MARKETING HIGHER ED TO PROSPECTIVE UNDERGRADS
An Introduction

The higher education landscape has expanded greatly over the past several decades and it continues to do so today. In just the ten year period between 2002 and 2012, enrollment increased a staggering 24 percent, from 16.6 million to 20.6 million students.

Despite this steady increase in postsecondary education involvement, colleges and universities are struggling to keep their undergraduate enrollment numbers up. This has forced many schools to take desperate measures in order to attract students, including making cuts in their budget - such as laying off staff or closing buildings - or significantly changing their tuition prices. However, these types of changes often come with a cost. Moody’s, which rates more than 500 public and private colleges and universities, downgraded an average of twenty-eight institutions annually in the five years through 2013, more than double the average of twelve in the prior five-year period.

Some individuals in the higher education sector have even gone so far as to say this is the beginning of a death spiral for colleges and universities. Clayton Christensen, professor at the Harvard Business School, predicted that as many as half of the higher education institutions in the U.S. could fail in the next fifteen years.

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That may be an extreme outlook on the status of higher education, but his concern lays the groundwork for a bigger conversation about the threats to colleges and universities:

**Increased Competition**

With more than 3,000 four-year institutions granting degrees in the United States, it is difficult for some schools to differentiate themselves from the pack.

**Expensive Tuition**

Despite an undergraduate degree being declared the “new high school diploma,” college still may not be worth the financial burden for some individuals. As the younger generation sees higher tuition prices and their peers leaving college with crippling debt, alternative career paths are looking more favorable.

**Technological Upheaval**

MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses) have created a lot of buzz in higher education in recent years. Upcoming students are much more tech-savvy than previous generations, and the prospect of an online (and cheaper) college education may sway some away from small brick-and-mortar colleges.

Higher education shouldn’t see these threats as roadblocks, but merely as obstacles that can be overcome with a shift in institutional thinking. To address these problems and boost enrollment in their schools, colleges and universities must implement new strategies on campus, off campus, and online.
Step One: Understanding the Target Market

The road to long-term stability and success for higher education institutions begins with understanding their target audience. Though prospective students come from the same general pool of high school students, the subsets of that pool from which higher education institutions actually target can vary greatly from school to school. Some take a sprinkler marketing strategy in order to attract as many students as possible, while others promote their niche core competencies to attract specific types of individuals to their schools. Regardless of which strategy a college takes, it is extremely useful to get a general sense of what prospective students want and how they are different from the classes who came before them.

For years, marketers working in various industries have been picking the brain of the Millennial generation in order to get ahead of the game and now, just as they are beginning to understand what makes this generation tick, a younger demographic is emerging: Generation Z. While there is no definite age range for this group, it is generally agreed that it begins with those born starting in 2000. Why is this important to higher education marketers? It’s crucial because the oldest members of this generation are currently underclassmen in high school - where colleges and universities start their recruiting.

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<tr>
<th>BORN</th>
<th>GENERATION Y</th>
<th>GENERATION Z</th>
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<tr>
<td>1980 - 2000</td>
<td>Immediacy, tolerance, value social connection</td>
<td>Value predictability &amp; structure, have strong work ethic</td>
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<tr>
<td>2000 - Present</td>
<td>Browsing from devices and visual social media</td>
<td>Value practical career choices, leaders in online collaboration, easily distracted</td>
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At the start of their journey, around 90% of prospective students are unsure of which school they want to attend. Getting early exposure to high school students can have a tremendous effect on how potential prospects travel through the student lifecycle and, ultimately, on your enrollment numbers. So, how do colleges make it happen?
Step Two: Connecting With Students Online

Once higher education marketers understand their target audience, they need to focus on increasing and enhancing their school’s online presence. Before prospective students are exposed to a massive amount of information about their higher education options, they tend to start their college information gathering and research process by heading to the web and doing general searches on non-branded terms. Because of this, prospective students have said they find college ranking and comparison sites the most useful tools during the application process. While actually moving up in the rankings requires a long-term strategy taking various factors into consideration, higher education marketers must also monitor the information on these sites in the short-term to check for accuracy and discrepancies.

After prospects find colleges that spark their interest, many then visit school websites for the first time to get more information. While higher education marketers have very little control of college ranking sites, they have significant impact on, oversight of, and freedom to build their own digital presence.

Using Personalization to Segment Prospective Students

Of the prospective students that complete applications online, only 15% of them do it on their first visit to a college’s site. If those students end up coming back to your site, you want to make sure their experience is enhanced in order to increase the chances that they actually go through with the application. This is where personalization comes into play.

Personalization is the practice of replacing generic content with personalized content based upon user segments and real-time analytic data. One simple way of integrating personalization into your recruiting process is by using the data received by prospective students interacting with your site’s forms. If a user inputs shares information about themselves through Contact Us forms, applications, or campus visit signups, their website activity can be tracked through a CRM system. From there, your communications team can send out personalized email messages and materials based upon what they are viewing on your site.

Keep in mind, your target audience frequently browses the web and does research on all devices (desktop, mobile, tablet, etc.) so it’s absolutely essential for your website to be optimized for mobile viewing. A responsive web design has replaced M-dot sites as the standard practice as it gives visitors on all types of devices the same user experience and site content.
Students love their social media. In recent years, the number of students spending six or more hours on social media has increased by 8.3% (18.9% in 2007, 27.2% in 2014). It’s not enough for a college or university to just have a social media presence, they have to do it well to fully engage with the campus community. Here are some ways schools use social media platforms to engage:

**Showcasing faculty and student achievement on Facebook**
Some of the best research and innovation comes from the bright minds at universities. Facebook is a great spot for sharing these accomplishments so others can recognize them.

**Using Periscope on Twitter**
Although this application is a new tool in Twitter’s arsenal, this live-streaming service can be a unique way for people on or off campus to see what’s going on.

**Campus stories on Snapchat**
This expands on Snapchat’s “Our Story” feature, which lets users at an event upload a snap to a central live feed. In this version, anybody at the school can post images and videos of campus happenings. Don’t worry, Snapchat filters out the posts so it isn’t filled with parties and rowdy behavior.

**Showing off campus on Instagram**
Instagram is the perfect place to showcase what the campus and surrounding community near the school is like. By going through a college’s Instagram page, prospective students should be able to get a feel for what it would be like to attend.

**Showing off alumni on LinkedIn**
Has one of your alumni become the CEO of a Fortune 500 company or just came through with a groundbreaking piece of research? Show them off! Everybody loves a good success story. LinkedIn can show off how your university is the first step in a successful future.
It’s crucial for higher ed websites to include content that is accessible, useful, and easy to read. While Academic Programs and Campus & Student Life sections tend to be the most viewed pages amongst prospective students, content considerations must be made for all parts of the site. Some bonus content that many prospective students value include:

- **ONLINE CAMPUS TOURS**
- **A DAY IN THE LIFE**
- **PROGRAM FINDER**
- **STUDENT BLOG**

### Step Three: Influencing the Influencers

Remember, you’re not just targeting prospective students. While the student ultimately decides which college they are going to attend, there are plenty of influencers who will significantly impact their selection. Guidance counselors join students in their college journey early on and hold their hands until they actually get there. Their duties as influencers include finding schools that match student profiles, delivering information about requirements, sending transcripts, giving recommendations, and answering any questions that students have about the confusing application process.

Higher education marketers need to recognize the importance of these guidance counselors by reaching out to them. The first step is creating a page on their college website where guidance counselors can find all the important information about the college and its application process. Colleges can take it a step further by creating events specifically tailored to guidance counselors such as weekend fly-ins, counselors breakfasts, and individual sitdowns.

### College Fairs

Coordinated conjointly by guidance counselors and colleges, college fairs can be a useful tool for students during their discovery process. While top-tier universities may not need the extra exposure a college fair provides, smaller schools can benefit from it and differentiate themselves from competitors. By giving students access to knowledgeable members of the campus community, college fairs provide a unique face-to-face communication experience with people not available through the online research process.

Source: tuadmissionjeff.blogspot.com
Guidance counselors are not the only adults with influence over prospective students during the college application. Parents and other family members will often try and guide students in a certain direction early on, especially in families with strong alumni connections to a university. With more than three quarters of students getting help from their parents to finance college, many parents are part of the final decision.

Marketing to parents is quite different from marketing to prospective students.

Parent’s decision making criteria are often a departure from that of their child’s. While students may focus on more superficial factors - housing, clubs, cuisine, and campus life - parents are more concerned with affordability, safety, and academic reputation. If your website and promotional materials highlight partying, spring breaks, and sporting events, parents may pull back the reigns on allowing their child from applying to your school.

Information Sources for Prospective Students
Step Four: Enhancing Programs and Campus Life

While building relationships and improving a college’s online presence are essential, many schools will actually have to enhance aspects of their offering in order to get students on campus. This is often where schools try to create the differentiating factors that will make them stand out in a sea of competitors. There are a few options colleges should consider:

**Improving residential facilities.**

It’s no coincidence that more than 95% of students live on-campus at elite universities like Harvard and Princeton. Campus residency allows students to create a sense of community, socialize, and get involved. While it can be costly, the on-campus living experience is often worthwhile for students. If students aren’t impressed with your on-campus living experience, they may spend their money elsewhere. College administrations should focus on creating an acceptable range of living options, and marketers need to showcase them both online and during campus tours.

**Building an international program.**

Kickstarting a global program provides higher education marketers a tremendous opportunity to build the school’s brand on a much larger scale. Building relationships with schools outside the U.S. has proved effective in bringing more undergraduates to campus and increasing revenue, as most international students pay the full tuition price. With more than one-third of incoming freshmen planning to study abroad, it’s a miss not to provide the opportunity for international experiences.

**Sports Programs**

Investing in sports programs can return long-term positive results so long as it doesn’t detract from improving academic based needs. Athletes are more likely to live on-campus because their practice facilities have to be easily accessible at all times. If certain teams are successful (or lucky) enough to make it far in a particular season, the school may receive a “playoff bump” - an increase in applications after a school gains exposure in highly publicized sporting events such as the March Madness tournament. Sports programs have the added benefit of creating unified campus pride and energize alumni who might be called on for philanthropic support.
**Focusing on the campus tour.**

If you can bring students on campus for tours, you’ve already sparked their interest. Amazingly, there is about a 50% chance that a student will matriculate after they’ve participated in your campus tour. Knowing this, you should be using campus tours to close the deal. Have students who are representative of the typical student lead the tour and show off campus hotspots.

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**Step Five: Ultimately Academics Matter Most**

Some things don’t change. Continuing its reign at the top with 64.5% of incoming freshman rating it number one, the most important decision making factor is a good academic reputation. While we can talk about dormitories, sports programs, and engaging websites all day long, students go to college to get the best possible education. Schools may benefit by adjusting their academic profile in order to attract a certain type of student.

Some colleges aim to increase their academic credentials and attract more qualified students with higher GPA and SAT/ACT scores. Their goal is to be considered alongside more selective schools with a built-in residential base of students. The challenge in building a thriving community is getting a critical mass of these students on campus.
One way of awarding applicants with exceptional academic credentials is implementing an early decision program. In 1999, 6.9% of first-time, full-time students noted that being admitted through an early action or early decision program was “very important” in their decision making process; this increased to 15.7% in 2014. With more than one-third of students feeling overwhelmed during the application process, early admissions relieves some stress for students and provides some flexibility for colleges.

### The Importance of Early Admissions Programs in the College Choice Process, by Institutional Control and Selectivity

(\% indicating “Very Important”)

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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Moderately Selective (SAT 1030-1200)</td>
<td>11.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Most Selective (SAT&gt;1200)</td>
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<td>25.5</td>
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Source: Higher Education Research Institution @ UCLA

### CONCLUSION

Despite the bleak outlook some higher ed experts have for the future, there are plenty of ways colleges and universities can buck the trend and plan for long-term success. Knowing what your prospective students want from their undergraduate experience - from the start of their student journey through graduation - and delivering it will help you rise to the top of their list.

But remember, higher education’s dynamic landscape and the students it serves are constantly changing, so always keep an eye on what’s coming next. By attending to the needs of your prospective, current, and former students, your school will be ahead of the game for decades to come.
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