

Scrolling Toward Enrollment

Web Site Content and the E-Expectations of College-Bound Seniors

Communicating with prospective students has undergone a profound transformation in the past ten years. Campus marketing—like marketing for any organization—had to adapt to the Internet and e-mail and now to new social media formats like social networking and blogging.

With the increased prominence of e-communications in student recruitment, it is easy to assume that prospective students are less likely to read information about a campus now than when print communications reigned supreme. Indeed, it almost seems that colleges have to “trick” students in order to engage them online, through video, flash-based design, and other visual elements.

A recent survey of 1,000 college-bound seniors, however, shows that prospective students not only value quality content, they are willing to read a great deal of the most valuable content on college Web sites. In addition, the majority of students said that if a college’s Web site content did not meet their expectations, they would be disappointed or even consider dropping that college from their search.

This report will explore what these college-bound students revealed about their online expectations, preferences, and behaviors. These students detailed what they felt about the content, organization, and look of college Web sites, and how much those elements factor into their enrollment decisions.

This study is part of the ongoing E-Expectations research project, a higher education market research project conducted by Noel-Levitz, James Tower, OmniUpdate, and the National Research Center for College & University Admissions.



How are students reaching your site?

Before students can read about your campus, they have to find it. Google has long been synonymous with Internet searching, so it is no surprise that Google is the leading method for finding college Web sites:

How do you find a school online?

- Google or other search to find schools by name—41%
- Use a site to match me, like My College Options or The College Board—38%
- Enter words or phrases into Google—35%
- Refer to a printed document with a URL—13%
- Use NCAA or other athletic site—5%
- Guess until I get it—4%
- Research on MySpace or Facebook—3%

Furthermore, 72% of students said that they land on a school's homepage after conducting a search.

These results highlight some challenges.

First, it's imperative to make sure that your campus name and any associated search terms (such as programs or majors) come at the very top of Google searches.

More challenging, though, is the lack of students using URLs from printed pieces to come to your campus. This doesn't mean those print pieces are not generating interest or building awareness. However, it seems that even if students want to learn more about your campus after reading a print piece, they are not using the URLs included on that piece. This may present difficulties in tracking the effectiveness of print materials through URLs unique to that piece.

How do they navigate around the site when they arrive?

While they may be using Google or other search engines to come to your Web site, once they arrive, they look for links to guide them:

- Above all, a college or university Web site should be easy to use. The links should take me right to the answers to my questions—85%
- I don't pay much attention to the link choices on a site, I go right for the search box or site index—15%

Site organization is therefore very important to your student visitors. It's crucial to make sure that the information they want the most is easy to find and access.

Many institutions struggle with the navigation elements of their homepages, fearing that an emphasis on one market (such as prospective students) will alienate other markets (such as alumni, faculty, or their community). The result is a homepage that serves too many masters and none of them effectively. Focusing on prospective students as a primary market for your school's Internet presence will clarify the resources needed on your homepage. Using audience pathways to address the needs of secondary markets can be very effective in meeting their unique site requirements and interests.

When students arrive at a Web site, 85% said that they used links to find answers to their questions, instead of using a search box or site index.



What impact is the economy having on their college decisions?

When asked if the current economic crisis was causing them to reconsider the schools they were applying to or planning to attend, 34 percent of respondents said yes, and expected that their plans for higher education might change in the following ways:

- I will work while going to school—21%
- I won't be able to afford tuition/tuition is too high—20%
- I will attend a community college —16%
- I will commute from your family's home—13%
- I am avoiding private school options—11%
- I expect to have financial issues—8%
- I will attend school part-time instead of full-time—7%
- I am reconsidering my school choices—7%
- I will apply for more aid—4%
- I will choose a school that is in-state—3%
- I am considering vocational or technical training instead of a traditional program—2%
- I will hold off on enrollment and going to work full-time—2%

Keep these economic concerns in mind when creating content for your Web site. Addressing student concerns regarding the cost of attendance and value or outcomes could encourage them to proceed with their original college plans.

The importance of Web site content to students

It is no surprise that students turn to the Web for information on schools, but just how important is that content to students when making their enrollment decisions? Quite important, it turns out. Eighty- eight percent of respondents said they would drop a school from their search or be disappointed with a school if that institution's Web site did not have the content students needed:

- If I don't find what I need on a school's Web site, I'll probably drop it from my list—16%
- I'll be disappointed if a school's site isn't helpful to me, but I will find other ways to get information—72%
- The school's Web site isn't really an important resource for me—12%

Among respondents who were still at the prospect stage, 23% said that if they did not find the information they

Regarding Web site content, 88 percent of respondents said they would drop a school from their search or be disappointed with a school if that institution's Web site did not have the content they needed.



needed on a school’s Web site, they were likely to drop that school from their list.

Additional questions clarified the importance of content versus design. When asked about whether content was more important than design, students said:

- The content presented on a college or university Web site is more important than how it looks—80%
- The look and feel of a school site is more important than what I find to read—18%

They were also asked directly about the content accuracy or helpfulness of Web content as it related to their searches:

- If I notice that the content or text on a school site is out of date, incorrect, or unhelpful, I will probably take it off my list—57%
- I don’t really pay too much attention to a school’s Web site content, so if it isn’t accurate or current, it won’t matter to me—40%

While the respondents show some quantitative variation in expressing how important Web site content is, it’s clear that the majority find Web site content very important, even crucial, in deciding where to enroll. At best, having incomplete or inaccurate Web site content will disappoint a student. At worst, it will cause them to navigate away and turn to other college choices. Even if a student did not drop a school from his or her search based on this criteria, a negative content experience could reduce a student’s interest in a particular campus.

How much will they read?

Students may give content a high priority, but how much content do they want to see? Will students sit and read Web pages with a great deal of information, or will they simply skim them? In the past, site designers and content producers have worked hard to keep content limited to the first screen so that users would not have to scroll. New trends in site design, including those for colleges and universities, are moving away from this practice. Millennial students do not appear to be as averse to scrolling through a page to read content as those from the Baby Boom and Generation X generations who may have brought their understanding of content value “above or below the fold” from newspapers to their online reading practices. According to the respondents, if the information is important to them, they read it, even if it means scrolling. Here is what they said about five common categories of Web site content:

Student willingness to read Website content

Activity	Admissions details and deadlines	Cost and aid content	campus location	academic content	blogs, profiles and other
Read it all, even scroll	79%	74%	52%	44%	22%
Read first screen only	10%	10%	18%	14%	12%
Skim and move on	11%	15%	29%	42%	53%
Bookmark	34%	33%	33%	35%	26%
Print	39%	41%	32%	30%	14%
Email it to myself	19%	17%	17%	18%	13%
Show family	21%	32%	21%	22%	11%
Show friend	6%	5%	8%	7%	3%
Link to social network	2%	2%	2%	2%	4%



When it comes to information about applying and cost, students appear more than willing to read Web pages, even if they have to scroll. In both cases, 40 percent of students said they would print those pages for reference. Campus location information was also highly valued.

Two items that have generated a great deal of buzz—blogs and social networking—did not fare nearly as well as more “traditional” information. This does not mean social media are not valuable. After all, at least one out of every five students appears to be reading blogs and student profiles very closely, and many are at least skimming them. It may be that social media interest is dependent upon the user connecting with the blogger or other individuals profiled on the site. They may be more likely to skim over these resources looking for someone who matches their career aspirations, program interests, or ethnicity.

Site design and interaction

College Web sites have evolved considerably over the last decade, changing from online brochures to much more interactive experiences for students. But how much interactivity do students want? And do they want a site to have a more traditional look or be more “edgy” in their look?

Respondents were split over their preferences for the design of a site:

- Colleges and universities should use young, edgy, and bold designs for their sites—50%
- Schools should take a more traditional approach with their site design—43%

A significant number of students also want to do more than read copy on Web pages:

- I need to find more to do on a college Web site than just click and read—42%
- College Web sites are just another form of the stuff they send me in the mail. I just use them to read information—56%

This desire for more interaction was greater among African American and Hispanic/Latino students, with 53 percent of African American students and 49 percent of Hispanic/Latino students expressing interest in interactivity. Their responses were significantly higher than those of white students—only 37 percent said they needed to do more than click and read on a college Web site.

Online cost calculators

One way colleges and universities can add interactivity and provide vital information to students is to add online calculators to estimate the cost of attending school or the amount of financial aid students will receive. Only 27 percent of respondents said they have used these calculators, but of those who did, 36 percent said these calculators increased their interest. Just 6 percent of students said that the calculators decreased their interest. In addition, within the next couple of years, campuses will be required by the federal government to post these cost calculators online if institutions are receiving federal aid.



Beyond the homepage: social networking and student recruitment

Social networking has taken the Internet by storm, becoming an incredibly popular online activity in a very short period of time. According to research by The Nielson Company, two-thirds of Internet users worldwide use social networks, and social networking has surpassed e-mail as the fourth most-popular online activity.¹ Among the E-Expectations respondents, 50 percent said they belonged to Facebook and 52 percent to MySpace (with 49 percent of Facebook users saying they also had MySpace accounts). Only 22 percent said they did not do any social networking.² The social networking phenomenon is changing the way organizations are marketing to their audiences, and given the age and general technological savvy of their audience, colleges are particularly well suited to market on social networks. The E-Expectations respondents showed a great deal of receptivity to communicating with campuses through social networking, both through general sites and password-protected sites set up by campuses.

In your opinion, should colleges and universities create a presence within any of these networks or communities to promote their programs?

Yes—70% No—28%

Should schools create their own private communities like these, that are password-protected and only for invited students?

Yes—75% No—22%

Should school representatives ever contact prospective students directly through social networks?

Yes—51% No—46%

With this level of openness to campuses using social networking, this represents a wide-open opportunity to colleges and universities. But what information or activities would students most value from a campus social networking site?

Respondents listed the following as their top five content items for campus social networking:

1. Discussions about courses and academics
2. Discussions about student activities and extracurricular options
3. Insight into school culture and diversity
4. Communication with current students and faculty
5. Communication with prospective students

Social networking is certainly no replacement for a solid, well-designed Web site, but it can support your other e-recruitment efforts. Even better, social networking can help circumnavigate the “secret shopper” syndrome, encouraging students to initiate communication with you instead of simply browsing your Web site anonymously

50% of respondents said they belonged to Facebook and 52% to MySpace, with 49% of Facebook users saying they had MySpace accounts as well.

¹ Nielson Online, Global Faces and Networked Places: A Nielson Report on Social Networking's New Global

Footprint (The Nielson Group, 2009), http://blog.nielson.com/nielsenwire/wp-content/uploads/2009/03/nielsen_globalfaces_mar09.pdf.

² Note that 65% of African American and 70% of Hispanic/Latino respondents said they belonged to MySpace, compared to 44% of white students and 43% of Asian American students. For a discussion of the social divisions surrounding MySpace and Facebook, see Danah Boyd, “Viewing American Class Divisions Through Facebook and MySpace,” Apophenia Blog Essay (June 2007), <http://www.danah.org/papers/essays/ClassDivisions.html>.



When to talk to them...and how

The pattern from this E-Expectations study, as well as those conducted over the last several years, is that while more communication options have entered the recruitment picture, campuses still need to maintain a diverse range of communication mediums.

Preferred methods of communication

This table shows how many respondents preferred to receive the following communications.

Activity	online	In person	By phone	By mail	Text message
Completing an application	70%	16%	1%	12%	0%
Sending a deposit	32%	23%	2%	42%	0%
Getting answers to my Q's	34%	30%	30%	4%	2%
Transcript Delivery	28%	18%	11%	43%	1%
Financial Aid Award	16%	29%	2%	52%	0%
Acceptance	15%	8%	5%	70%	1%
Communicating w/ Students	60%	18%	8%	6%	8%
Communicating w/ Faculty	50%	30%	13%	5%	1%

While online is still highly preferred for completing applications or communicating with students and faculty, students still show significant preferences to receive financial aid awards and letters of acceptance by mail.

The death of e-mail has been greatly exaggerated

In recent years, e-mail has lost some of its luster as a way to communicate with students, who were moving toward text messaging and messaging through social networks as their preferred communication options.

However, 87% of the E-Expectations respondents said they would be willing to give colleges their e-mail addresses. Furthermore, 67% said they would provide their personal e-mail address that they check most often, while 23% said they would use an e-mail address dedicated to their college searches. In addition, recent research suggests that 18- to 34-year olds are still more receptive to email marketing the marketing through social networking.³ The bottom line: don't delete your e-mail campaigns just yet.

³ Jordan McCollum, "Email Marketing Better Than Social Networking Marketing," Marketing Pilgrim blog, October 21, 2008, <http://www.marketingpilgrim.com/2008/10/email-marketing-better-than-social-network-marketing.html>



Conclusions: 10 things to take away from this study

1) Know what students want to read online.

According to the respondents, students are not nearly as averse to reading content online as they have been portrayed. A large majority are actually willing to read a lot of information that is relevant to applying to and paying for college. Many will also read quite a bit about campus location and academic information.

While your campus does not need to go overboard in detail, it's important to provide students with enough detail that they understand what they have to do to apply for admission and aid, as well as what distinguishes your school's location and academic programs.

2) Make key content easy to navigate.

Once students arrive on your Web site, most are looking for links to find the information they need. Display application and financial aid information links prominently on the homepage. Likewise, make it easy to find information about your campus and academic offerings. If this information is hard to find, students may drop your school from their lists.

3) Maintain and update content as much as possible.

When students find content, it needs to be accurate, relevant, and helpful. The most important pages on your Web site should be reviewed regularly for readability and accuracy. Information should be clear, as concise as possible without sacrificing important details, and organized logically.

4) Know your search results.

Google is the gateway to college Web sites for students. It is vital for your campus to own your search results, not just for your school name, but other terms which are highly relevant to students searching for your institution. In most cases, students will also wind up on the homepage, which makes homepage navigation critical.

5) Choose a design that matches your campus brand.

Students appear somewhat split on whether campuses should use traditional or more ground-breaking Web site designs. The important thing is to choose a design that fits the image of your campus and the types of students you hope to attract. This is one area where market research can be very helpful—if your prospective students lean more heavily in one direction, a Web site design that matches their expectations can provide a big advantage over competitors.

6) Add a cost calculator on your homepage.

Students are greatly concerned about the cost of college, and even though they are willing to read, they still like interaction. A cost calculator gives them vital information in an interactive format, and more than one-third of students said these calculators increased their interest in a campus. These online calculators will also be required by the federal government within the next few years.



7) Emphasize the value of an education from your institution.

The economy is clearly weighing on students' minds and affecting their decisions about college. Show the value of an education from your campus, and make it easy for them to find information about tuition and financial aid.

8) Support your e-recruitment with social networking.

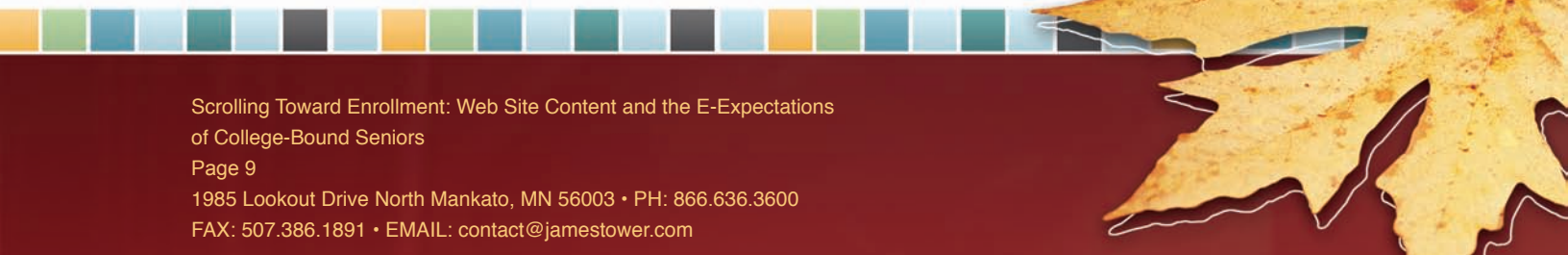
Students are on social networks, and even more importantly, they are open to campuses being on them as well. While social networking won't take the place of other recruitment efforts, it can be a dynamic element of your e-recruitment program. Also, it offers a chance to build relationships with students who may be searching your Web site anonymously..

9) Maintain a healthy mix of media.

Like a good diet, any communications plan should have a lot of different ingredients. Online communication has certainly increased quickly, but mail, e-mail, in-person, and phone communications still play important roles in recruiting students.

10) Think like a prospective student—or better yet, just ask them.

Above all, when in doubt, try to put yourself in students' shoes. Or take it one step further and conduct research to understand how your market is responding to your site. What do your prospective students want from your site? Can they find that information quickly? Does your site inform and engage them? Reviewing your site and communications from that perspective will help you meet the expectations of students. Adding usability testing and effective site analytics review will affirm your current approach or give you ideas for improvement.



Participant demographic information

Participants

- 1,005 college-bound high school seniors, with even representation from four geographic locations in the United States.
- The pool was 50% male, 50% female.

Ethnicity

- Caucasian—53%
- African American/Black—16%
- Hispanic/Latino—10%
- Multiple ethnicity—9%
- Asian—4%
- Indian/Native American—3%
- Declined—3%
- Other—1%

Grades

- A—39%
- B—48%
- C—12%
- Other—1%

Family income

- Less than \$50,000—25%
- \$50,000 to \$75,000—23%
- \$75,001 to \$100,000—11%
- \$100,001 to \$125,000—7%
- More than \$125,000—4%
- Don't know/Refused—29%

Current enrollment stage

- I have only looked at schools through Web sites or other materials. I have not contacted any school directly to express my interest, (prospect)—14%
- I have contacted at least one school to get more information, (inquiry)—17%
- I have applied—24%
- I have been accepted—25%
- I have sent in a deposit—2%
- I am have made my final decision and know what school I will attend this fall—19%



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Questions about this paper ...

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