

PUTTING THEM ON PATH: STRENGTHENING PROGRAM RECRUITMENT

A Theory-Informed Approach to Student Recruitment

Why Recruitment Needs a Different Approach

The demand for a skilled technical workforce continues to accelerate, yet many programs struggle to attract the learners needed to meet this moment. As workforce needs expand and experienced professionals retire, the pipeline of new talent has not kept pace, placing increased pressure on education and training programs to recruit effectively. At the same time, recruitment itself has proven difficult. Employers report persistent challenges filling technical roles, and programs frequently encounter obstacles in generating sustained learner interest despite significant outreach efforts.

Even when programs deploy similar tactics – from industry tours to marketing campaigns to community partnerships – results often vary widely across contexts. What succeeds in one setting may fall short in another, leaving many

teams without clear insight into what truly drives recruitment success.

Our framework responds to this challenge by helping programs move beyond isolated tactics toward a systems-informed understanding of recruitment. By examining the conditions that shape learner decision-making, programs can translate recruitment activity into actionable knowledge, strengthening near-term enrollment while building long-term institutional capability.

Want to Learn More about our recruitment framework? Join our session at NCPN Connect 2026: **Recruitment That Works: A Theory-Informed Approach to Student Attraction**

The Foundation of TRG's Framework

Observations from active programs reveal a consistent pattern: similar recruitment tactics often produce very different results. These variations are rarely random. Instead, they reflect how institutional conditions, program design choices, and external influences interact to shape participant decision-making.

Examining recruitment through this lens shifts the conversation from which tactics were used to why certain efforts gain traction while others stall — creating a clearer foundation for understanding and improving recruitment outcomes. In one case, two project teams pursued a similar objective within the same institutional context. One struggled to recruit participants, while the other met its goals. When viewed through the framework, the difference became clearer. The more successful effort demonstrated stronger engagement across system levels including institutional coordination, communication with families, and the reinforcement of favorable perceptions about the field and program.

A second example revealed how program design signals can shape participant response. In one initiative, scholarship requirements were perceived as burdensome, potentially discouraging participation. In another, fewer post-completion obligations and more proactive engagement with admissions counselors and families aligned the opportunity with participant expectations, supporting stronger recruitment outcomes.

Explore the Research and Strengthen Your Strategy



We Built It, Why Aren't They Coming?

Learn more about the value and process of

taking a theory-driven approach to recruitment, minimizing recruitment tactics, and implementing a more effective overall recruiting strategy.



Working Together

Complement this framework with perspectives from our

Working Together webinar – perfect for program leaders and recruitment practitioners aiming for meaningful engagement.

Scan to explore the research and tools shaping more intentional recruitment.



These cases reveal a critical pattern: recruitment success is shaped less by the presence of specific tactics and more by how effectively the conditions surrounding prospective participants are aligned. When institutional signals, program design, and external influences reinforce one another, efforts gain traction; when they do not, even well-intended strategies may underperform.

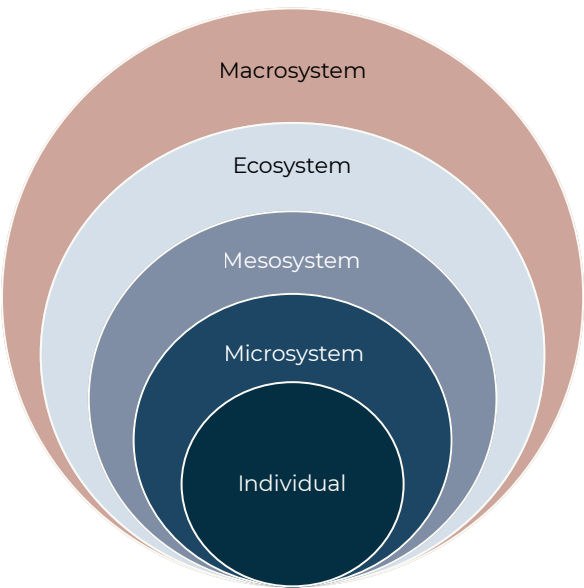
A structured lens makes these dynamics visible, helping programs replace assumption with insight and approach recruitment with greater clarity and more consistent outcomes.

The Foundation of TRG’s Framework

Participant recruitment does not occur in isolation. Decisions to enroll in education and workforce programs are shaped by a dynamic ecosystem of influences – institutional structures, community context, social networks, perceived opportunity, financial realities, and individual aspirations. Our recruitment framework draws on an ecological systems perspective, recognizing that participant behavior is not driven by a single message or outreach strategy, but by the interaction between multiple layers of influence.

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ultimately shape participation. When recruitment strategies focus too narrowly on tactics (increasing emails, expanding advertising, attending more events) programs risk overlooking the structural and contextual factors that ultimately shape participation. An ecological approach reframes recruitment as a system-level challenge. It invites programs to examine not only how they recruit, but also how their design, messaging, and environment signal opportunity to prospective participants. By understanding recruitment within this broader ecosystem, programs can move beyond reactive outreach toward strategies that are intentional, aligned, and sustainable.



- Social Norms** Cultural perceptions surrounding the individual and/or program area or career.
- Institutional/ Policy Context** Environments that indirectly impact on the individual by influencing other systems.
- Peripheral Connections** Entities and processes that interact with the individual but do not have a close interpersonal relationship.
- Interpersonal** Close others who interact first-hand with the individual.
- Individual** The person targeted for recruitment to a program or profession.



The Rucks Group LLC
7887 Washington Village Drive; Suite 250
Dayton, OH 45459

Let's Stay Connected!



+1 (937) 242-7024



www.therucksgroup.com



info@therucksgroup.com



[The Rucks Group LLC](#)



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