

Identifying Effective Web-Strategies for Enrollment Management

The emergence of the Internet, web pages, online applications and other new forms of communications technology in college admissions marks one of the most profound changes in the college selection process in history...beyond any doubt ... the Internet has become one of the most important communications tools in college choice. It is now equal to paper as the preferred medium for filing an application, a key source of information as application decisions are made, and a major source of influence over final choice.

Richard A. Hesel (2000)

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Introduction

Increasingly, research evidence points to the fact that Web based information and technology are changing the way in which students conduct searches for colleges. Today, the overwhelming majority of college bound students have access to the Internet both at home and at school, and use this technology as an important tool for higher education planning. In fact, a 2002 survey of admissions officers by the National Association for College Admission Counseling showed that prospective students were more likely to communicate with colleges online than over the telephone. This is resulting in increased pressure on professionals in enrollment management in colleges and universities to develop effective strategies to supply information on the Web.

Given the demand for information, and the level of use of the Internet by college bound students, it is not surprising that most schools have invested significant resources in a website, with the goal of providing information to multiple audiences ranging from prospective students to current students, faculty and alumni. What is surprising, however, is the quality of that information and its presentation. In institutions that spend hundreds of thousands of dollars carefully planning a marketing strategy and designing print materials, it is not uncommon to find Web-based information that is almost impossible to navigate. A quick tour through several college websites is likely to provide more aggravation than information. While a minority of schools have invested in a coherent and professionally designed site that clearly integrates with their overall enrollment strategy, many sites are, at best, underwhelming and at worst extremely confusing and poorly planned. Such sites are likely to leave prospective students, who are relatively sophisticated users of the Web, with a confusing message. When one also considers that the process used to place that information online is often significantly less efficient and more costly than necessary, administrators may also find themselves confused.

Consider Neal Raisman's perspective in his article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* February 14, 2003:

Either to permit self-expression or to save money by not hiring a professional, some institutions let departments or offices design their own pages. The result is often an example of academic freedom run wild: No two pages use the same layouts, graphics, or fonts; many pages do not link to each other, and some even contradict one another. The message that such chaos sends to the outside world is that the college is badly run, as well as inexperienced with modern technology.

(Raisman, 2003)

While Raisman suggests that the cause of "such chaos" is possibly either budgetary constraints or issues of academic freedom, his last point may actually be a more likely culprit. Consider a couple of examples.

While most administrators have solid experience with print media, and years of experience managing budgets that are constrained, few in higher levels of academic administration are experts in Web based media. While most administrators would be comfortable editing and critically reviewing print materials, they may not feel qualified to make similar decisions about the school's Web presence. Such decisions are often left to "the professionals" in Information Technology, who may have more or less perspective on the overall enrollment management strategy being employed by the administration as a whole.

In some ways, this may not be surprising; after all, that is what IT is for, isn't it? Perhaps, and perhaps not.

While some schools may have several IT professionals with solid experience at many levels of academia, many, perhaps most, do not. Given narrow institutional experience, it is not uncommon to find that decisions in IT may be made more from the perspective of what works best for IT rather than what works best for the institution as a whole. Again, perceived lack of expertise in technology may leave enrollment managers hesitating to step in and make strategy decisions. Interestingly, an experienced administrator who would never fall for an academic department pushing through a new major, then using that new major to justify a new faculty line, may not recognize the same strategy at work in a different venue. For example, it is not uncommon for IT to state emphatically that one piece of software "must" be integrated with another, in order to save duplicated input of information. As a result, many schools have created a complex set of customized software, requiring weeks of costly custom programming, to save 10-20 hours annually of cutting and pasting that could have been handled by a work study student. The result is a savings of some low hourly wages, and a software system that must now be custom programmed each time software is upgraded. Hardly a "big picture" strategy but, unfortunately, hardly an uncommon occurrence either.

Does that mean that academic administrators must all become technology experts? No. But it does mean recognizing that a new media exists and is being used as a key touch point in your enrollment process. Given that the Web is now one of your first and perhaps most influential contacts with potential students, it makes sense to have a clear view of the factors that are most important to them, the implications of that information, and the consequences that information has for your strategic enrollment strategy as it pertains to Web-based information.

Using a frame such as "What?, So what? and Now What?" can be a useful approach to such a task. By examining the problem and the information available, enrollment managers can make more effective technology decisions. As an example, consider the issue of the role technology and Web-based information plays for college bound high school students, in terms of college decision making.

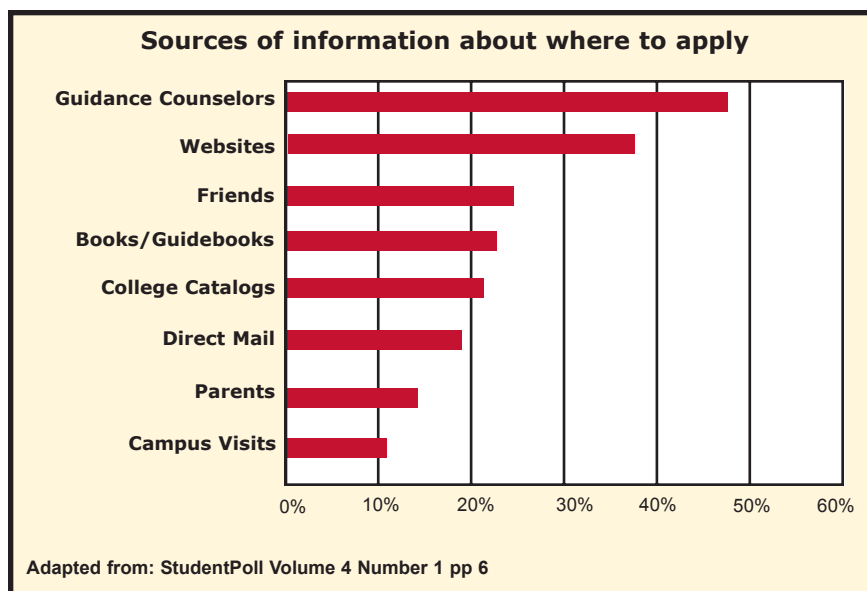
What?

For most in academic administration, particularly those who have developed a strategic enrollment management focus, findings such as Hesel describes (see above) may not be particularly surprising. But the magnitude of the transition that has occurred in the role technology plays for information gathering, decision making, and ongoing communication for prospective students, current students, and alumni is hard to overestimate.

Study findings exploring the relative influence of the Web on college bound students in terms of information

collection, decisions about where to apply and the final decision regarding enrollment point out some particularly interesting trends.

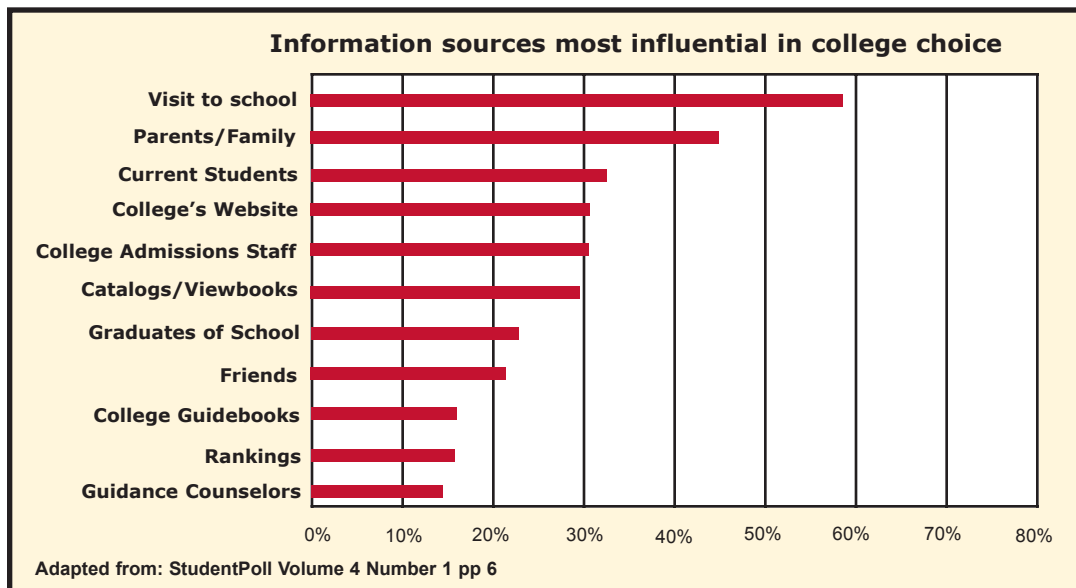
Information gathering. Recent findings indicate that the Web is second only in importance to guidance counselors in terms of sources of information in the first stage of the college search process when identifying where to apply. The graph below indicates that 48% of college bound students mentioned a high school guidance counselor as being important, followed by 37% who cited web sites with information about colleges as being important. The next sources of information most frequently cited were friends (25%), guidebooks/book (23%), and college catalogs (21%).



Application decisions. In examining the primary sources of information that influenced the decision to apply to a particular school, again, the importance of the Web was second only to guidance counselors. Guidance counselors were mentioned most often by 20% of students, and the Web was second at 15%. Other primary sources of information mentioned by more than 5% of respondents included direct mail/viewbooks/brochures (10%), college catalogs (9%) guidebooks/books (9%) and a college visit (8%).

Final enrollment choice. In examining the sources of information that most influenced final enrollment choice, it is not surprising that personal sources of information such as campus visits are highly influential. In fact, visits to campus were rated as very influential by 69% of respondents. The next most influential source of information came from parents and other family members who were cited as most influential by 46%. Interestingly, the next four sources of information most frequently identified as influential in making the final enrollment decision were closely clustered and included both relationship based and more fact-based sources of information. Current students were identified as most influential by 32%, college website information by 31%, college's admission staff by 31%, and catalogs and viewbooks by 30%. Additional sources of influence that were identified frequently included friends (23%) and graduates of the school (24%).

The graph below depicts the types of information that most influenced final enrollment choice:



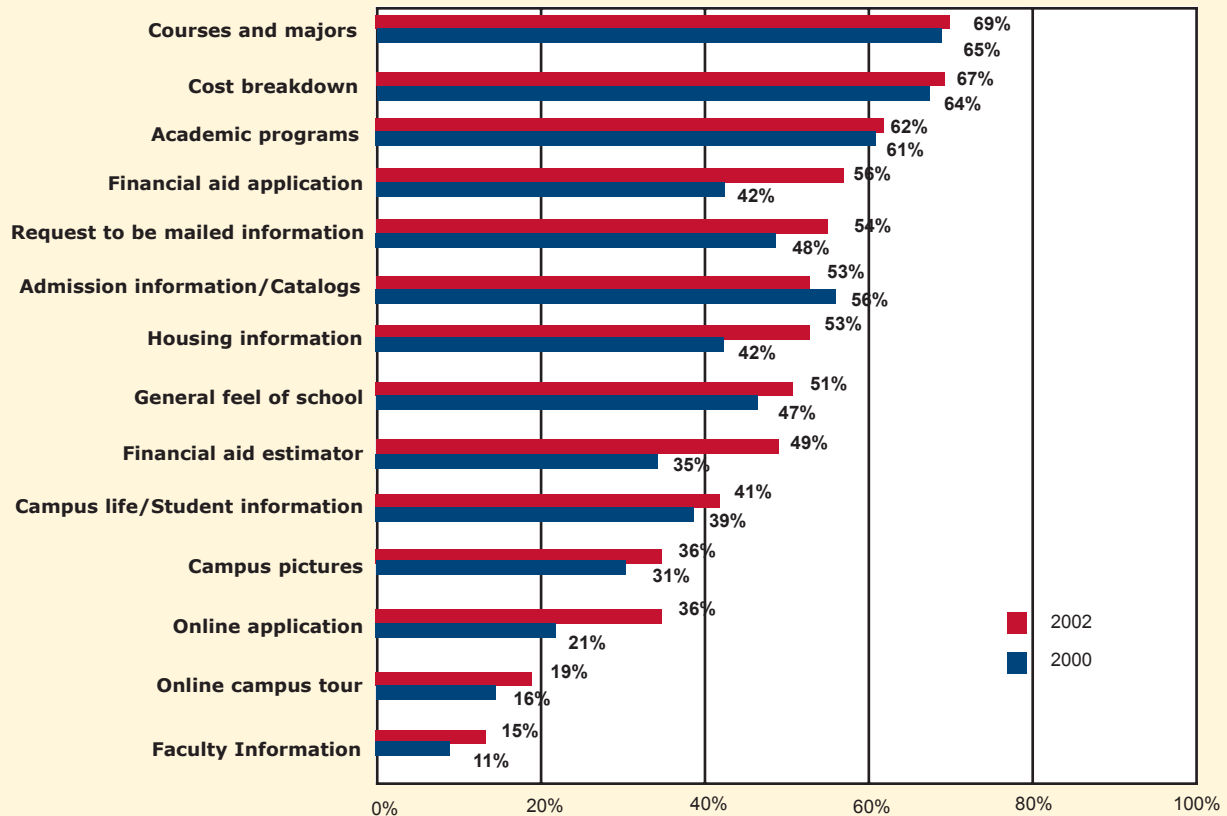
So What?

Clearly, technology and Web based information plays a significant role in prospective college student's decision making process. Web based information is cited by college bound students as being important and influential from the first steps of information gathering, through the process of deciding where to apply, to the final decision of where to actually enroll.

As a result, it makes sense for those interested in maximizing the return on their enrollment management investment to clearly identify the types of information likely to be most of interest, and ensure it is accurate, highly accessible, and appealing. To aid in this process, it would clearly be useful to understand exactly what sections or features students making enrollment decisions identify as being most valuable.

A survey by the Art & Science group, published in January of 2003 (Volume 5, Issue 3) provides some very useful information in this regard. Specifically, the study found that academic content and cost-related information are the most important kinds of information prospective students seek on college web sites. The findings indicate that the majority of students who had visited college web sites identified information on courses (69%) or majors (69%) and academic programs (62 %) were "very important" to them. Other information cited as very important included a breakdown of costs including tuition and fees (67%) and information about academic programs (62 %). The graph below, adapted from their results details the information identified by students who visited college websites as being "very important" in the years 2000 and 2002.

**Information on college web sites rated "Very Important"
by students who visited college web sites**



Now What?

Given the findings outlined above, the overall enrollment management strategy of an administration, and continued solid market research, there are likely to be several tactical implications for effective resource allocation that vary from institution to institution. In addition, there are some implications that are likely to be common across many settings. For example, it is clear that the college website was repeatedly identified as an important factor in information gathering, application decisions, and enrollment choice. Examining additional information suggests that there may be ways to create increased synergy by ensuring that specific types of information of significant interest are readily available on the website.

A good example can be found by considering the information above and noting the frequent mention of the academic catalog. In fact, the findings above show that college bound students frequently stated that college catalogs were important sources of information. Catalogs were identified as important by 21% in terms of information gathering, by 9% in making application decisions and by 30% in making the actual enrollment choice. In addition, when information on the website seen as being "very important" is considered, it is clear that catalog information is central. In fact, the top three types of information identified as "very important" in the website for college bound students are included in college catalogs (courses and majors, cost breakdown, and academic programs). In fact, of the 14 items identified as "very important" in the college website, at least 8 are likely to be included in catalog information.

Online Catalog Approaches

Such findings lend solid, empirical support to the increasing movement among colleges and universities to providing an online version of the academic catalog on the college websites. Unfortunately, many online catalogs are also a perfect illustration of Raisman's online "chaos" and many are very poor uses of the media's potential. In fact, in many sites the worst part of the website is the online catalog, which is often just the print catalog placed online in a Web accessible format. While this is a step in the right direction, it is not as effective in terms of providing information, saving staffing time and resources or cutting costs as it might be.

PDF. A good metaphor might be having a successful radio station, with several popular radio shows, then adding the ability to broadcast television, but only continuing to offer the same radio programs, in basically the same format. While some might be entertaining, some would be horrible, and none would take full advantage of the media. A website parallel can be seen in the PDF version of the academic catalog available in many college websites. Literally a print document online, ranging from 100 to 300 pages or so in length, it is hardly accessible, as anyone who has tried to page through realizes quickly. Nevertheless, schools that want to continue to rely most heavily on print catalogs sent through the mail may do well to continue to use this strategy, since it does not require any new technology, or significant changes in process or procedures. In particular, if there are not major complaints or problems associated with relative lack of usability in a large, slow loading file, some schools may choose to stay with their existing print focused strategy for a bit longer. The most significant problems with this approach include the time intensive process of editing and updating a large text file, the cost of printing, and the significant and increasing expense of mailing print catalogs.

HTML. Many schools, desiring to improve their online presence have become frustrated with the large file size of a PDF, and have moved to translate their print catalog into HTML. Such versions are more accessible to the online visitor, and are likely to be far easier to page through. In addition, since they are basically web pages, they offer opportunities to add additional media, provided the staff has sufficient time and programming ability. This approach would allow a school to begin to take advantage of some of the opportunities the web offers. Unfortunately, however, these are still largely "print online" (going back to the metaphor, this is somewhat akin to first producing a radio show, then adapting it into a televised version, rather than producing a television show in the beginning). In order to create these pages, the entire print catalog must be completed first, and then translated. These versions are very labor intensive, and are likely to require a fair amount of relatively expensive IT/Web staff time to create, update, edit, and correct every year. The process is also deadly dull, and not often at the top of most IT staff's list of engaging or rewarding tasks to spend a few weeks doing. Since the print catalog must be completed before HTML pages can be made, the task is also likely to be a very intense, deadline driven task. The combination of the large number of pages required, and the tedium-under-time-pressure may explain why this approach is prone to errors, such as missing or incorrect pages and dead end links. The cost of this approach is also not insignificant, and is recurring, since the entire catalog must be rebuilt each year. The cost for HTML page translation alone is typically between \$4-8K each year.

Database Driven. Although both of the previous approaches put the catalog on the Web, neither of them is actually a Web-based approach. Both are print strategies using text files. An alternative approach would be to transition the academic catalog to a database driven program that provides multiple options for publication, such as text files suitable for print layout, and an online version drawn from the same source. This type of system offers significant advantages at two levels, at an administrative/management level and at the level of the online presentation itself. First, a catalog created in a database is more easily updated and edited than a "flat"

text file. For example, if a department renumbers its courses, changing the course number in one place in a database changes the number throughout the catalog automatically. Not only does this save time, it also reduces errors significantly. Managing the catalog in a relational database can significantly reduce the time required for edits and updates for the print version of the catalog. At the same time, using a system designed with a multi-channel publishing option can offer literal "click to web" delivery, eliminating extensive IT time needed to create HTML pages.

Schools with quality online catalogs are finding it possible to make significant cuts in the number of print catalogs and the amount of postage required for mailings, without decreasing access to information. In addition, systems designed specifically for academic catalogs, such as the aCalog™ Catalog Management System, are designed to allow the addition of any type of Web-based media to the online version of the catalog, without the need for programming expertise. This makes the online catalog a truly Web-based enrollment management tool, linking together admissions information, marketing material, and an opportunity to provide information and features that are unique to the Web environment. This type of functionality can make it simple to add additional information identified as "very important" such as campus pictures and online campus tours, bringing the academic catalog to life.

Summary

Clearly, college websites are a major source of information in the college decision-making process, and one of the major areas of interest in those sites is the academic catalog. By considering the types of information that are most useful to prospective students, and how to most effectively provide them, professionals in enrollment management are likely to receive a better return on time and resources expended.

While IT professionals play an important role in the decision making process in enrollment management, abdicating this important area of control to "experts" in technology alone is not likely to provide the most beneficial or cost effective outcomes. Effective technology decisions in higher education should be part of the overall enrollment management strategy. Administrators will do well to examine their overall resources, needs and goals, and consider them in conjunction with research trends and appropriate marketing information. This solid grounding in research based information along with an integrated approach that takes a "big picture" view of the needs across several areas of concern is likely to result in high quality solutions that lay the groundwork for new and more effective approaches to using technology in enrollment strategy.