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Connections with the Current Generation of College Students Using Digital Marketing Practices

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Signature Sheet

This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the Chair of the Master's program, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

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Abstract

Higher education professionals in college and university admissions utilize various forms of communication in enrolling their fall class. The problem with the digital generation, also known as the Millennials, is that students have disconnected from the personal touch - the connection that is established between the student, their admissions counselor and the institution. Often it is found that this connection helps prospective students find that perfect fit in selecting a college.

This study identifies several technological approaches and evaluates their effectiveness in undergraduate admissions recruitment. A review of the literature revealed that recent technological advances such as social media, personal electronics and electronic communication have changed the overall engagement of students, and how they select a specific institution post high school. This is a mixed method study using both qualitative and quantitative data that examines student attitudes and participation in recruitment.

Results indicated that colleges and universities are actively participating in digital marketing tools to boost recruitment. The most common tools have been identified as email communication, online net price calculators, website recruitment pages, email searches and Google Analytics.

Keywords: communication, technology, admissions, recruitment, marketing, culture, Millennials

Chapter 1 Current Generation of College Students

Every year high school students have the seemingly impossible task of selecting what college or university that they are going to attend. At first their choices appear endless. University mailings coming to their house on a daily basis. Students at this point in time do not know if they want to stay in state or out of state or understanding the benefits of a public or private education. They then begin to research institutions based on the list of characteristics that they want their dream school to have. Soon their list of 26 potential schools turned into 7, and with the help of their family, they decided to visit every institution on their narrowed-down list.

The day finally arrives for visit number 4 – a small, private university in Northern California. It is a school that most do not know about, but this student in particular was genuinely attracted to the beauty of the brochure. On this brochure rests a picture of Meadowlands Hall that is showcased on a gorgeous spring day. The initial reaction expressed the thought that this building does not represent a stereotypical college campus. That reaction was confirmed on the day of the visit. The moment the student and their family stepped foot on campus, they had this overwhelming sensation. It was feeling they had not felt at the other universities, but it was a feeling that excited them so. From that point forward, the tone was set for the day to come.

The family was greeted and welcomed by cheerful Student Ambassadors and admissions counselors. It was only 8:30 AM and yet everyone was warm and friendly. The genuine interactions allowed for the connection between the student and the university to slowly develop. It was not until the tours began that the student started to picture oneself on campus. They imagined walking to a class they were about to have in Guzman Hall. They visualized themselves eating in Caleruega Dining Hall with a couple of their classmates. When they were

finally standing in front of the residence halls, they knew they wanted to live in Fanjeaux, the

Harry Potter looking building.

This developing connection left the student wanting more, and the only way to get more

information was to interact with the admissions counselor. It was at that moment, they were sold.

They knew that this small, private university in Northern California was the school for them.

Their admissions counselor was a graduate of this particular university, and provided all the first

hand knowledge that the student wanted to know. And overall, it was the personal touch that won

this student over. The student felt that they were actually cared about at this university; they were

not just another number. They were going to known as…Michael.

Statement of Problem

Over the past few years, advances in technology have changed the quality of the college

admissions process. Admissions counselors are competing against the digital world and

struggling to make a personal connection with their students. While email is still the predominant

form of communication, new methods have been integrated into the world of admissions that

have been developed to reach the student's on their level. For example, tech startup companies

have developed apps for prospective students to use that will allow them to connect with an

admissions counselor, financial aid advisor, student life administrator and even a current student.

These apps are only the beginning, but the question is are they effective?

Purpose Statement

The intent of this study is to identify tools commonly used by students in the Millennial

generation that can assist in recruiting Generation Z, and subsequent groups when they reach the

college admissions age. These tools need to be part of an admissions marketing plan. It is also

necessary for these tools to motivate the student towards enrollment at their targeted college or

university. The importance of this study is to identify effective digital marketing tools and

techniques that admissions counselors can use throughout the enrollment funnel.

Research Question

How can admissions counselors utilize digital marketing practices to connect with their students

and encourage them towards enrollment? The intent of the digital marketing tools is to create a

vision of the academic institution. This serves to provide a context for prospective students to

evaluate the institutions ability to meet their academic goals.

Theoretical Rationale

Throughout the research process one theory that consistently arose in the articles related to the

literature review: communication theory. Looking at this theory, it is said, "communication…is

the very means by which we produce our personal relationships and professional experiences"

(Dainton & Zelley, 2015, p. 2). In other words, it is the foundation of everyday interactions. The

three sub-theories of communication theory include the following: commonsense theory,

working theory, and scholarly theory all equally appropriate to the research question stated above.

The commonsense theory is the basis of everyday decisions that are influenced by personal

experiences or influences. The working theory is typically content specific in regard to a

profession that is stimulated by an agreed-upon behavior. And lastly, the scholarly theory is the

heart of communication theory. It is by far the most complex and difficult aspect to comprehend

because it allows for a clear understanding of the communication process. Combined, these three

sub-theories created the pathway for research within communication. Through different methods

such as survey research, textual analysis and ethnography, people are able to evaluate how

effective communication can be. All in all, communication theory is the process in which people

communicate with one another. It is the backbone of the current study and the inspiration for the personal relationship in the world of Higher Education.

Assumptions

In the world of college admissions, it is safe to say that one must expect the unexpected. From active students not enrolling at a college or university when they were one that admissions counselors were counting on, to stealth applicants submitting a deposit to enroll three weeks before the semester starts. With admissions being an ever-changing field, it can be assumed that students are finding new ways to connect with colleges and universities worldwide. Students will utilize technological resources to learn about an institution and what they offer before reaching out to a college representative. It can be assumed that college representatives are also changing their methodologies to connect with their students.

Background and Need

With the development of technology, higher education professionals have taken initiative to interact and connect with students where they feel most comfortable…online (Lindbeck & Fodrey, 2009). "The online space most colleges and universities occupy creates a much wider recruitment base without the expense of traveling great distances" (Lindbeck & Fodrey, 2009, p. 27). Internet advances have allowed for professionals to connect with their students on another level. The facts inspired researchers to develop a study that identified current and future plans for integrating technology as a recruitment tool. An online survey collected from 36 institutions concluded that the most common forms of technology used are the institution's website and e-mail, while podcasts and virtual worlds were predicted to be the most appealing. Furthermore, results showed that technology is being used for one-way communication or information sharing.

These results are now motivating colleges and universities to restructure the way they communicate with the millennial generation through technology.

Summary

College admissions counselors are experiencing a new trend as the Millennial Generation is enrolling in universities nationwide. These students live in a digital world that take away from having a personal connection with their admissions counselor and the institution. Studies have shown that the Millennial Generation is also the most overprotected generation in history (LeMoyne & Buchanan, 2011). Parents now have a strong influence and input in their child's college admissions process. With these newly evolving changes in the world of Higher Education, it is up to admissions counselors to find the best communication practice for them and their institution.

Chapter 2 Review of the Literature

Introduction

This section is an examination of the research literature on technological advances in undergraduate admissions recruitment. Information was gathered from academic library searches using online resources. Research information is organized in the following categories: Historical Context and Review of the Academic Research which includes the subcategories: Culture of an Institution/Higher Education, The Millennial Generation, Technology in the Millennial Generation, Recruitment in Higher Education, and Marketing for the Millennial Generation in Higher Education.

Historical Context

Throughout the last ten years, the general methodology to Enrollment Management has changed substantially (Handel, 2014). Since the days of James Conant, private institutions have focused the application process with a holistic approach. This task is something that is new to public institutions. While the holistic approach is time consuming, it determines if the student is a good fit for the university. However, this approach has also led to universities increasing their selectivity. For example, the New York Times stated that universities similar to Harvard and Stanford accept less than 1 in 10 freshman applicants per year (Perez-Pena, 2014), ultimately leading to students applying to more universities. In the 2014 Admissions Report, NACAC identified that the overall percentage of students applying to 7 or more schools has doubled in the last ten years. This trend has led admissions offices everywhere to change the way that they are predicting their enrollment goals for the year. If the university admits too many, the director of residence life is going to request a transfer; if the university admits too few, admissions counselors are going to be looking for new jobs. When it all comes down to it, the future of

enrollment management is unpredictable. Changes are constantly happening, who knows where we will be 10 years from now.

Review of Academic Research

Culture of an Institution/Higher Education

Institutions have developed a model to better understand the level of academic student engagement in undergraduate students in the University of California system (Brint, 2007). The dimensions of academic student engagement can be identified as active/collaborative learning, student-faculty contact, level of academic challenge, enriching educational experiences, and supportive campus environment. Each dimension is what students personally identify with as an important factor throughout their undergraduate education. For example, students are yearning for active/collaborative learning (1) through in class discussions and community based projects. The relationship between students and faculty (2) allow for academic growth due to faculty members serving as role models and mentors for their students. This ultimately results in a high level of academic challenge (3) since students are looking for an experience that promotes student achievement by emphasizing effort and high expectation. One way that students like to experience this is through enriching educational experiences (4). They find that activities outside the classroom lead to intellectual and personal growth. Lastly, students find that a supportive campus environment (5) lead to developing a perception of how campus can lead to intellectual and personal growth. Following and understanding this methodology will allow for the University of California campuses to reach disengaged students, even though their campus may have over 10,000 students.

The connection between spirituality and religion has influenced how students are engaging on liberal arts college campuses (Kuh & Gonyea, 1995). It is said that a goal of a

liberal arts education is for students to receive a well-rounded education, however what happens

when a student's personal religious and/or spiritual thoughts get in the way of their education?

Kuh and Gonyea surveyed 150,000 first year and senior college students from 461 universities

nationwide to get a better understanding how students are engaging on campus. Their key focus

revolved around deep learning, time usage, perceptions of campus, overall satisfaction with

college, and a desired outcome of a liberal arts education. The researchers found 10 important

aspects in their findings: first year students are yearning for a developed sense of spirituality;

white students are less focused on benefitting of a spiritual experience; students who engage in

spiritual activities are more likely to be involved campus-wide; the enhanced spiritual

experiences do not influence the student's college engagement; students who seek a deepened

spiritual experience benefit from more in college; grades, majors, and first-generation status have

no influence on the student's spiritual practice; the institutional size does not effect a student's

desire to seek a spiritual experience; baccalaureate college outcomes are vastly different in

comparison due to the presence of faith on campus; the campus environment appeals to students

over the type of educational practices and outcomes; and student's who enroll in faith-based

institutions gain more from spiritual experiences, but participate less in campus life activities.

These findings suggest that having the opportunity to experience spiritualties throughout college,

students will have a heightened overall experience.

Millennial Generation

College-level student affair officers and high schools counselors have found that the Millennial

Generation embody traits that both challenge and gratify their professional skillset (Elam,

Stratton, & Gibson, 2007). Building upon the values of the Baby Boomers and filling the cultural

void of the G.I. Generation, the Millennial Generation has been influenced by media forces that

has attributed to both positive and negative qualities. Millennials are known to be hard-working students that have supportive parents guiding them through life. They also tend to be involved in many academic, service, and extra-curricular activities, which has coined them as socially engaged citizens. And lastly, growing up in the media world the students have developed that ability to multitask.

While these qualities represent the good that this generation has established, Millennials also embody some challenging aspects for educational professionals. For example, parents of this generation have been involved in their children's lives to a point where they serve as an advisor or advocate for their child, sometimes leading toward a tense interaction with educational personnel. Students have also relied on communicating with society through technology resulting in underdeveloped interpersonal skills. Lastly, the ability to multitask has shortened the student's attention span. Based on these attributes, educational personnel need to evaluate their efforts in building relationships with Millennials and their parents in order to share and develop these student's skillsets.

Characteristics that are used to describe the Millennial Generation can help higher education professionals understand the expectations and motivations of these students (DeBard, 2004). Identified as the most ethnically and racially diverse generation in the nation's history, the Millennials can be described as *special, sheltered, confident, conventional, team-oriented, achieving,* and *pressured*. They have learned and adapted traits from the previous generations of which has allowed them to respond appropriately to authority and strive to be the greatest and happiest generation. This generational shift has also changed the way that the Baby Boomer and Generation X educators work with their students. Students are extremely optimistic about their academic success and expect to be rewarded with grades that reflect their optimism. However,

the faculty generations are more realistic; in a sense that the student needs to practice what they believe, rather than just believe. In conclusion, the Millennial Generation are academically optimistic, service-focused, and more politically involved than ever before. This goes to show that higher education professionals will be very active in meeting the expectations and motivations of the Millennial Generation.

Building upon the characteristics as described by DeBard (2004), the Millennial Generation will necessitate a reevaluation of how collegiate programs and services are organized and delivered (Lowery, 2004). The dependence of technology has influenced educators to learn to use technology more efficiently to communicate with their students. For example, some institutions are now requiring professors to reply to their students via email within 48 hours. Other institutions are developing online databases for their students to access specific academic support services, such as academic advising using webcams. In order for these online/technological advances to be successful, institutions should make sure that services are:

- An easy access, any-time/any-place self-service model
- A one-stop shop – all administration should be trained how to use all functions
- Equitable in quality and diversity
- Equitable for students to provide feedback
- A way to connect all students to campus

If these steps are taken to engage millennial students, institutions will transform the overall culture of campus as did the previous generation before them.

College admissions counselors have experienced a new trend in the college admissions process as the Millennial Generation continues to enroll in universities nationwide. Parents have a strong influence and input, guiding their children throughout the college admissions process.

Students' experiences with parental oversight are reported as both positive and negative in the research literature. Studies document that the Millennial Generation is the most overprotected generation in history (LeMoyne & Buchanan, 2011). Students often request their parents' advice and input regarding the decision on selecting a major and an institution to attend. Parent involvement can contribute to their children's emotional instability as they are preparing for their college and career lives (Galindo, 2016).

Technology in the Millennial Generation

Today's college aged students are said to be "the first generation of digital natives" (Levine & Dean, 2013). Born into founding days of Apple, Microsoft, and AOL, these students have an expectation of communicating through a digital means. To understand specifics of student expectations, the researchers conducted a survey of 5,000 undergraduate students and 33 focus group interviews across the United States. The results of the survey suggested that 79% of current undergraduates are very satisfied with their college experience and quality of teaching, however 4 out of 5 students stated that their education could be improved upon if an increase of technology was implemented in the classrooms and their professors knew how to use it correctly. Furthermore, the influence of technology in the classroom has created tension between the student and their faculty members. Professors have been extremely critical on their students in regard to their research tools; emphasizing that technology makes students lazy. On the other hand, students have been critical on the way that professors use technology in their classroom. With the implementation of Microsoft PowerPoint in the classroom, students state that professors simply read word for word off the screen or summarize exactly what they read the night before.

Outside the classroom, technology has done wonders for the student's community and social life. Students are using social media sites such as Facebook, MySpace, and LinkedIn to

communicate with their friends and family any time throughout the day. However, many

outsiders of this generation have stated very disturbing, yet significant insights to what is going

on: "students are more connected with others as in their known associates, but less connected

than ever to those immediately around them…*they were alone together*" (Levine & Dean, 2013,

p. 8). College professionals have noticed that students have a difficult time communicating face-

to-face; they would rather send an email or a text. From the student's perspective, the constant

digital communication is said to decrease anxiety and overall vulnerability. Students have even

gone to the point of establishing a method to using a specific type of digital communication for

different people: texts are meant for friends and emails are for any other adult. This unique type

of message has further increased the sense of immediacy for the students. Students expect to hear

back with a response within 20 minutes. University dean's have joked and called this generation

the "I want it now generation" (Levine & Dean, 2013, p. 8).

       The overall impact of technology in a student's life has changed not only the way that

student's communicate inside and outside the classroom, it changed how students communicate

with their families. The constant communication for the new generation has allowed them to be

closer with their parents. The data suggests that students consult with their families on academics

(37%), social decisions (20%), and even their romantic relationships (58%) of the time. This fact

alone has increased the amount of parent involvement in the collegiate atmosphere.

       All in all, the students of the new generation have changed the entire system in all areas

of higher education. Digital influences have allowed students to become operate at all hours of

the day, creating a sense of immediacy for everyone involved. Digital influences have changed

how professors teach in their classroom, sometimes for better and sometimes for worse. Digital

influences have allowed students to become multi-taskers, being both active and passive in the

classroom setting. Digital influences have also allowed students to either go above and beyond in research or the bare minimum; with so many resources in the cyber-world, it can be extremely overwhelming.

Recruitment in Higher Education

The college admissions process is shifting in order to understand students that would benefit from an ethical and intellectual higher education experience (Making Caring Common Project, 2016). To promote the ethical and intellectual development of the student, college admissions professional needs to be able to relieve the inevitable pressure of individual academic performance of potential students, reward students who embody *authentic citizenship*, and establish equity and access for all. To achieve these goals, 80 higher education professionals came together in a conference setting to address this issue; recommendations following their deliberations were identified as follows:

1. High school students often face stressful situations over concern about their grade point average (GPA) and standardized tests scores. In order to step away from the brag sheet, where students are explaining 10+ extra curricular activities, it is recommended that applicants limit their list to no more than three. From the counselor's perspective, one is able to evaluate students with comparable experience instead of wide discrepancies between modest and extensive list.

2. College Admissions should mention that both Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) courses do not influence their application over someone who is not enrolled in these rigorous courses.

3. Students should be able to be authentic throughout the application process, and not someone that is influenced by what their parents or other says. College admissions will rely on working directly with the student in ensure that the student's voice is being heard in their application.

4. Students who are engaged citizens in society should be recognized. Engagement can range from

    contributing to one's family or society through service.

    These recommendations are vital in reevaluating the college admissions process. If successful,

    every college-entering student will have a more enjoyable and equitable admissions process.

    This process alone will lead to an increase in 4-year retention rate and ultimate job success.

Marketing in for the Millennial Generation in Higher Education

With the development of technology, higher education professionals have taken initiative to

interact and connect with students in their comfort zone. "The online space most colleges and

universities occupy creates a much wider recruitment base without the expense of traveling great

distances" (Chimes & Gordon, 2008). These Internet advances have allowed for professionals to

connect with their students on a whole other level. The facts inspired researchers to develop a

study that identified current and future plans for integrating technology as a recruitment tool. An

online survey collected from 36 institutions concluded that the most common forms of

technology used are the institution's website and e-mail, while podcasts and virtual worlds were

predicted to be the most appealing. Furthermore, results showed that technology is being used for

one-way communication or information sharing. These results are now motivating colleges and

universities to restructure the way they communicate with the millennial generation through

technology.

The advancement in cell phone technology and its digital applications has college

admissions offices experiencing a resurgence of quality interactive email (Epstein, 2015).

Through the viewpoint of the author, he explores his own experience and tips on how to create

an effective email. Unfortunately, email was being overpowered by the presence of social media.

After trials and trials of different social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram,

admissions professionals were still not connecting with their students as originally planned. However, over the last 5 years, the method in which student access the Internet has drastically changed. With the rise of the ever-evolving iPhones, students have a found an interest in email once again. The ease of access with applications such as Gmail, Y-mail, or Apple Mail has students once again actively engaging with their email. Mirabile (2015) of Beloit College said it best, "just when the narrative that e-mail was dead and student recruitment had to move to Facebook was at its loudest, we began to see an increase in our open rates" (Epstein, 2015, pg. 40). Email rates soon increased to almost half of the targeted seniors at certain institutions. This rising trend led admissions professionals to implement new ways to keep students focused and engaged. While email has allowed for the millennial generation to connect with their admissions counselor in a whole new light, there is still an overarching presence of competition from other institutions.

Summary

Considering the research on this topic, it is clear to see that there is a need for a shift in the college admissions process. However, in order for the shift to begin, one needs to go back to the basics – learn about the culture of the institution. At many Liberal Arts colleges there is a significant focus on academics and personal growth. And to go even deeper on that focus would be to include active/collaborative learning, student-faculty contact, the level of academic challenge, enriching educational experiences, and a supportive campus environment. All of these areas provide support to the overall academic student engagement at liberal art institutions. However, the students who are now enrolling in these institutions may be the most over protected generation in history.

The Millennial Generation has definitely had its fair share of analysis. These students have been known to be extremely hard-working and involved in various academic, service and extra-curricular activities. They also come with supportive parents that can guide their experience into college. This fact alone has proven to be both a positive and a negative trait. Nonetheless, they have also been the generation that has experienced technology since they were in elementary school. Growing up with the rapid change in technology has allowed this generation to be extremely particular in the way that they communicate with one another, including their professors. Universities around the country have changed had to adjust their communication methods to meet their student's needs. Such changes have included an establishment of an easy access online system that serves as a one-stop shop for both students and administrators. This ultimately provides an equitable format to provide feedback to students. Not only are universities finding different methods to communicate with their students, recruitment in higher education is changing as well.

At many Liberal Art institutions, recruitment focuses on the holistic approach - meaning that it is about the student and who they are versus solely being reviewed on their academic performance. More universities use this approach each year, including large public universities. This approach supports the data that an increasing number of highly qualified students are now applying for admission to a college or university campus. The reason for this is simple; the pressure is off of academics and allows the student to be themselves throughout the college admissions process. Admissions offices everywhere have acknowledged this shift and are adjusting to their marketing strategies accordingly.

Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram are just a few of the different social media outlets that are now being used by various admissions offices as they trying to connect with their students.

However, the most accessible and beneficial form of communication has proven to still be email.

This is ultimately a result of the iPhone generation, which allows the accessibility of email at

your fingertips. While email has proven to be the most effective communication method there is

currently, is that what the students want? If not, what type of communication do they want from

their counselors?

Chapter 3 Method

Research Approach

An evaluation research approach (Patten, 2012) was used throughout the study to result in the findings that are discussed in Chapter 4. The analyzed documents were produced by an enrollment and fundraising management organization that works with Dominican University of California, Ruffalo Noel Levitz (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2016).

Ethical Standards

This paper adheres to the ethical standards for protection of human subjects of the American Psychological Association (2010). This paper was reviewed by my thesis advisor and approved.

Access and Permissions

The reports used, 2016 E-Recruiting Practices Report (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2016) and 5 Gaps in College Digital Marketing (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2016), are public documents that were generated for partnering institutions of Ruffalo Noel Levitz.

Data Gathering Procedures

Data were collected from 224 non-profit four-year and two-year colleges and universities which enroll over 1.8 million students. The survey used was sent to enrollment and admissions officers from accredited institutions throughout the United States.

Data Analysis Approach

The 2016 E-Recruiting Practices Report for Four-Year Colleges and Two-Year Institutions (Ruffalo Noel Levitz, 2016) is divided into three separate sections: rankings of e-recruiting practices in general and social media; findings on cell/mobile phones, email and texting; and website features. Each section has break down for the type of institution: four-year public institution, four-year private institution and two-year public institution. The data analysis focuses

on information from four-year private institutions to accurately create a plan for a small college

or university in Northern California.

Chapter 4 Findings

Description of Data

Rankings of E-Recruitment Practices in General and Social Media

To begin analyzing what practices digital marketing practices are effective and which ones are not, Ruffalo Noel Levitz identified 27 major e-recruiting techniques that are used in the United States. The top 10 among four-year private institutions are:

1. Email Communication with Prospective Students

2. Online Net Price Calculator

3. Website Recruitment Pages

4. Student Searches

5. Google Analytics

6. Mobile Optimized Websites

7. Content Management System

8. Online Videos

9. College Planning Websites

10. Landings Pages for Email Campaigns

The data state that 100% of the 59 four-year private institutions use email communication as a digital marketing tool with their prospective students. However, 85% of high school seniors consider and use college-planning websites as a reliable source for information. This fact alone provides evidence that students are looking for multiple methods to learn about college and the admissions process. In conclusion, it would be ideal for the four-year private institutions to reimagine the methodology that they are using and consider college-planning websites as a priority.

Social media is another area that institutions nationwide are incorporating into their

communication flow. Ruffalo Noel Levitz identified the following as the top five social media

platforms:

1. Facebook

2. Twitter

3. Instagram

4. YouTube

5. Snapchat

The data state that 98.6% of the institutions utilize Facebook and only 39.3% use Snapchat.

While the first four platforms have remained active throughout the past five years, Snapchat is

the newest and most engaging platform. However, YouTube is still effective with 77% of high

school seniors using the platform each week. This concludes to the fact that students are looking

to engage with the university. Social media platforms that show a vision of how the institution

can contribute to their academic and personal goals can lead the student towards enrollment.

Findings on Cell/Mobile Phones, Email and Texting

In the 21st century it is not too common to find someone without a cell phone. Colleges and

university admissions and enrollment offices have taken advantage of this trend and are findings

ways to recruit students within the palm of their hands. Data suggest that 95% of private

institutions request their prospective student's personal cell phone number to establish a

relationship with them. Colleges have seen much success with the personal relationship that

48.6% of them provide cell phones for their staff of admissions counselors. Due to the reality

that counselors recruit on the road for long periods of time, 88% find it effective to utilize their

work cell phones to directly phone their students. However, only 79.4% of counselors send and

receive text messages, while 64.7% promote their number to prospective students and their families, as well as high school counselors. Data also suggest that each institution established their very own personal cell phone policies.

Based on the data, it seems beneficial for an institution to develop a specific cell phone policy/plan. This would allow for effective engagement between a student and their admissions counselor, and hopefully progress towards enrollment. The policy/plan should also consist of direct engagement and utilize text messaging to the best of their ability. For example, send reminders about their application or an admissions related event, or if the institution is willing to take the next step, allow the counselor to have specific hours in which they respond to student's individual text messages. One should note that establishing this policy could lead to an increase in the workload for the counselor and potentially take away from the work-life balance, however. Data suggest that students are looking for this type of communication with their counselor.

With the advantage of prospective students having a cell phone in the palm of their hand, colleges and universities have also changed the way that they are using email. Students primarily check their emails with a cell phone and 60% of institutions use their campus-based Customer Service Management (CRM) system to optimize their emails for mobile devices. Just about every population including prospects, inquiries, applicants, admits, and deposits, in the application funnel receives some type of mass email, and 75% of the sampled institutions send 35 or more mass emails in an application cycle. In similar situations, 92.9% of private institutions are marketing their mass email campaigns to first time college students.

The trend that the data is showing is not particularly new information. Colleges and universities have always been on the cutting edge with their number one source of communication. While some universities use their CRM, others use a third party vendor to

complete the task. Nonetheless, the method in which the message is being displayed is what the new struggle has been, and something must be done. Institutions should develop a strategic communication plan in order to be extremely effective. While majority of the content revolves around emails, this will also include other forms of communication such as text messaging campaigns, online chats, social media campaigns, and other digital marketing techniques. This plan serves as the backbone of the admissions cycle and ensures that the every student will receive the information through every part of the funnel.

Website Features

An institutional website is a huge component on how students retrieve information regarding a college, and research has shown that 68% of students use their mobile device to research a college. Ruffalo Noel Levitz found that 77% of four-year private institutions have a web design that adapts to mobile devices, and only 10.6% have a specific mobile website. Out of the institutions that do not have a mobile-friendly website, 70.4% expect to have their website updated within one year. As for the institutions that have a mobile-friendly site, they find that the following is most effective with prospective students:

1. Campus Visit Details – 95.6%

2. Enrollment/Admissions Information– 93.8%

3. Financial Aid (including scholarships) – 92.9%

4. List of Academic Majors & Programs – 91.2%

5. Application Information (including application process) – 91.2%

   This data suggest that institutions have moved in the right direction in updating their website to be mobile-friendly. As well as institutions that are not currently active, they have evaluated their overall digital marketing plan to optimize towards mobile functionality.

Chapter 5 Discussion

Summary of Major Findings

The data collected from Ruffalo Noel Levitz was extremely significant in regard to the overall

research question of the study. The findings suggest that email is still the number one method to

communicate with prospective students. However, 85% of students use college-planning

websites to start their college search and communicate with college professionals. Social media

is a huge influence to how students view different colleges and universities. While Facebook

remains the most popular platform, admissions offices should reevaluate and potentially reinvest

in publishing videos through YouTube. Students are often using YouTube on a weekly basis and

find that videos portray realistic engagement of said institution. Lastly, 68% of students use a

mobile device to research college, 77% of private institutions have opted to optimize their

website for any mobile device.

Comparison of Findings to the Literature

After reviewing the data that was collected from the Ruffalo Noel Levitz studies (Ruffalo Noel

Levitz, 2016), there are many comparisons to the overall findings found in the literature. Authors

of the majority of articles reviewed all types of institutions: four-year private, four-year public

and two-year public. However, to make utilize the research and data effectively, only the four-

year private institutions were analyzed for the purpose of this study. In regard to how colleges

and universities are effectively communicating with their students, new methods are being

researched and developed. While each institution is different, the outcomes for each method will

also relay different result.

One major difference in the overall review of the literature to the data is the generational

shift of college students. While majority of the research collected focused on the Millennial

Generation, the current students that are being recruited by college admission professionals are apart of Generation Z, that is, anyone born 1999 and after. The significance between these two generations is extremely important, however limited research is available on Generation Z. The new generation builds upon the ideals of the Millennials; they also bring up new challenges for higher education. This topic is further discussed in *Implications for Further Research.*

Gaps in the Research

The data collected identified five significant gaps in the way colleges and universities utilize digital marketing; these gaps involve paid online ads, online videos, texts messages, college planning websites, and job placement statistics. When using paid online ads to promote student enrollment, it is found that 27% of four-year private institutions use this method as a major recruitment tool, while 96% of four-year private institutions only use it occasionally. However, even though a significant amount of institution uses this method, the targeted population (high school seniors) only clicks on these ads 39% of the time. This digital marketing tool proves to be effective and needs to be utilized correctly. Institutions should keep in mind who they are targeting and how they want to construct their message. Based on the data, an institution can benefit from this tool to increase the number of transfer students or increase their adult population.

The use of online videos is a feature that many institutions has used throughout the past few decades, and it proves to be just as effective in 2016. The data show that 77% of high school seniors use YouTube on a weekly basis. Institutions have taken notice of this common trend and 92% of four-year private institutions post videos to a social media platform occasionally, while 28% of four-year privates post videos weekly. The data show that more four-year private institutions utilize this method in order to encourage students to enroll at their institutions. The

data also suggest that the institution should keep going with this trend and be smart with the message. Institutions should be brief and specific, and focus on life and events that are happening on campus.

Email is the most popular form of communication between an institution and a student, however. An increase of cell phone usage throughout the past few years has encouraged institutions to evaluate their communication methodology and include text messaging as an option. Data show that texting is 35% *very effective* in comparison to email with 31% *very effective*. However, when looking at the next level of *somewhat effective*, texting is at 46%, while email is at 62%. It is hard to say just how effective texting can be, simply because only 40% of four-year private institutions are taking advantage of this new engagement tool. Throughout the next decade we will be seeing a dramatic shift in the use of text messaging; more colleges and universities will opt in to using them. However, in order to be effective in texting, the institution must establish a complete communication flow of the admissions cycle. What messages and/or links can be utilized to be effective?

The final gaps within digital marketing revolve around how students are getting their information and just what are they looking at? 85% of high schools seniors are using reliable college planning websites to find their college of enrollment. This statistic could be a direct influence to the fact that 70% of four-year private institutions use college-planning websites to promote their brand and message. Utilizing this tool is key in the private sector, mainly because students find exactly what they are looking for. In regard to what students are looking at, 63% of high school seniors want to see some type of job placement data on a college website. Private institutions are the leaders in this initiative with a 67% with posting their alumni data.

After taking a look over these gaps, it may be a bit unclear as to how these digital marketing tools provide gaps in the research. The complete report not only analyzed four-year private institutions as the research may have suggested, it also analyzed four-year and two-year public institutions. In looking over the complete data, that is where the gaps align. Every component to this digital marketing campaign resulted in four-year institutions taking initiative, while two-year public institutions were not trying the new methods. If these different types of institutions take advantage of their resources and reallocate their marketing and communication plan to utilize these tools, the result may end differently.

Implications for Future Research

After 10 weeks of recruitment, it was clear to see that colleges and universities are no longer recruiting Millennials. As an admissions counselor myself, travelling through various counties including Calaveras, Fresno, Imperial, Inyo, Kern, Kings, Madera, Mariposa, Merced, Mono, San Benito, San Diego, San Francisco, San Joaquin, San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, Stanislaus, Tulare, Tuolumne, and Ventura) in California, and even out of state in Colorado, I observed the shift in generations. The college-entering students today are building off of the *digital natives* that came before them, and are utilizing the digital world at a faster and greater capacity than the previous. In order to be effective, admissions counselors need to be pay close attention on how media tools evolve and how new ones develop. It is known that Higher Education relies heavily on standard print marketing and messaging. However colleges and universities must establish marketing practices and social media tools that are uniquely created for Higher Education. If we are looking to be successful, we should look towards the business model. One business model to look into is Kiosk, a full-service marketing agency with offices in Novato, San Francisco, Liverpool, and Toronto. This company specializes in unique and creative technological

approaches for traditional business. They have completed redesigned the traditional business model and turned it into a model that works for today's consumers that use technology. With digital companies changing their branding and messaging all the time, why shouldn't Higher Education be able to do the same thing?

Overall Significance of the Study

Communicating with anyone in the 21st century is a tough challenge. With different methods of contacting one another in the digital age, high school students and admissions counselors may find it difficult to establish a personal connection and/or relationship with one another. It is clear that colleges and universities are moving in the right direction in utilizing different digital marketing techniques to enroll their class of students, and Dominican University of California is fortunate to be a part of that population. They have a staff that is dedicated to ensuring that they are moving forward in the admissions funnel utilizing the best digital marketing tools they can. Significant steps have been taken to oversee their ultimate goal.

In July 2016, the author Michael Galindo was promoted to Assistant Director of Undergraduate Admissions and Strategic Communication Manager, where he has been able to implement a complete strategic communication plan for the 2016-2017 cycle. Utilizing the data collected in the present study, the Office of Admissions is already seeing immediate results with communicating with their students. Another Admissions Counselor was also named the Social Media Manager, and is currently working with current students making sure their voices are being heard throughout various social media platforms. While this is only the beginning of the current process, there is bound to be effective and long-lasting results of the study.

About the Author

Michael Galindo currently resides in Marin County, California where he also works for Dominican University of California as the Assistant Director of Undergraduate Admissions and Strategic Communication Manager. He currently plans to continue his education in Higher Education Administration and Leadership once he graduates in December 2016. During his down time, he enjoys discovering new restaurants and adventuring around the San Francisco Bay Area with his closest friends and family.

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