

ADMISSIONS RECRUITING AND SOCIAL MEDIA

April 2015

In the following report, Hanover Research reviews the use of social media in admissions recruiting. The report outlines the level of social media use among teens, as well as the use of social media in the college search process. The report also includes potential strategies for developing a social media strategy and utilizing specific social media platforms.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND KEY FINDINGS

INTRODUCTION

In this report, Hanover Research (Hanover) reviews the use of social media in admissions recruiting. The report outlines the use of social media by teens, and explores the role of social media in the recruitment and college search process. The report also identifies potential strategies for developing an effective social media strategy and strategies for using specific social media platforms.

The report comprises three sections:

- **Section I** provides an overview of the role of social media in enrollment management. The section highlights social media use among teens and how social media is used in the college search process.
- **Section II** identifies potential strategies for developing an effective social media strategy for admissions and recruitment, including social listening, crafting relevant content, and web analytics.
- **Section III** discusses specific approaches for utilizing different social media platforms and provides some examples of innovative and effective social media recruitment strategies.

KEY FINDINGS

- **Students increasingly seek more flexible and authentic engagement throughout their college search and admissions process.** A combination of traditional recruitment methods and social media engagement appears to be the most effective recruitment strategy. Sixty-two percent of students prefer to use web-based resources in the college search, and 51 percent of parents feel the same.
- **Students increasingly research colleges through social media and the internet on mobile devices.** In a recent survey, 77 percent of students indicated they visited a college or university website on a mobile device. However, a majority of these students found the experience “just okay” or “challenging.” Additionally, a mere 54 percent of universities have mobile-optimized sites. Thus, there is a need for colleges and universities to ensure websites are mobile-friendly.
- **In a recent survey on students’ social media use, two-thirds of students report that conversations with institutions on social media influence their enrollment decision.** Students are not only interested in interacting with admissions representatives, but also current and other prospective students.
- **Crafting authentic social media content begins with the process of “social listening.”** Noting and tracking the level and style of student engagement with the institution’s social media accounts can reveal patterns of interest and concern, or particularly relevant and effective content.

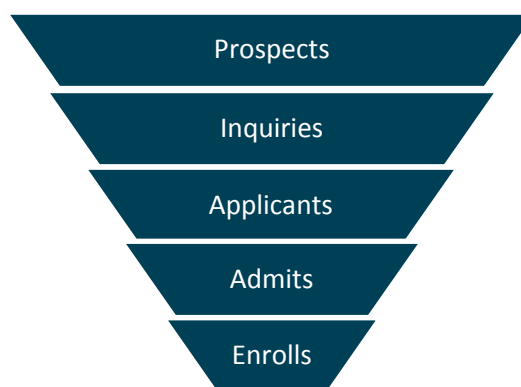
- **An overwhelming majority of students want to receive information from college admissions offices that is specifically tailored to their interests.** Similar to online advertising, students expect colleges and universities to provide individualized information to address their personal questions and concerns.
- **While Facebook is still the most used social media site, teens are increasingly attracted to visual social media platforms.** Instagram and YouTube are currently the fastest growing social media platforms.
- **In the college search, students are most interested in scholarship information (83 percent) and least interested in college rankings (52 percent).** Additionally, students are increasingly interested in financial aid information over information about housing or social events.

SECTION I: OVERVIEW OF SOCIAL MEDIA AND ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT

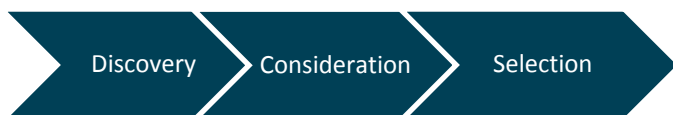
THE CHANGING ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT LANDSCAPE

The metaphor of the funnel is often used to explain the process of enrollment. While there are typically a large number of prospective students, a smaller number inquire for more information, then apply to the school, are admitted, and ultimately enroll. Historically, enrollment planners used this model to manage students at different stages of the timeline and determine the best strategies to interact with students at each level of the admissions process.¹

When university recruitment was primarily conducted through paper mailings, phone calls, and campus visits, this model proved more accurate, but in the age of social networks, email, and virtual tours, this model is no longer as helpful as it once was.² Students find their own information online and seek out engagement with current students and alumni, as well as the admissions office, throughout all the stages.



New enrollment models attempt to illustrate the complexities of the 21st century admissions process. One new model suggests that the college search begins with a “discovery” stage (learning facts and information about the university), then moves to a “consideration” stage (deliberating about the benefits of attending), and a “selection” stage (thinking about the fit of the university).³ This model highlights students’ complex ongoing concerns and motivations and recognizes that the decision process is often more fluid than



the enrollment funnel suggests. This model points to an important change in university admissions; flexibility and authenticity are increasingly essential for attracting incoming students as students take greater control of the college search and recruitment process.

¹ “The Enrollment Funnel: Understanding the Admissions Process.” Enrollment and Retention Management, Stony Brook University. <http://www.stonybrook.edu/ugadmissions/erm/funnel.html>

² “Retooling the Enrollment Funnel: Strategies and Metrics for a New Era.” Noel-Levitz, 2009. https://www.noellellevitz.com/documents/shared/papers_and_research/2009/retoolingtheenrollmentfunnel0109.pdf

³ Supiano. B. “You Know the Funnel, Now Meet the Arrow.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 28, 2010. <http://chronicle.com/blogs/headcount/you-know-the-funnel-now-meet-the-arrow/27642>

SOCIAL MEDIA USE AMONG TEENS

A number of trends define the current social media use of teens (defined as ages 12 to 17):

- Nine out of 10 teens have used social media.⁴
- Fifty percent of teens check social media more than once per day.⁵
- Over half of teens who own smartphones are “cell-mostly” internet users.⁶
- Teen social media users are increasingly creative: over one-quarter of teens post videos online.⁷
- Teens are increasingly interested in visual social media platforms; Instagram is currently the fastest growing social media platform.⁸
- Facebook is still the most frequently used social media platform among teens, but its growth has slowed.⁹

These trends suggest that social media is an integral part of the daily life of many American teens and students growing up in the digital age expect to be contacted by universities through social media. For universities, then, the question is not “whether to use social media, but how many and which ones.”¹⁰

A survey of the social media habits of 7,000 students graduating from high school in 2014 found that students interact with social media platforms in different ways and for different purposes. While Facebook has the most daily users, YouTube experienced the most widespread usage, and Instagram had the most engaged users.¹¹

⁴ Bennett, S. “Tumblr, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram & Snapchat – How Teens Use Social Media.” *SocialTimes*, October 18, 2013. <http://www.adweek.com/socialtimes/teens-social-media/492148>

⁵ Lep, K. “How Teens are Really Using Social Media.” *Edudemic*, July 28, 2014. <http://www.edudemic.com/teens-are-really-using-social-media/>

⁶ Madden, M., A. Lenhart, M. Duggan, S. Cortesi, and U. Gasser. “Teens and Technology 2013.” *Pew Research Center*, March 13, 2013. http://www.pewinternet.org/files/old-media/Files/Reports/2013/PIP_TeensandTechnology2013.pdf

⁷ “Teen Media Use Part 1 – Increasing and On the Move.” Office of Adolescent Health, U.S. Department of Health & Human Services. <http://www.hhs.gov/ash/oah/news/e-updates/eupdate-nov-2013.html>

⁸ Blaszcak-Boxe, A. “Teens Ditch Facebook for New Social Media Favorite.” *CBSNews*. <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/kids-social-media-survey-instagram-twitter-facebook/>

⁹ Madden, M., A. Lenhart, S. Cortesi, U. Gasser, M. Duggan, A. Smith, and M. Beaton. “Teens, Social Media, and Privacy.” *Pew Research Center*, May 21, 2013. <http://www.pewinternet.org/2013/05/21/teens-social-media-and-privacy/>

¹⁰ Jaschik, S. “How Much Social Networking.” *Inside Higher Ed*, August 14, 2012.

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/08/14/study-documents-social-networking-college-websites>

¹¹ “The Best and Worst: Media Habits of the Class of 2014.” *Niche.com*. <https://ink.niche.com/best-worst-media-habits-class-2014/>

Figure 1.1: Social Media Platform Usage

TYPE OF USAGE	SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORM					
	Facebook	YouTube	Instagram	Snapchat	Twitter	LinkedIn
Percent Use Daily	61%	55%	51%	46%	35%	2%
Percent Have Used	87%	97%	66%	65%	55%	8%

Source: Niche

To date, four-year private institutions may be overinvesting in certain social media platforms. For example, a 2012 survey by Noel-Levitz indicates that 96.6 percent of four-year private institutions use Facebook on a monthly basis, whereas only 74.6 percent of high school seniors report monthly use of Facebook. Furthermore, Snapchat appears to be an increasingly popular platform among high school seniors, yet four-year private institutions are not investing in the platform.¹² Figure 1.2 displays the most popular social media platforms used at least once per month by both four-year private institutions admissions representatives and college-bound high school seniors.

Figure 1.2: Social Media Use of Teens and Universities Compared

FOUR-YEAR PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS		HIGH SCHOOL SENIORS	
Platform	Percentage of Users	Platform	Percentage of Users
Facebook	96.6%	Facebook	74.6%
Twitter	83.4%	YouTube	73.1%
YouTube	79.3%	Instagram	49.6%
Instagram	56.6%	Twitter	39.5%
Student blog	42.1%	Snapchat	38.7%

Source: Noel-Levitz

SOCIAL MEDIA USE AND THE COLLEGE SEARCH

Students who use social media regularly are also likely to use social media when researching potential colleges and universities and connecting with admissions representatives. In a 2014 survey conducted by college review website Zinch, students were asked about their use of social media in their college search process.

- Sixty-eight percent of students use social media to research colleges and universities;
- Seventy percent of students found social media to be influential to the college search; and
- Seventy-three percent of students believe colleges and universities should have a social media presence.¹³

¹² "2014 E-Recruiting Practices Report for Four-Year and Two-Year Institutions." *Noel-Levitz*. pg. 4. https://www.noellellevitz.com/documents/gated/Papers_and_Research/2014/2014_E-Recruiting_Practices_Report.pdf?code=542656397201527

¹³ Pratt, A., Dalfonso, JD., and Rogers, G. "Digital, Social, Mobile: The 2014 Social Admissions Report." *Zinch.com*. pg. 12-13. <http://www.uversity.com/downloads/presentations/2014-Social-Admissions-Report-Webinar.pdf>

In addition to being the top sites for social media use overall, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter are also the top three social media sites students visit to learn about colleges and universities.¹⁴ In 2012, 49 percent of students “followed” or “liked” a college on social media platform. In 2013, there was a dramatic increase to 72 percent of students “following” or “liking” colleges on social media platforms.¹⁵ Specifically, 80 percent of students watched videos from the college or university and 44 percent watched videos from students during the college search.¹⁶

Additionally, **86 percent of students found the college website to be very or extremely useful** in their college application and decision process. College review and scholarship sites were useful to 77 percent of students, and ranking sites were useful to 56 percent.¹⁷ Sixty-seven percent of seniors and 59 percent of parents indicated that the college website affects their perception of the college and.¹⁸

More than half of students (62 percent) and parents (51 percent) prefer to use web-based resources in the college search.

Important to note, digital communication is important, but traditional communications are still used and valued as well. According to recent survey results, directed mailings, e-mails, and phone calls are still effective in connecting with both students and parents.¹⁹

ENHANCING ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT WITH SOCIAL MEDIA

Traditional recruitment strategies (such as writing to students, adding inquiries to databases, and sending paper letters, brochures, and emails) are part of a “long-held paradigm that building an inquiry pool is the first stage in the recruitment funnel.” However, students are increasingly “no longer willing to participate in [the] existing paradigm.”²⁰ For example, “stealth students” research universities on their own and only contact the university when they submit an application. They do not appear anywhere in the enrollment funnel until the application stage, opting out of the model altogether.

Yet, social media offers “a huge, open, unstructured environment ready to be the innovative platform for the next recruitment paradigm.”²¹ For example, Stony Brook University Enrollment and Retention Management has embraced multi-dimensional traditional and digital approaches to recruitment that combine “robust communication plans” at each stage

¹⁴ Ibid., pg. 20.

¹⁵ Ibid., pg. 27.

¹⁶ “2015 Social Admissions Report.” *Chegg.com*. pg. 2. <http://edu.chegg.com/infographic-the-2015-social-admissions-report/>

¹⁷ Pratt, “The 2014 Social Admissions Report.” Op cit., pg. 5.

¹⁸ “2014 E-Expectations Report: The Online Preferences of College-Bound High School Seniors and Their Parents.” *Noel-Levitz*. pg. 9. https://www.noellellevitz.com/documents/gated/Papers_and_Research/2014/2014_E-Expectations_Report.pdf?code=32266358201524

¹⁹ Ibid., pg. 1.

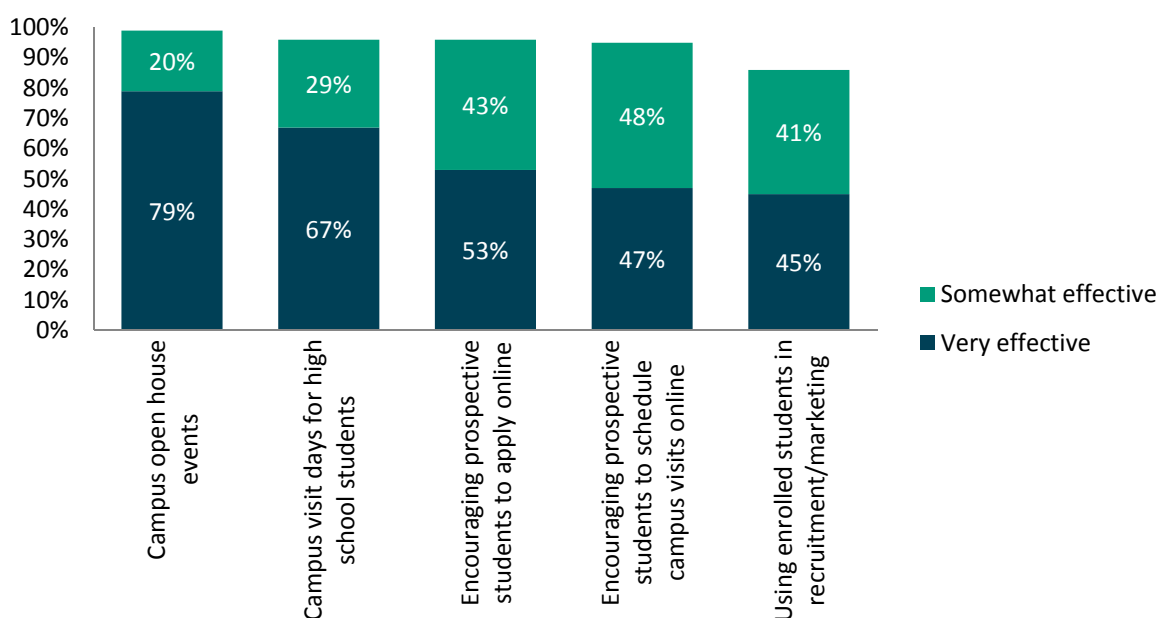
²⁰ Baworowsky, J. “The Next Big Thing in Enrollment Management.” *Chronicle of Higher Education*. March 4, 2013. <http://chronicle.com/blogs/headcount/the-next-big-thing-in-enrollment-management/34131>

²¹ Ibid.

with “greater emphasis on optimizing their websites.” In addition to campus visits and admitted student days, Stony Brook University also offers a self-service menu of resources, including a virtual tour, a mobile app, interactive webinars, student and study abroad blogs, and active Facebook and Twitter accounts.²² This strategy helps the university interact with students at all stages of the enrollment process, whether the students contact the university or not. John Baworowsky, Vice President for Enrollment Management and Student Success at Westminster College, notes that “we can maximize the value of social media as a recruitment tool and better serve students if we are willing to engage students outside the bounds of traditional inquiry communications.”²³

A poll of college enrollment officials found that campus visits are still considered the most effective recruiting strategy, but that online engagement helped facilitate these visits. The poll indicated that a combination of in-person and online efforts proved effective. Figure 1.3 displays the top five most effective recruiting practices for four-year private institutions according to college admissions officials.²⁴

Figure 1.3 Effective Recruiting Practices at Four-Year Private Institutions



Source: Noel-Levitz

Universities can successfully supplement traditional strategies with creative social media campaigns. For example, Dominican University designed their traditional paper brochures to

²² “The Enrollment Funnel: Understanding the Admissions Process.” Enrollment and Retention Management, Stony Brook University. <http://www.stonybrook.edu/ugadmissions/erm/funnel.html>

²³ Baworowsky, Op cit.

²⁴ Table taken verbatim from: Longenecker, F. “Top 5 practices for marketing and student recruitment, as rated by college admissions officials in a recent poll.” *Ruffalo Noel Levitz*, August 12, 2013. <http://blog.noellevitz.com/2013/08/12/top-5-practices-marketing-student-recruitment-rated-college-admissions-officials-spring-2013/>

include a die cut of a “D” logo that students could remove. Prospective students were invited to photograph the “D” alongside something they considered dynamic, which reflected Dominican University’s “Dominican Dynamic” messaging campaign. Students were then invited to upload the photos to Dominican University’s Facebook page, which created an online space for prospective students to connect with each other.²⁵

²⁵ Baworowsky, Op cit.

SECTION II: STRATEGIES FOR SOCIAL MEDIA USE

CREATING A STRATEGY FOR SOCIAL MEDIA USE

Less than half of four-year private institutions have a clear strategic plan to guide social media and website development.²⁶ Social media and website development may seem straightforward, but effective content, strategic posting, and meaningful social media interactions require strategic planning and organization.²⁷

Designated social media strategy staff is an essential component of an effective social media strategy. Multiple people may contribute content across different social media platforms within an admissions department, or one person may be responsible for streamlining the message across all platforms. At some schools, social media development may be a part-time responsibility for one (or more) employee, or there can be teams managing all social media across the university. For example, Western Kentucky University (WKU) centralizes all social media and websites in the Office of Creative Web Services. The office oversees content creation and management in order to create a consistent message and tone for WKU sites.²⁸ Figure 2.1 displays the results of a 2014 survey about staff allocation for social media development among four-year private institutions.²⁹

Does your institution have a strategic plan for website and social media development?

Yes	48.3%
No	35.2%
I don't know	16.6%

Figure 2.1: Time Allocation for Social Media Development

WEBSITE STAFF TIME ALLOCATIONS	PERCENTAGE OF FOUR-YEAR PRIVATE INSTITUTIONS
This is a part-time responsibility for one person.	48.1%
This is a part-time responsibility for two or more people.	32.6%
This is a dedicated role that receives one person's full-time attention.	11.1%
This is a dedicated role that receives two or more people's full-time attention.	8.1%

Source: Noel-Levitz

CRAFTING QUALITY CONTENT

Quality content may be the most essential component of an effective social media recruitment strategy. According to a 2014 survey, **only 4 in 10 students find the content on an institution's social media sites relevant.** Many prospective students were uninterested

²⁶ "2014 E-Recruiting Practices." Op cit., pg. 8.

²⁷ "2014 E-Expectations Report: The Online Preferences of College-Bound High School Seniors and Their Parents." Op cit.

²⁸ "WKU Creative Web Services." Western Kentucky University. <http://www.wku.edu/web/services/sample.php>

²⁹ "2014 E-Recruiting Practices." Op cit., pg. 22.

in information that was clearly tailored to upper-classmen or advertised events or deadlines that were not relevant to them.³⁰

Higher education content professionals from the 2015 Higher Ed Content Conference recommend that **content development be flexible, focused, deliberate, and collaborative**. They suggest a combination of the following strategies:³¹

- Brainstorm with a team;
- Know your audience;
- Make it easy for people to share stories;
- Take time to create a strategic plan;
- Fact check the content;
- Challenge yourself to try new strategies; and
- Be flexible and kiss perfection goodbye.

Media savvy students increasingly look for authentic engagement, tailored individual advertising, and relevant information from prospective schools, instead of generic mass mailings.

Authentic Engagement

Students look for authentic content and engagement from college admissions professionals, current students, academic departments, and other prospective students. Students increasingly manage their own admissions process and seek information about schools outside of the enrollment funnel or other admissions paradigms. In response, institutions should not seek to control the process by maintaining traditional marketing content, but should engage with and respond to students in a reciprocal fashion. In fact, **two-thirds of students indicate that conversations with institutions on social media influence their enrollment decision.**³² Students see interactions like this as more authentic, with schools focusing on their inquiries directly, rather than offering a generic message. Moreover, 62 percent of students expect to receive an answer from a college representative within 24 hours.³³

Who do students want to engage with during the college search?

Current Students - 74%
Other Admitted Students - 72%
Admissions Counselors - 69%

³⁰ Pratt, "The 2014 Social Admissions Report." Op cit., pg. 15.

³¹ Joly, K. "Content Strategy: 12 useful tips for #highered content professionals." *Collegewebeditor*, March 23, 2015. <http://collegewebeditor.com/blog/index.php/archives/2015/03/23/content-strategy-12-useful-tips-for-highered-content-professionals/>

³² Pratt, "The 2014 Social Admissions Report." Op cit., pg. 19.

³³ "2015 Social Admissions Report." Op cit.

Students find value in interacting with a variety of people at an institution. Although admissions counselors and academic staff can answer questions about majors, requirements, and tuition, current students can speak to the social aspects of the institution and offer inside information on balancing activities or finding ways to get involved.³⁴

Tailored Individual Advertising

Students seek information that is most relevant to them. In fact, **91 percent of students want to receive information from college admissions offices that is specifically tailored to them.**³⁵ Tim Copeland, a higher education marketer, compares the strategies of consumer companies with higher education institutions. He notes, “Keenly aware that consumers are shifting their behavior to avoid mass marketing, companies are shifting their strategies to connect one-to-one.”³⁶ Students who are used to tailored online advertisements may expect the same from higher education marketing.

One way to tailor information is to encourage students to fill out online inquiry forms detailing their intended major or interest in particular sports, clubs, or activities. The inquiry forms, which can be available on the website and also accessible on a mobile device, allow institutions to determine the type of information that will be most relevant for the student (e.g. calendars of music auditions, news articles about the debate team, etc.). These forms also signal that the student gives the institution permission to contact them further. This prevents frustration over mass mail and e-mail blasts.³⁷

Another way to customize marketing content is to write fictional student personas and “create content that is targeted at individuals at the multiple entry points of your recruitment funnel.” Blog posts and social media updates can be written with an ideal student in mind. It is also helpful to curate information that may be useful to the type of student the institution is looking to attract and also tailor the information to prospective students that may be at different points in the college search process.³⁸

Use student inquiries or fictionalized personas to craft content that is tailored to specific students.

Interacting with students to determine their individual needs also helps institutions create more effective recruitment strategies. More clearly understanding the needs of students

³⁴ Pratt, “The 2014 Social Admissions Report.” Op cit., pg. 26.

³⁵ “2015 Social Admissions Report.” Op cit.

³⁶ Copeland, T. “The Hottest Internet Trend and College Stealth Applicants.” *Higher Education Marketing and Enrollment Management*. June 6, 2011. <http://www.enrollmentmarketing.org/highereducation/2011/06/the-hottest-internet-trend-and-college-stealth-applicants.html>

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Duncan, S. “Strategies for Creating High Quality Content for Lead Generation in Higher Ed.” *Higher Education Marketing*. September 17, 2012. <http://www.higher-education-marketing.com/blog/strategies-creating-quality-content-lead-generation-higher-ed>

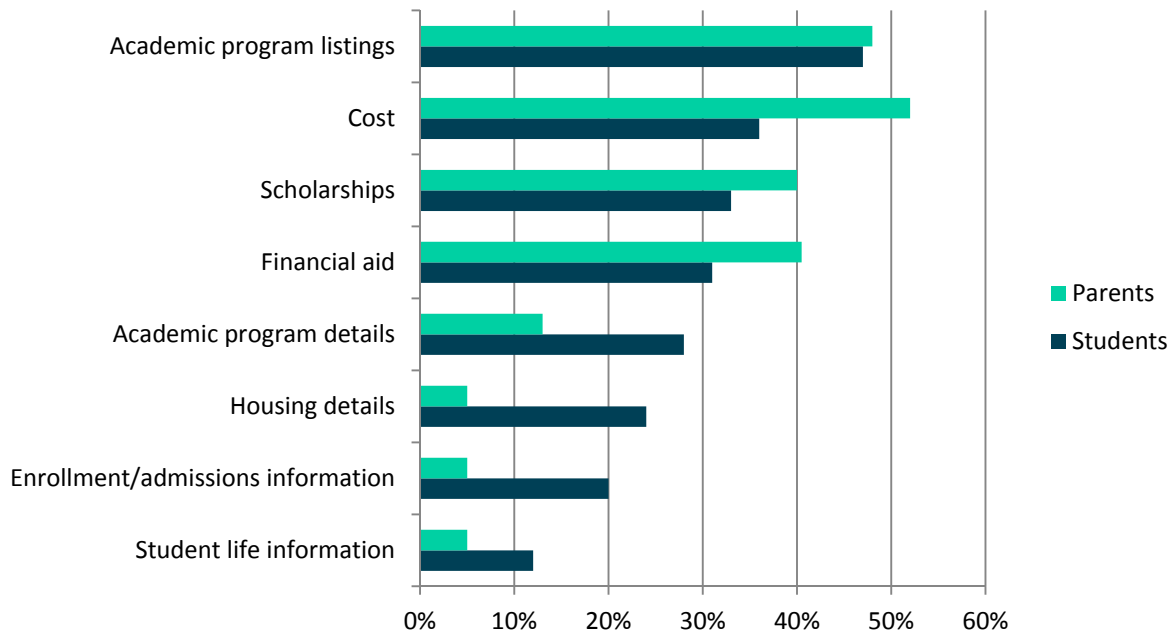
“yields essential behavioral information that will impact...planning, budgeting, and resource allocation processes.”³⁹

Relevant Information

While students may be excited about extra-curricular activities and social events, recent surveys show that students are most interested in financial aid when making a final university enrollment decision. A 2015 survey suggests that **students are most interested in scholarship information (83 percent) and least interested in college rankings (52 percent)** when searching for a college or university.⁴⁰

Additionally, a survey of high school seniors and their parents asked for participants’ top three priorities when searching a college or university website. Both students and parents prioritized information about majors, tuition costs, and scholarships over housing and student life information. Figure 2.2 presents details about students’ and parents’ priorities in the college search process.⁴¹

Figure 2.2 Student and Parent Information Priorities for the College Search



Source: Noel-Levitz

³⁹ Hoey, J. and A. Parenti. “Tips for Innovating Responsibly in Enrollment Management.” *Academic Impressions*, October 7, 2014. <http://www.academicimpressions.com/news/tips-innovating-responsibly-enrollment-management>

⁴⁰ “2015 Social Admissions Report.” Op cit.

⁴¹ “2014 E-Expectations.” Op cit., pg. 10.

SOCIAL LISTENING

Another key component of creating an effective social media strategy is the process of social listening. **Before crafting relevant content, admissions representatives should identify significant conversations, concerns, or questions by “listening” to prospective student voices on social media.** Rod Yabut, the interactive marketing manager at the University of Southern California notes, “The premise behind listening in on the conversation around your school is to tap into trending topics your social channels, assess if it fits any of your key communication initiatives, test it in small content batches to see if there's receptivity, and depending on response, extend your university brand narrative by featuring it elsewhere.”⁴²

Social listening involves tracking the audience's level and style of engagement (e.g. which posts get the most “likes” versus the most thoughtful comments). Patterns of engagement emerge over time and these patterns can help an admissions office identify what content to feature, and on which platform. Yabut presents five questions to note while “listening” to the effectiveness of certain content:⁴³

- Will this social content carry the same impact on another communication platform?
- Does it fit any of our communication priorities?
- What angles can we use to carry our communication priorities within the content?
- What media types will enhance the story?
- Target audiences as a whole aside, will the content topic resonate on an individual level?

The University of Southern California (USC) admissions office utilized social listening to determine that campus housing was a recurring theme in many prospective students' questions. In response, USC created a YouTube series entitled “USC Dorms” that profiled distinctive dorm rooms around campus. The videos feature student-guided tours of dorm rooms and an explanation of the different housing features. Viewers were then invited to vote on the dorm rooms they liked best, which created additional opportunities for sharing, engagement, and page views.⁴⁴

WEB ANALYTICS

Web analytics is “the measurement collection, analysis, and reporting of internet data for the purposes of understanding and optimizing web usage.” This data can be used to track

⁴² Yabut, R. “Social Listening as Part of Content Creation for Higher Education.” *LinkedIn*, October 3, 2014. <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/20141003231338-17093854-social-listening-as-part-of-content-creation-for-higher-education>

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Foulger, M. “Higher Education Success Stories: How 3 Leading Universities Use Social Media.” *Hootsuite*. <http://blog.hootsuite.com/higher-education-success-stories-3-leading-universities/>

the outcomes of the online activities of prospective students.⁴⁵ Web analytics can help institutions identify the content that deserves increased resources, and the content that is least relevant.

For example, when the Pennsylvania State University Manager of Web Strategy and User Experience, Shelby Thayer, ran web analytics on the Penn State World Campus website, she found that “tuition” was the top search term for the site, even though a link to tuition was featured prominently on the front page of the website. After further research she determined that prospective students were searching for tuition for specific majors, consequently, they moved tuition information to multiple pages. This demonstrates how institutions can optimize their website even further reviewing the search terms used in the internal site search feature.⁴⁶

Hamilton College, Wayne State University, and Belmont University all utilized web analytics for admissions, audience tracking, and public relations. Figure 2.3 displays the type of data that was collected, the changes made to the website, and the result of the data-based changes.⁴⁷

Figure 2.3 How Three Colleges Used Analytics to Improve Admissions

COLLEGE	DATA USED	CHANGES IN SITE	RESULT
Hamilton College	Searches for financial-aid information surpassed the number of queries about admissions during financial crisis of 2008	A letter to parents from the president about financial aid was placed front and center on the main admissions page	Searches for aid information decreased, and admissions queries rebounded
Wayne State University	Number of prospective students going from college home page to admissions page	Different designs of home page "Apply" buttons tested to see which one drove more traffic to admissions	The most effective button increased traffic to the main admissions pages by 62%
Belmont University	How often prospective students respond to e-mails, and Web traffic stemming from campus visit invitations	Reminders sent to prospective students based on traffic patterns; difficult-to-use links on Web site were modified	A large increase in campus visits and applications, in part because of personalized, data-driven communications

Source: Chronicle of Higher Education⁴⁸

Web analytics do pose some challenges, as well, which:⁴⁹

- Data can be misused;

⁴⁵ Joly, K. "Embracing Web Analytics." *University Business*. June 2010.

<http://www.universitybusiness.com/article/embracing-web-analytics>

⁴⁶ Thayer, S. "Web Analytics and a Website Redesign." *Trending Upward*. January 31, 2012.

<http://www.trendingupward.net/>

⁴⁷ Keller, J. "Colleges Rehab Their Websites for Major Payoffs." *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. April 17, 2011.

<http://chronicle.com/article/Colleges-Rehab-Their-Web-Sites/127170/>

⁴⁸ Verbatim from Keller, Op Cit.

⁴⁹ Keller, Op cit.

- Collecting data can be difficult when multiple departments control the website; and
- Many higher education goals (such as improving reputation) are not easily measure.

Search Engine Optimization

Search Engine Optimization (SEO) is another important component for elevating an electronic presence. According to a 2011 report from ThinkEducation, 84 percent “of all queries about education begin not with a school’s name but with keywords.”⁵⁰ Consequently, institutions should identify key descriptors of their institution to attract new online users. For example, optimizing terms such as “regional,” “research,” “liberal arts,” or “rural,” can help draw in potential students that would be a good fit for the school.

⁵⁰ Barnes, K. “How Colleges and Universities Can Increase Enrollment with Hyperlocal Marketing.” *Hobsons Education Blog*. March 7, 2014. <http://www.hobsons.com/blog/blog-detail/how-colleges-and-universities-can-increase-enrollment-with-hyperlocal-marke>

SECTION III: UTILIZING SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

In 2012, 92 of the top 100 colleges and universities (as ranked by *U.S. News and World Report*) linked to social media platforms on their websites.⁵¹ These institutions used an average of 3.7 different sites to connect with students. Facebook was the most frequently used site, followed by Twitter and YouTube.⁵² However, while these are the sites most used by universities, they do not necessarily represent the preferred social media sites of students and prospective students, or the most effective sites on which to engage with students about the college search.

It is important for institutions to identify the social media platforms that will be the most effective for their particular message, community, and prospective student base.

Social Media Sites Used by Top 100 Colleges

Facebook	91
Twitter	88
YouTube	79
iTunes	47
Flickr	31
LinkedIn	18
Foursquare	9
Other	6

MOBILE DEVICES

Mobile devices (smartphones and tablets) are increasingly displacing the computer as the preferred tool for web-surfing, social networking, and digital communication. A 2013 Pew Research Center study reported that 37 percent of teens (ages 12-17) own a smartphone, and a 2013 Nielson study found that somewhere between 70 percent 79 percent of young adults (ages 18-24) own a smartphone.⁵³ Moreover, the Pew Research Center found that half of the teens that own a smartphone are “cell-mostly” internet users.⁵⁴

Additionally, a 2014 survey estimates that 97 percent of students have visited a college or university website on a mobile device.⁵⁵ Almost two-thirds rated the experience “just okay” or “challenging.”⁵⁶ This suggests that institutions need to focus on providing websites that can be easily accessed and navigated on both a computer and a mobile device. Although 77 percent of students visit a university website on a mobile device, **only 54 percent of universities have mobile-optimized sites.**⁵⁷

The convenience and accessibility of a mobile device also encourages students (and parents) to complete inquiry forms, campus visit requests, and other forms online. Figure 3.1 outlines the most likely forms to be completed on a mobile device.⁵⁸

⁵¹ Jaschik, Op cit.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ [1] Madden, “Teens and Technology 2013.” Op cit. [2] “Ring the Bells: More Smartphones in Students’ Hands Ahead of Back-to-School Season.” *Nielson.com*. October 29, 2013.
<http://www.nielson.com/us/en/insights/news/2013/ring-the-bells-more-smartphones-in-students-hands-ahead-of-back.html>

⁵⁴ Madden, “Teens and Technology 2013.” Op cit.

⁵⁵ [1] “2014 E-Recruiting Practices.” Op cit., pg. 3. [2] Pratt, “The 2014 Social Admissions Report.” Op cit., pg. 31.

⁵⁶ Ibid., pg. 31.

⁵⁷ “2014 E-Recruiting Practices.” Op cit., pg. 3.

⁵⁸ “2014 E-Expectations Report.” Op cit., pg. 8.

Figure 3.1: Completing Forms on a Mobile Device

FORM	HAVE COMPLETED		WOULD COMPLETE	
	2014 Seniors	Parents	2014 Seniors	Parents
Information Request	41%	27%	53%	28%
Campus visit request	35%	44%	55%	30%
Open house registration	29%	27%	57%	31%
Apply for enrollment	40%	27%	33%	27%
Register for a class	17%	19%	52%	30%
Use cost calculator	47%	29%	53%	74%
Estimate scholarships	47%	29%	52%	24%
Register for online event	19%	19%	40%	24%

Source: Noel-Levitz

SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS

LIVE CHATS

Due to the high volume of prospective students each year, some institutions are exploring additional options for interacting with students in real time, such as offering live online conversations and panels for students. These live chats with admissions representatives provide an opportunity for a large number of students to receive immediate answers to questions about the admissions process and the university, and offer a connection for students who may be unable to make a visit to campus.

The University of Colorado-Boulder offers group chats to prospective students, where three admissions counselors field questions about admissions, housing, financial aid, and on-campus dining. For example, one two-day chat attracted 250 students and parents. The University of Colorado-Boulder finds this platform especially useful for international students who are working around difficult time zones.⁵⁹

FACEBOOK

Although Facebook is not the most popular social media site among teens, the platform is still useful for recruitment efforts. Due to the ubiquity of the site, there are many ways to utilize this platform in innovative ways. Higher education marketer Kathleen Cross recommends six strategies for utilizing the features of Facebook:⁶⁰

- Add an inquiry form
- Send engaging newsletters through the newsletter application

⁵⁹ Hoover, E. "Chatting One-on-One with 20,000 Applicants?" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. May 30, 2013. <http://chronicle.com/blogs/headcount/chatting-one-on-one-with-20000-applicants/35083>

⁶⁰ Cross, K. "Six Great New Ways You Could Be Using Facebook for Student Recruitment." *Kelmscott Communications*. <http://www.kelmscottcommunications.com/case-study/white-paper-six-great-new-ways-you-could-be-using-facebook-student-recruitment>

- Attract more students to “like” your site by creating “likes-only” pages
- Use free text and voicemail features to contact prospective students
- Embed a mini-site for particular events
- Open a virtual campus store

Facebook also allows for the creation of “groups” and 63 percent of students say they would join a special group for admitted students.⁶¹ These groups allow students to connect, find roommates, ask and answer questions, and become familiar with the school before arriving on campus in the fall.

YOUTUBE

Visual sites are the fastest growing social media sites. Videos (a source that stimulates both the audio and visual parts of the brain) can increase a person’s understanding of a subject by 74 percent.⁶² This suggests that institutions can utilize YouTube (or other video sites, such as Vimeo) to engage students more fully. Mike Richwalsky, a marketing director at John Carroll University, offers four suggestions for using video to attract students.⁶³

- **Create a Vine** – use six-second video snippets to introduce the university and answer questions.
- **Explain complicated information** – identify the most complex content on the site and provide a video to explain the concepts more fully.
- **Offer a free video prep course**– offering free college application courses on Udemy or Coursera with the institution brand can increase traffic to the institution website.
- **Optimize the videos for traffic** – include multiple key words to attract the greatest number of views, perhaps offering a summary transcript of the video content in the comments.

INSTAGRAM

Another visual platform, Instagram, is the fastest growing social media site for teens. Brendan Schneider, a social media marketer for a private school, outlines four steps that help boost the effectiveness of his school’s Instagram account. He notes, “it is important to us that we build an audience that’s interested in hearing—or in this case seeing—our school’s story.” The four steps are:⁶⁴

⁶¹ Pratt, “The 2014 Social Admissions Report.” Op cit., pg. 23.

⁶² Angus, A. “Why a Video Elevator Pitch Will Improve Your Market Share.” *Forbes*. October 10, 2013.
<http://www.forbes.com/sites/theyec/2013/10/10/why-a-video-elevator-pitch-will-improve-your-market-share/>

⁶³ Richwalsky, M. “How Higher Education Marketers Can Use Videos.” *HighEdWebTech*. February 26, 2015.
<http://highedwebtech.com/2015/02/26/higher-education-marketers-can-use-videos/>

⁶⁴ Schneider, B. “4 Ways to Gain Followers for Your School on Instagram.” *schneiderB.com*
<http://www.schneiderb.com/4-ways-to-gain-followers-for-your-school-on-instagram/>

- **Be smart about who you follow** – align engagement with the purpose of the account.
- **Let students run the Instagram account** – much like blogging, allotted time periods where students run the account can give a candid first-hand look at the institution.
- **Post regularly** – plan ahead and make sure to update photos regularly.
- **Regram photos** – post photos from other accounts to raise awareness about your institution.

TWITTER

Twitter can be used by college admissions offices as a forum to field questions or direct inquiries, to provide links to other content, or to advertise the school. According to recent survey data, 37 percent of high school seniors use Twitter to follow a college; this is a 12 percentage point increase from the previous year.⁶⁵ The short 140 character limit on Twitter allows institutions to update information often, without a risk of inundating students with too much information. In addition, Twitter offers an opportunity for effective prospective student engagement and can be used to connect students with a variety of voices at the institution. The Appendix offers two sample Twitter conversations that illustrate effective uses of Twitter in the college search process.

Almost one-third of students searched for college information using specific hashtags.⁶⁶ Hashtags group certain information or connect students around different activities or topics. For example, Oberlin Admissions (@ObieAdmissions) used the hashtag #oberlin4me when they announced that decision letters had been mailed for the class of 2019. Students then tweeted various celebratory tweets using this hashtag which can be found by searching the hashtag on Twitter. This hashtag connected accepted students and further advertised the Oberlin College brand.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ "2014 E-Expectations Report." Op cit.

⁶⁶ Pratt, "The 2014 Social Admissions Report." Op cit., pg. 21.

⁶⁷ "Results for #oberlin4me." *Twitter.com* <https://twitter.com/search?f=realtime&q=%23oberlin4me&src=tyah>

APPENDIX

The following Twitter conversations represent examples of actual interactions between prospective students and university admissions offices. These conversations illustrate effective use of social media and authentic online engagement.

Sample Twitter Conversation:⁶⁸

@Student: "I swear if Bradley University emails me one more time"

@Bradley: "You'll love us even more?!"

@Student: "that made my day, but no, sorry, I don't think it'll work out. But it's not you, it's me"

@Bradley: "Worth a try, but to help, simply click "unsubscribe" at the bottom of the emails. It'll make our break-up official. *sigh*"

@Student: "you're taking this very well"

@Bradley: "The pint of @benandjerry helped..."

Sample Twitter Conversation:⁶⁹

This conversation begins with a prospective student, who is ultimately connected with Twitter accounts for Lehigh University, Lehigh University admissions, the ghost of a Lehigh founder, the Lehigh marching band, two journalism professors, a current Lehigh student, and a local restaurant.

March 2014

Student: "Oh my God. I got into Lehigh. What. What. What."

"Stoked at the prospects of joining the @marching97."

Marching97: "@student so are we! Hope to see you at candidates day! #Lehigh2018 #psyche"

Student: "I need @LafCol to convince me why I shouldn't go to @LehighU and vice versa."

LehighU: "Hmm...#Lehigh over LafCol...how to convince...let me throw to this guy -> AsaPackersGhost. And you too, @lehighadmission GO!"

Lehighadmission: "@LehighU @student @AsaPackersGhost UG research, interdisciplinary, fac mentors, gorge campus, opps to be a leader, 250 clubs #enoughsaid"

AsaPackersGhost: "@student, I won't belabor you with another recitation of brochure bullet points./There's a whole world out there that needs people with vision, talent and

⁶⁸ Pratt, "The 2014 Social Admissions Report." Op cit., pg. 14.

⁶⁹ Weaver, L. "How one student used Twitter to figure out which college was right for her." *USA Today*. February 16, 2015. <http://college.usatoday.com/2015/02/16/how-one-student-used-twitter-to-figure-out-which-college-was-right-for-her/>

most importantly tenacity./And of course if you want to be in a “real” marching band, I have no idea why you’d even consider that other place./Fact is, Lehigh is the stronger school with more powerful network and a challenging path to a better future. You want that?/Lehigh and that other place may be in the same state, but we’re definitely not on the same level.”

Student: “@lehighadmissioni @LehighU @AsaPackersGhost can you tell me more about your Journalism department?”

Prof. Jeremy Littau: “@student But as they say on Reddit, ask me anything.”

Student: “@JeremyLittau Do you have any opinions on a Journalism/Global Studies double-major or GS minor?”

Prof. Jeremy Littau: “@student Our journalism dept chair @JackLule is rooted in global. Ran their major for several years. He’d be a great guide for you.”

Prof. Jack Lule: “@JeremyLittau Asking questions via Twitter. Interested in global studies and Journalism. Neither at Laf. @student needs to be @lehigh”

Student2: “@student @lehighadmission @LehighU @AsaPackersGhost I’m a freshman journalism major! Message me if you have questions!”

Prof. Jeremy Littau: “@student If you end up coming, email me ----- and I’ll make sure you’re placed in my intro Media & Society course.”

Student: “@JeremyLittau I will definitely do so. I’ve heard good things in my brief interactions with some freshman students.”

Prof. Jeremy Littau: “@student Great to hear, and I hope you’ll join us! Congratulations on your acceptance.”

The Goose Deli: “@student glad you enjoyed your visit ☺ as you know @LehighU..has @thegoosemen & @lafcol doesn’t! I’m just saying ☺ ...see you in August!”

April 2014

Student: “I can hardly believe it’s real but #lehigh18 here I come.”

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