Engaging the "Social Networking" Generation

How to Talk to Today's College-Bound Juniors and Seniors

The Internet has changed the college recruitment landscape in nearly a blink of an eye. Many of the rules of enrollment have been rewritten or even discarded as prospective students turn to the Web as their source of college information.

Initially, campus Web sites were little more than online viewbooks. Students, however, began demanding more personalization from college and university Web sites—a reflection of the growing personalization on the Web. Last year, Noel-Levitz, James Tower, and the National Research Center for College and University Admissions (NRCCUA) chronicled these expectations and experiences in the E-Expectations: Class of 2006™ report, *Navigating Toward E-Recruitment: Ten Revelations About Interacting With College-Bound High School Students*, based on a nationwide survey of 1,000 high school juniors.

This year's E-Expectations: Class of 2007 study reveals just how quickly these expectations are evolving. Personalization is just the beginning. More and more, the Internet is serving as a social network for high school students. From blogs to MySpace pages to podcasts, today's college-bound students connect, communicate, and create collectively online. This trend toward online social networks presents dramatic implications—and new possibilities— for e-recruitment.

This report presents some of the findings from this new survey of 1,000 college-bound high school juniors from throughout the United States.
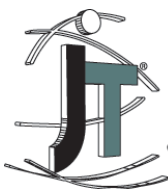
Here's what I want to do on your site...

A real-time financial aid estimator is the most critical function to offer at your Web site, as shown by the responses below. Here are the top activities students said they would like to complete on college Web sites:

1. Complete a financial aid estimator form (88%)
2. Complete a tuition cost calculator form (83%)
3. Complete an admissions application online (81%)
4. Request a campus visit by completing a form (81%)
5. Exchange instant messages with an admissions counselor or student worker (72%)
6. Complete a form to RSVP for a campus event (72%)
7. Inquire online (70%)
8. Read profiles of faculty (64%)
9. E-mail a faculty member (64%)
10. Read a blog written by a member of the faculty (64%)
11. Read profiles of current students (63%)
12. Read a blog written by a current student (63%)
13. View a virtual tour (63%)
14. Personalize a Web site (62%)
15. E-mail current students from the site (61%)

83% of students say they want to complete a tuition cost calculator online.

My e-network

Students are also expressing a desire for "social computing"—the application of computer technology to facilitate collaboration. As discussed in the 2006 edition of *The Horizon Report*, students are already familiar with and using these types of tools: sites such as Flickr for photo sharing, instant messaging (IM) software for immediate communication, and other applications that help them connect online socially with their peers.[1]

Personal and social scorecard: Rate your institution

Personalization on the Web has increased dramatically, and Internet users have come to expect this type of customization. Students are looking for one-to-one connections, to feel that the impersonal is personal. Web sites, e-mails, and other e-communication tools can help facilitate that personalization. While many campuses have gotten on board with this trend, colleges and universities could still do a better job in this arena in the eyes of the class of 2007.

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[1] The New Media Consortium and EDUCAUSE Learning Initiative, *The Horizon Report: 2006 Edition*, (The New Media Consortium, 2006), 8.

But many students now also seek more than just personalization. They want online social networks, through applications and communication streams that pull them into a virtual community. Many students desire this type of online socialization as they conduct their college searches.

The following scorecards show how many students had completed these activities and how many would if they could. Is your campus e-communications program offering what students want?

	Have done this	Have not	Would if they could	*Offered by your campus?*
Personalized Web page	42%	58%	62%	
Personalized viewbook PDF	16%	84%	59%	
Online chat on Web site	9%	91%	51%	
Instant messaged an admissions counselor/student worker	21%	79%	72%	
E-mailed current students from the site	18%	82%	61%	

Prospective students also seek more information on students and faculty through online profiles and new avenues such as blogs:

	Have done this	Have not	Would if they could	*Offered by your campus?*
Read profiles of current students	36%	64%	63%	
Read profiles of alumni	18%	82%	56%	
Read a blog written by a current student	30%	70%	63%	
Read a blog written by a faculty member	17%	83%	83%	
Subscribed to an RSS or XML feed	6%	94%	45%	
Created a profile page for prospective students like MySpace or Live Journal	43%	57%	57%	

With the blog and RSS responses, even though many students had not done these activities, there were still quite a few who would like to if they could. In the case of RSS and XML feeds, the lower "would if I could" response may be due to students being unfamiliar with these applications. However, RSS and XML are great ways for campuses to deliver blog content to students without students having to seek it out.

Students are also showing interest in new technologies such as podcasts:

	Have done this	Have not	Would if they could	*Offered by your campus?*
Downloaded a podcast	9%	91%	54%	
Downloaded a video podcast	9%	91%	46%	
Viewed a virtual tour	35%	65%	63%	

As *The Horizon Report* notes, because of the explosion in popularity of the iPod, many high school students already possess the technology to download podcasts and video podcasts.[2]

Text messaging is the new e-mail

Every year, the Beloit College Mindset List describes the cultural touchstones of entering college freshmen. This year's list included this entry: "Text messaging is their e-mail."[3]

Students increasingly use technologies such as instant messaging and cell phones to send messages or even get online. Sixty-eight percent (68%) of the respondents said they own a cell phone, and 64% said they use instant messaging.

A growing number of students appear open to recruitment efforts used through these media:

- **Would you consider sending an IM to a college rep through the school's site?** Yes 71%
- **Would you consider reading/responding to an IM from a college rep if he or she noted you were online?** Yes 82%
- **Would you consider taking a call on your cell from a college representative?** Yes 59%
- **Would you consider accepting a text message from a college rep?**[4] Yes 49%

Cell phones in particular are important to note, as cell phone technology is advancing rapidly and offering users an increasing number of communication options: Web browsing, e-mail, text messaging, and phone calls. Colleges and universities that have not already begun to explore cell phones in their recruitment efforts may not be able to wait much longer.

Maintain a multimedia mix

While students appear to be open to multiple communication avenues, what communications do they prefer? Are they interested in print materials? Can schools only send e-mails to them? The survey used forced pair questions to uncover some of these communication preferences.

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[2] *The Horizon Report,* 12

[3] "Beloit College Mindset List for the Class of 2010," (Beloit, WI: Beloit College, 2006), http://www.beloit.edu/~pubaff/mindset/index.html

[4] Seventy-two percent (72%) of students noted that their cell phones could receive text messages.

One of the most pressing questions for campus marketing and recruitment professionals is: can we switch from print to e-communications? When asked to choose between the Web and printed brochures, here is how students responded:

- **I would rather look at a Web site than read brochures sent in the mail:** 56%
- **I would rather read brochures sent in the mail than look at a Web site:** 44%

While the majority showed a preference for Web pages over brochure pages, there is still a strong desire to receive information in the mail:

- **I would like to receive information in the mail about a school on my list:** 64%
- **I would like to receive e-mail messages from people at a school on my list:** 36%

Face-to-face contact is also important. Students expressed a strong preference for visiting campus and talking in person to students and staff:

- **I prefer to go to the campus and talk with people to learn about the school:** 63%
- **I like seeing information in the mail, online, and in e-mail messages about schools on my list:** 37%

Students are turning to the Web more, but 64% say they still want to receive information in the mail.

Keep talking to me

Naturally, students want to receive information about your campus when they are beginning their searches. But they also want to continue communicating throughout the recruitment process. We asked students about the kinds of communications they prefer and when they prefer them. In every case, the majority of students wanted to engage in these communications throughout the funnel.

Action	Before applying	After applying	Never
Sending a brochure or letter to me in the mail	80%	17%	3%
Sending me an invitation to visit campus	78%	20%	2%
E-mailing me general information about the school	80%	16%	3%
E-mailing me a personalized PDF brochure	67%	25%	8%
Calling me to talk about academics	55%	40%	5%
Calling me to talk about financing and scholarships	58%	38%	3%
Calling me to talk about student life and activities	54%	40%	6%
Calling me to talk about athletic programs	53%	35%	12%
Inviting me to participate in an online chat session	45%	35%	19%
Instant messaging with a representative from school	46%	37%	17%

Recruit my family

While students are forming new social networks online, their most immediate social network still plays a big role in their decision: their families.

When asked how involved their parents or family were in the college research and application process, 61% said their parents or family were helping with "some of the research and paperwork," while 6% said their parents or family were doing "most" of the research and paperwork. Seventy percent (70%) also said their parents or family were using the Internet to research these schools. Finally, the vast majority of respondents said their parents/family had visited a college campus with them (51%) or thought that they would (42%).

Given the high rate of parental/familial involvement in the college decision process, campuses should be actively recruiting parents of students, not just the students themselves.

Bye-bye dial up

When students go online, the majority of them now use broadband connections. More than three-quarters (78%) said they access the Web through some form of high-speed connection. This is a key trend, because faster connection speeds pave the way for more elaborate content options. Audio and video are no longer time-consuming forms of online content considered taboo during the dial-up era.

Eighty-three percent (83%) also reported that they go online most often from home, with 12% mentioning high school as their preferred Internet surfing spot. This means that most visits to college Web sites are happening at home, with parents or family nearby or even reading along.

Six strategies to take away

What implications does this research have for campus e-recruitment programs? Here are six strategies to help campuses stay ahead of the e-communications curve.

1) Make e-recruitment a social experience.
Personalization is now a key strategy for any e-recruitment communication program. But more than personalization, students are looking for socialization.

Campuses should definitely explore options such as blogs and instant messaging, and even campus-specific social networking pages. Why? Because the "authentic voices" of your students, faculty, staff, and alumni are important and compelling.

2) Expand e-recruitment beyond e-mail and Web pages.
Students are using an increasing array of media to communicate and receive information. E-mail and Web pages are still very important and probably the anchor of any e-recruitment program. But tools such as instant messaging, online chats, podcasts, or virtual tours can greatly enhance the overall effectiveness of e-recruitment.

Cell phones are also another avenue campuses need to use. More and more students have their own cell phones, and many are open to receiving calls and text messages. Plus, as cell

phones become increasingly powerful and versatile, students will use them for activities such as Web surfing and playing audio files.

3) Remember the power of print and personal contact.

While more students expressed a preference for Web pages over printed brochures, they also strongly preferred receiving information by mail to e-mail. Communication programs should still have a mixture of e-communications and print materials in order to reach the greatest range of students.

Likewise, students expressed a 2:1 preference for visiting campuses in person versus receiving information by mail or electronically. E-communications should give students a taste of campus life and encourage them to check out the campus themselves.

4) Give students the information they want as soon as they want it.

This may seem somewhat obvious, but many campus Web sites and communication programs forget this simple principle. Web pages should have quick, easy access to the information nearly all students want: financial aid, tuition, and academic programs. Furthermore, students want tools like financial aid calculators. Help students envision themselves on your campus with effective content and service. Students also want continuous contact, not just up front until they apply. Keep a communication flow going through the admission stage to push students to enroll.

5) E-recruit parents and family, too.

Social recruiting extends to parents and family, too. According to the E-Expectations respondents, 70% of parents are also going online to research college information.

Having sections of a Web site for parents provides another powerful method for influencing prospective students. Personalizing these parental/family Web pages—and offering family members a chance to opt in for more information—allows you to turn them into influential proponents for your campus. Information and tools such as a financial aid calculator could have an even greater impact on them than the prospective students themselves.

6) Gain their trust and respect their privacy by offering them the option to opt in.

One thing that the E-Expectations survey has made clear is that, even in cases where most students prefer a form of e-communication, not all of them do. Some may not want to take phone calls or read instant messages or receive text messages.

Respecting their privacy can seem like a barrier to e-communications. But it's really an opportunity. By providing students with a range of opt-in options—e-mail, cell phones, instant messaging—campuses can give students the types of communications they most want.

About the research sponsors

Noel-Levitz

Noel-Levitz has consulted with more than 1,800 public and private institutions, helping these campuses and systems reach their goals for enrollment, marketing, and student success at the undergraduate and graduate/professional levels.

James Tower

James Tower, headquartered in North Mankato, Minnesota, provides an unparalleled range of recruiting communications services, helping colleges to create custom-built, highly interactive Web sites; targeted e-mail campaigns; virtual tours; videos, DVDs, and CD-ROMs; and print publications.

NRCCUA

The National Research Center for College and University Admissions (NRCCUA) conducts the largest in-school college and career planning survey among high school students. Services include student search lists, recruitment publications and related communications resources.

About the methodology

The E-Expectations: Class of 2007 study uses responses from a telephone survey of 1,018 college-bound high school students transitioning to their senior years. The margin of error for the survey is +/- 3% at a 95% confidence level.

Questions about this paper

If you have any questions or comments about the E-Expectations: Class of 2007 study, please contact Stephanie Geyer, executive consultant at Noel-Levitz. Call 1-800-876-1117, or e-mail stephanie-geyer@noellevitz.com.