansion is an appropriate next step for your online program recruitment, as well as how to manage the process correctly.

The keys to a successful geographic expansion lie in strategic planning, research, testing, optimization, and a realistic expectation of the effort and investment required to expand your footprint. If you’re trying to decide whether geographic expansion is right for your marketing efforts, the experts at Archer advise you to consider the following seven steps.



STEP 1

Step 1 — Define Success >



“Success” means something different to every institution, every year. Before embarking on geographic expansion, set goals to determine how you’ll measure your school’s and your marketing initiative’s success. A goal of aggressive, dramatic enrollment growth vs. a goal of incremental, sustained enrollment will present very differently and require very different approaches. If you don’t begin by defining what you want to achieve and how quickly you want to achieve it – in actionable, measurable terms – you will struggle to evaluate your efforts and progress.



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What gets measured gets improved. Set milestones/timelines for all the high-level goals you establish now, so you can check in with your team: monthly on overall performance and quarterly to evaluate/re-evaluate your strategic approach.

STEP 2

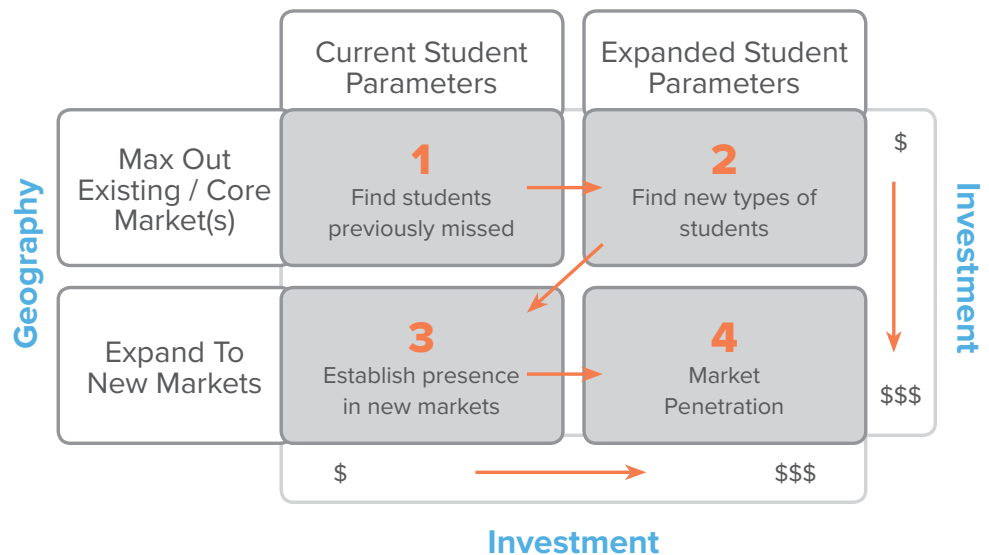
Step 2 — Figure Out What You’re Willing to Invest >



To come up with a baseline, start by evaluating existing performance in your core geographic area. Archer recommends starting with your current costs per enrollment and inflating them to account for additional market investment.

Geographic expansion, like any other business expansion strategy, requires financial investment. Decide how much your institution is willing to commit, how aggressive you are willing to be with your spending, and – most importantly – if your planned investment aligns with the goals you set in Step 1. If what you have available to invest isn’t enough to achieve what you’re after, you likely need to figure out how to get more funding, change your growth expectations, or narrow the geography into which you’re trying to expand.

A framework for geographic expansion of online programs



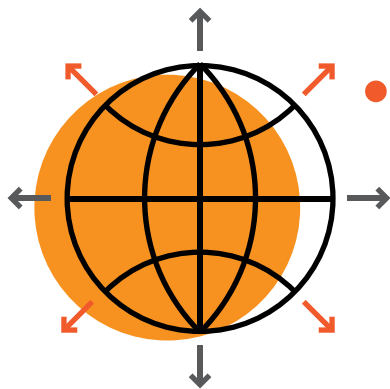
STEP

3

Step 3 — Max Out Your Local Market >

Understand that the low-cost, high-ROI enrollments you're used to are a product of brand familiarity. It's likely you experience this familiarity in your local market based simply on proximity. As you begin to expand geographically, however, your costs will rise and you will need to invest more heavily than you need to locally.

To maximize your spend, make sure you're saturating the local market before investing in expansion. Generally, there are two ways to reach this saturation point: by engaging and re-engaging previously-missed prospects, and by expanding the types of potential students you target.



After estimating how much closer you can get to the goals set in **Step 1** by investing in these two target audiences within your core geography, you'll know how much of the remainder will need to come from geographic expansion. Then, you can begin building budgets (that include brand awareness, not just later-stage conversion-focused efforts) and timelines accordingly.

Determine how saturated your local market is and how much more you could grow from continued local investment by researching Bureau of Labor Statistics' employment statistics in your area, Google search volume for terms related to your program offerings, and census information on your local populations.

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STEP 4

Step 4 — Decide Where To Grow >

Not all geographies are created equal. There are areas where your brand will make much more of an impact than others – you just need to find them. In most cases, we recommend figuring out how to dominate your entire home state before looking farther away.

Then, determine if there are any non-core geographies where your brand already has recognition. Utilize the same tools from **Step 3** (labor statistics, Google search trends and census data) to get an idea of where your program offerings are needed. Also consider where your graduates are located. Are there specific cities/states with a significant concentration of your graduates?


For most institutions, this step is the most difficult and the most critical. Because you are building awareness in a new geography, it will initially cost significantly more to generate inquiries outside your core geography. While these increased costs will likely level off as your expansion efforts continue, you need to make sure there's no guesswork involved in the first phases of your attempted growth. If you feel that you need more help with this research phase, or the insights generated by more sophisticated tools, the experts at Archer are here to help.

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It's important to remember that your conversion rates are not likely to be dramatically impacted as you expand. Your initial cost per inquiry, however, will be higher, so don't be shocked if you see your costs per inquiry (CPIs) rise. Pay attention to your inquiry-to-application and application-to-enrollment rates to ensure you're not experiencing any relative admissions drop-off.

STEP 5

Step 5 – Get to Know the Competition >



Once you get outside your local market, your creative and branding become even more important than they are at home. They are how you will stand out from competition that has a head start on brand recognition in new markets. So do your homework! Understanding how you stack up against local colleges and universities allows you to speak to the new, unique value you add in their markets.

For every market you're expanding into, research the local schools you'll be competing with. Compare their creative approach(es) and research keywords they are bidding on, then make a worksheet of their creative approaches and value propositions by brand and by program. Then compare your own institution and figure out which gaps you can fill. Identify opportunities to speak to your institution's differentiating value propositions. It is imperative to make sure everyone on your marketing team(s) – internally and within any partner agencies you work with – have this information so they can use it to develop and test new creative approaches.



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Determine whether or not you will need to have a physical presence in any of your expansion areas. For example, programs that require hands-on training will require at least a partner presence in every geography. If so, make sure to include that in your investment strategy.

STEP 6

Step 6 — Test, but Be Patient >

Expanding into new markets takes time. While it's important to go into new markets with a “testing” mindset, it's just as important that you don't overreact to what you're seeing and change direction too quickly. It takes time – often a lot of time – to ramp up brand recognition and build a presence in a new market.

If you're used to low costs per enrollment, this can be a shocking paradigm shift. Institutions sometimes find the increased costs hard to accept and end up panicking and pulling out of their efforts too quickly. Know before you get started that it will likely take around 6-12 months' worth of heavy display investment and higher CPIs before you start to see real progress and results.

Don't give up: think of display as the new TV when it comes to brand growth. It is very effective when used consistently, but meaningful results do require substantial investment and commitment. Be consistent in your efforts and stick to your expansion plan.

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Studies [have shown](#) that 27% of consumers search for a brand after seeing its display ad, and that these display-driven searches result in a 59% lift in conversion. However, a Harvard Business School study also found that while display ads have a significant impact on search, the impact is not instant. Usually, a prospect won't search for your brand for [two weeks](#) after seeing a display ad.

STEP



Step 7 – Measure and Adjust >



You've been patient, you've been measuring the results of your efforts, and – congratulations – you're seeing progress ... more progress from some efforts than others. After a few quarters, you can begin to trust the results of what you've been doing and re-align your investments with what's working in each market.



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Don't be afraid to reevaluate your initial goals. You may discover that they were too aggressive, or perhaps not aggressive enough. That's okay! It's smart to adjust expectations for performance as you go, grow, and learn.



Are You Ready to Get Started?

While there is no “one size fits all” approach to expanding your online programs geographically, we’ve found these seven steps to be appropriate for every institution that’s ready to make the leap. Each one of them – defining success, determining your budget, maxing out your local reach, deciding where to grow, evaluating your new competition, testing your approach and adjusting based on results – can be configured to your programs, value propositions and goals.

If you’d like the added assurance of industry expertise behind you as you begin your geographic expansion, the experts at Archer can ensure you stay on track as you do your research, determine your strategy, and measure your performance.

