How Students (Really) Decide: Class of 2015

Using lessons of today to inform your strategy tomorrow...

By Gil Rogers

> "When you are born into this type of world, it is hard to be expected to utilize traditional mediums to perform active research; particularly when digital sources are oftentimes so quick to change and provide fresh and relevant content."

Building recruitment and marketing plans to attract today's college-bound students goes beyond the tactics of leveraging social media or contact list acquisition. In fact, enrollment managers and admission officers must seek to have a true understanding of Generations X and Y and how they go about making decisions in today's digital and mobile-first world.

Understanding Millennials and the "iGeneration" goes beyond knowing what websites they use or the latest messaging app that's all the rage. It takes looking at where they are coming from with respect to digital resources and how they leverage (or don't leverage) them in their daily lives—specifically their college searches. Additionally, in a world driven by cost and ROI, it would be irresponsible to not acknowledge the role and influence their parents have, as many are paying the full bill.

Finally, before building a recruitment plan, it is important to understand key influencers of students at each phase of their college search, specifically how they decide to add schools to their consideration list, how they decide where to apply, and ultimately where they decide to enroll.

UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN DIGITAL AND SOCIAL

Students use online tools and apps for vastly different purposes throughout their college searches, while enrollment marketing professionals seem to combine all online activities into one segment of their recruitment strategy. When building an enrollment recruitment plan, it's critical to segment where and how students find, request information from, and evaluate schools using specific tools.

DIGITAL TOOLS

While there are dozens of college search aggregators on the web, only a handful of them are identified by students as truly useful. These sites can be broken down into three segments including:

- Student review sites that provide insight into the campus experience (Chegg, Niche, YOUniversityTV)
- Informational sites to review general things like cost and application requirements side-by-side (College Navigator, myCollegeOptions, *U.S. News & World Report*)
- Specialized resource sites that empower students to perform specific activities like contact coaches or submit required documents (beRecruited, Parchment)

In the recent *Social Admissions Report*, an annual study published earlier this year by Chegg, nearly 90 percent of students are using one of the sites

listed above to perform college research, with nearly 75 percent of them using them for basic admission information. When students are in discovery mode they gravitate to online tools that help them shop, compare, and evaluate schools side-by-side.

College review and scholarship sites are the most useful resource for college information next to college and university websites themselves, with 73 percent of students indicating they are very to extremely useful.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media sites are not going anywhere anytime soon, but their place in an overall recruitment plan continues to change.

One of the biggest areas of conversation with respect to recruitment continues to be Facebook. While recent data indicate active use by college-bound students continues to decline (21 percent decrease in once-a-day or more visits from 2013–14), use of the platform for college research, particularly at the decision phase, continues to increase (growing 58–67 percent during 2012–14). Facebook is far from dead. Meanwhile, sites like LinkedIn are jumping into the fray and getting a lot of attention. (Still, nearly 90 percent of students have never once used LinkedIn for college information).

Another great example is Instagram, which, because of its visual and mobile-first nature, continues to grow in both overall use (75 percent increase from 2013–14) and when specifically used for college information (67 percent increase during the same time). Partnered with the fact that nearly 40 percent of students search or tweet specific hashtags, it is clear that mobile and visual platforms are going to be the preferred social channels for students for the foreseeable future.

While it can be easy to quickly migrate to the "next big social network," it's important to differentiate between a "shiny new toy" and a truly strategic tool.

MESSAGING APPS

When thinking about messaging apps like Yik Yak and WhatsApp, it's important to think about mobile responsiveness in general before talking about any one app or tool. While two in five students would download an app to communicate with college reps; they are not going to do so on the mainstream messaging apps they use today. And more importantly, if your general institution website is not mobile friendly and responsive in design, you will not get high enough on a student's list for it to matter.

Three out of five students access college sites on a mobile device at least weekly, and most indicate the experience they are getting could be better with nearly 75 percent rating the experience simply "OK" or worse, "challenging."

DECIDING TO ADD SCHOOLS TO THEIR LISTS

Today's college-bound students were born when Google began and in grade school when Facebook really took off. They are accustomed to having the world's information at their fingertips on devices that can fit in their pockets. When you are born into this type of world it is hard to be expected to utilize traditional mediums to perform active research; particularly when digital sources are oftentimes so quick to change and provide fresh and relevant content.

Also known as the "made to order" generation, today's students prefer information be fast and personalized. More than 60 percent of students indicate a desire to receive a response from admission within 24 hours when requesting information and more than 90 percent of those students prefer that information be tailored specifically to them.

Oftentimes the difference between being on a student's list and off of it is the speediness of your response and how personalized that response is. While many institutions are still focused on mass marketing to the top of their funnel, strategic institutions are moving to a more "middle of the funnel" strategy focused on engaging undecided students that have demonstrated interest.

DECIDING WHERE TO APPLY

According to a recent online poll of more than 500 college-bound students, 56 percent of students applied to at least one college or university because someone else wanted them to. The key influencer was family, with nearly 60 percent of students indicating their parents influenced where they applied.

One area of interesting note is the continued changing role of the guidance counselor in a student's decision where to apply. In 2014 about 40 percent of students indicated guidance/college counselors influenced their decision; while in 2015 that number decreased to less than 30 percent.

Above parents, students said that visiting campus influenced their decision where to apply (75 percent of students indicated the campus visit being influential); meanwhile, direct-to-student outreach at their high school seems to have lost some of its luster over the years. Only one-third of students indicated a college rep visiting their school influenced where they applied and three out of four students said college fairs were not influential. This begs the question: is the admission road runner going the way of the doctor in-home visit and pitches from door-to-door salesman?

Furthering the point of a "middle of the funnel" strategy, institutional leadership should focus on a strong parent engagement strategy, as well as aim to make campus visits more frequent, accessible, and authentic.

DECIDING WHERE TO ENROLL

As students get closer to their final decisions, online tools influence them most greatly, but offline resources play a part as well. It's important to balance the use and understanding of both.

It's important to note that while only 12 percent of students indicate following or searching for a school-specific account on Facebook, that number increases to close to 30 percent when a student is deciding where to enroll. Additionally, half of prospective students indicated conversations they had via social media with students currently attending the school influenced their decision where to enroll.

Of course, social media is more of a tactical way of reaching students at the latter phase of their search. It's more important to also understand what is influencing their decision to ensure your message and resources align with their needs. Nine out of 10 students say affordability is a factor in their decision, while 70 percent of students said their financial aid package was very important.

Four in 10 current college students are not attending their first choice school. Aside from not being admitted (which would of course preclude them from attending), cost is a top reason why students are choosing to pursue a degree elsewhere. ⌐

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