



Student Recruitment Marketing Handbook for Trustees

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Student recruitment is, perhaps, the most mysterious and challenging aspect of higher education. We differentiate between “admissions” and “student recruitment.” If most of the admissions staff’s time is spent reading application materials and selecting a class, that college has the luxury of being in “admissions.” If most of the admissions staff’s time is spent trying to get students to apply, visit campus and ultimately enroll, they are in “student recruitment.”

Most colleges and universities understand that student recruitment is a marketing effort. Yet few, if any, are familiar with *services marketing theory* and how it can be applied to higher education. Here, we examine the idiosyncrasies of student recruitment marketing in a way you probably have not seen before: through the prism of services marketing.



Consider these questions:

- ▶ Would you ask an 18-year old to make a lifelong decision?
- ▶ Would you expect a third party — parents in this case — to pay more than \$100,000 for something from which they will derive no *direct* benefits?
- ▶ Can you think of any industry that must provide as many services (educational, food, hotel, entertainment, etc.) as a residential college or university?
- ▶ Do you think the choice of a college is a rational decision?
- ▶ Do you really think marketing a college education is like marketing a car?
- ▶ Do you know any other industry where the “sale” of the product is in the hands of 23-year old, recent college graduates?

Marketing: The Four “P”s.

Service marketing and goods marketing begin at the same place. Both recognize the importance of the four “P”s: *Product, Price, Place and Promotion*. These four dimensions must be managed to establish and maintain a desired position for a college in the higher education marketplace. Unfortunately, until recently, most colleges relied solely on promotion — admissions and public relations — as their marketing focus. Promotion, however, should come last.

THE PRODUCT

What is the product of a college? If you say “a quality education,” you are simply dealing with a euphemism for a wide variety of desired outcomes. Wouldn’t you agree that the residential life or participation in athletics can be a product of college?

To understand a college’s product within the context of service marketing, you must be sure to differentiate between “benefits” and “features.” Benefits are derived from participation in the institution. Features are the activities or resources used to provide the benefits or, in other words, the product.

There are an endless number of benefits associated with a typical college experience. Some that come to mind include confidence building, intellectual skill development, career preparation, value clarification, gaining independence, growth in a safe environment, developing new interests, confronting otherness, having fun, establishing an identity, developing social relationships, etc.



In a GDA Research national survey to determine the benefits that students value most highly, we asked college-bound students what “skills” they expected to gain from their college experience. In order of importance, the skills students said they wish to attain or enhance during college included: *communication skills* (96%); *professional skills* described as the traits, skills and talents needed in all professions (94%); *lifelong learning skills* defined as how to find information and how to research new areas of interest (91%); *social skills* (92%); *intellectual skills* (91%); *personal management skills* defined as the ability to

manage life after college (89%); *leadership and management skills* (87%); and *change skills* defined as the flexibility needed for change and the ability to identify and create opportunities (84%).

Clearly, expectations for college go well beyond a superior academic experience and, especially for smaller colleges, must include rich and varied use of the residential life.

The questions you must ask yourself about your college’s products include:

- ▶ *What is the entire array of benefits offered?*
- ▶ *How (through what activities and resources) does your college produce each of these benefits?*
- ▶ *What benefits are delivered in a way that is distinctive to your institution?*
- ▶ *How visible and intentional is your institution in providing these benefits? Prospective students and parents rely on symbols of institutional seriousness.*
- ▶ *How well are the benefits demonstrated to prospective students, alumni, donors and friends as well as the campus community?*

THE PRICE

The cost of a college education has many facets — far more than simply the tuition, room and board. We will explain the many costs of college later.

The price a student must pay certainly represents a marketing concern. When all is said and done, there are only two (ethical) ways to increase market share with any product:

1 CUT THE PRICE – discount, in other words. Financial aid and fee increases below the inflation rate are the two primary ways colleges cut their prices. Merit-based scholarships are another form of discounting.

2 INCREASE THE VALUE OF THE PRODUCT or the people’s awareness of its value. The public will generally pay what is necessary if the product is believed to be superior. In higher education, as in most industries, increasing the perceived value of your college is the more effective way to increase market share. Price discounts are easier for the competition to match than value enhancements.

PLACE

In most cases, place is not a variable in the marketing of a college to traditional students (young, 18-22 year old, single adults). Your college is not likely to move even if it has a somewhat difficult location to “sell.” Admittedly, off-campus programs (study abroad, urban terms, field stations, internship opportunities) do provide colleges with some “place” options. Also, colleges with satellite campuses or continuing education programs in other locations are using “place” in their market considerations. Yet most colleges must learn how to promote their individual campus and its setting.

PROMOTION

The object of a promotional program at an institution is to get the word to people about the benefits your college provides and how your institution produces them. In other words, place your college in the minds of the appropriate constituencies with an honest and persuasive set of messages.

Performing this task involves virtually all areas of the institution. A high rating from one of the college guides has promotional benefits. So does a strong report from the accreditation visiting team. A winning football team has promotional clout because it provides visibility and indirectly demonstrates success, quality, competitiveness, etc.

Of course, most of the promotional effort is the combination of admissions materials, alumni magazines, high school visits, news releases, letters to key constituencies, visible special events, etc.

THE MARKETING MIX

Product, Price, Place and Promotion constitute the marketing mix. How your institution uses and formulates the mix will determine the effectiveness of its marketing effort.



“Product, Price, Place and Promotion... How your institution uses and formulates the mix will determine the effectiveness of its marketing effort.”

The Idiosyncratic Properties of “Service”: The Four “I”s.

You may decide to purchase an expensive product such as a car if it has the needed features, it looks good in the showroom, has a decent warranty, performs well in a test drive and gets a good report from a reliable evaluation source (*Consumer Reports, Road & Track*).

A student searching for a college has far fewer direct pre-purchase evaluations. In most cases a college education comes with few ways to test drive (experience) and few colleges offer any kind of warranty. A college education or experience has four properties that make it more difficult for a prospective buyer to evaluate: Intangibility, Inseparability of production and consumption, Involvement of the consumer in the production, and Inconsistency.

These idiosyncratic properties of services present both marketing problems and opportunities to colleges and universities.



INSEPARABILITY OF PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION

The manufacture of physical goods can occur under highly controlled conditions, and with a great deal of automation, that ensures the output of items of standard quality. They can be inspected prior to their delivery to the consumer. For many services, the consumer takes delivery at the same time that the service is produced. An educational experience, whether it be a classroom activity or a late-night “bull session” in the residence hall, is produced in the presence of the student consumer (*and with the direct participation of the consumer*). A classroom lecture can be worked out carefully in advance, but its delivery is a much less controllable phenomenon; even more so, a seminar experience requires interaction among students and the professor to have value. The inseparability of production and consumption creates great problems of quality control for colleges and universities.

The student consumer faces another set of problems — how to generalize from limited exposure (for example, a visit to one class or a short campus tour) to what might reasonably be expected from a broad and complex program.

“...it’s easier to produce identical widgets than to produce equal wizards.”

INTANGIBILITY

The challenge for any college is to demonstrate its benefits when the student can’t touch, taste, smell or test the benefits of the experience directly. Earlier we listed some of the benefits of a college education. Virtually all of them are intangible. They cannot easily be measured. The development of intellectual skills cannot be easily observed, explained or sampled. We know it happens, but we can’t package it for trial use.



While the inseparability of production and consumption creates some challenges for quality control, it also affords the following advantage and disadvantage.

Advantage: Instantaneous Feedback

Because production and consumption are inseparable, feedback is instantaneous. Thus, a course that appears too difficult or too easy for a given set of students can be modified by the professor mid-term. Even a lecture that seems to be losing a significant element in a class can be revised in the course of its delivery by a professor who is alert to visual cues and questions. An admissions staff member can tailor his or her interview based on questions and reactions from the prospective student. This is a major advantage over the “recall” that is required for the correction of poorly manufactured goods.

Disadvantage: Individualization

“One man’s meat is another man’s poison” goes the old adage. Higher education reflects this position. Some students love chemistry, others do not. Because of these individual differences, no two educational

experiences are alike and students bring different needs and problems to the same curriculum — even the same lecture. You can take two students, demand they live together, take the same courses, participate in the same activities and follow the same schedule.

What each student gets out of the experience, however, will be quite different. What each student needs may be quite different as well.

For example, students who read the same text or listen to the same lecture can emerge with different questions that require clarification or they may be pointed in different directions for subsequent learning activities. College is a personal and individual experience.

This, of course, makes presenting the experience effectively to prospective students more difficult. Some students may actually seek a college with required language study while others will rule out a college with such a requirement. Learning early about each student’s interests and concerns, therefore, is critical for effective student recruitment marketing.

INVOLVEMENT OF THE CONSUMER IN THE PRODUCTION

If a student from your college is awarded a Rhodes scholarship, who should receive the credit — your college or the student? Obviously both had a role in the production.

A well-led class discussion is one example of how production and consumption become inseparable. The professor may masterfully lead the discussion, but the student must participate in the discussion and learn from other students for the classroom experience to be a success. If you take fine facilities and a great teacher and put them with an unmotivated student, you will still end up with a poor educational experience. Students must take an active part in their education. If nothing else they must take exams, write papers, take part in discussions, attend labs, etc.

When students say, “You get out of college what you put into it,” they are recognizing one of the properties of many service industries including higher education.

INCONSISTENCY (QUALITY CONTROL)

Inconsistency in delivery haunts higher education. Not all professors are equally good teachers. Not all good teachers are “on” every day they teach. Even different sections of the same course are often unequal in quality. We regularly hear complaints from students that their section of an introductory course is much easier or more difficult than the section taught by another professor. Additionally, different professors can grade the same term paper quite differently.

In short, it’s easier to produce identical widgets than to produce equal wizards.

Higher Education: Special Difficulties in Marketing.

Higher education presents marketing challenges that greatly exceed those of many other services.

In this section, we will explain why.

As defined by marketers and economists, goods and services fall into three categories:

► **SEARCH.** Products that fall into the search category can be touched, tested and seen in advance of purchase. Clothes, cars, refrigerators and houses are searchable products because of their properties discussed above. Services are not searchable.

► **EXPERIENCE.** These are goods or services that cannot be examined prior to purchase, but which are sufficiently standardized (usually sufficiently simple) so they can be judged by virtue of past

purchases or the purchase and testimony of others. Experience products tend to be relatively low cost, frequently purchased and low risk. For example you can go to a barber for a haircut. If the barber does a good job, you will probably return. If he or she does not, you will look somewhere else. Dry cleaning, vacations and restaurants are in the experience camp.

► **CREDENCE.** Credence goods and services are experience products raised to a higher degree of complexity and sophistication. They are services that are infrequently purchased, have long-term effects and tend to be relatively expensive.

They often require technical or professional judgment not only to know how well they have been delivered, but sometimes whether they have been delivered. Professional services — medicine, law and financial counsel — are high in credence properties. A college education, with its heavy element of certification and its long-term payoff, is a credence product par excellence.

A COMPLEX PACKAGE OF SERVICES

Higher education is really a complex bundle of services, not a single service. Marketers have developed a taxonomy of service activities.

NATURE OF SERVICE	DIRECT RECIPIENT OF SERVICE	
	PEOPLE	THINGS
TANGIBLE ACTIONS	Services Directed at People's Bodies	Services Directed at Goods and Possessions
	Medical Care Passenger Transport Hotels Restaurants Health Clubs	Freight Transportation Janitorial Services Laundry/Dry Cleaning Veterinary Care Landscaping
INTANGIBLE ACTIONS	Services Directed at People's Minds	Services Directed at Intangible Assets
	Education Broadcasting Personal Counseling Theaters	Banking Legal Services Insurance Employment Agencies

A brief look at this table reveals a rather awe-inspiring fact: a residential college offers virtually all the services listed. Your college may run an infirmary, own vans for transportation, run several restaurants, have janitorial service, operate a theater and radio station, offer insurance and banking services.

In short, colleges embrace numerous areas of services. Thus, the marketing of your college is more complex than providing a single service titled “a college education.” Your marketing success may rest nearly as much with the quality of the food service or the cleanliness of the residence halls as it does with the scholarship of your faculty. We often laugh at the consistency of students complaining about the food or residence halls at their institution but we, *de facto*, promised them a service as part of the “contract” which would be delivered.

A HIGH RISK PRODUCT

Colleges often remind prospective students in their admissions literature how important it is to choose the right college. We do not need to tell them that higher education is a high-risk product.

Marketing experts describe a high-risk product as having these characteristics.

► **INFREQUENT PURCHASE.** A student will only purchase a college education once or, maybe, twice (with a transfer) in his or her lifetime. Thus the opportunity to become an expert in the college selection process is minimal.

► **HIGH COST.** A student considering a selective private college has to face, with his parents’ blessing, at least a \$100,000 price tag. Even a cost per course of \$800 is expensive for many family budgets.

What students actually pay is, however, simply one cost. Other costs occur. Choosing to go to college means giving up other opportunities. Some economists argue that a student who takes the cost of a private education in cash and invests carefully will have a small fortune in ten or so years. Think of people like Steven Jobs, founder of Apple Computer, and Bill Gates, founder of Microsoft. They chose opportunities outside of higher education. Anxiety also has a cost in the college selection process. Will I be accepted? Will I like it? Will I fit in? These kinds of questions raise anxiety.

Other people’s perception of a college is a cost. What do my parents think of my college? My peers? Professionals? Graduate schools? These are the kinds of conscious or subconscious questions a student may ask. Some colleges are widely recognized and respected (low social cost or risk); others impose considerable “recognition” costs if a student travels outside that college’s relatively small sphere of influence. Finally, there is the cost of a student’s self image in a college context. A student who chooses your college because she was rejected elsewhere will have a different self image than one who considers your institution as a first choice.

► **HIGH PERSONAL IMPORTANCE.** Your college probably contributes to a student’s intellectual development, self-confidence, emotional growth, sense of identity, etc. — things of high personal importance.

Additionally, a person’s degree has symbolic importance. A college degree, for better or worse, is a student’s credential in the job market, graduate school arena and, in many cases, the social “market.” The prestige and quality of a college reflects on a student’s judgment and talents. The degree becomes part of a student’s self image and public image.

► **LONG-TERM COMMITMENT.** Two or four years at a college may seem like a very long time in the life of an 18-year-old. Yet the commitment is really for a lifetime. Students cannot go back and exchange their degree for one that better fits their needs or the image they would like to present. (Of course, they can choose to get another degree from a different institution.) Nor can they decide later in life that they wish to change alumni affiliation. It is theirs for life.

► RELATIVELY FEW ALTERNATIVES.

Admissions directors may laugh at the thought of “few alternatives” yet, in the minds of a prospective student, this is true. If a student wishes to stay close to home, as most do, the available colleges listed in the various guides to college are rapidly reduced to a few pages. If the same student seeks a small college that offers Russian, the options are further reduced. Add to this the fact that students have a limited awareness of what’s available and the number of options seems smaller still.

► HIGH LEVEL OF “CREDENCE”

QUALITIES. We discussed credence qualities earlier. Because it is difficult to experience a college education prior to purchase, the customer will turn to other people for help or endorsement. Prospective students seek endorsements from trusted sources when choosing a college. If that endorsement is not forthcoming because your college is not highly regarded or visible, the student is unlikely to pursue the inquiry.

The high risk contributes to the difficulty of recruiting students. The only service that may have a higher risk quotient, based on the criteria outlined above, is elective surgery.

Problems for Students in Choosing a College.

If we assume the issues in the previous section are true, we can better understand the difficulties students have in choosing a college.

►ASCERTAINING AVAILABLE BENEFITS.

Students only have a vague notion of what colleges offer and how certain features translate into benefits. For example, they see small classes as more personal, but they may miss the reality that fewer students provide more interaction with peers, encourage discussion which in turn increases communication skills, aid in their ability to formulate their own views, provide greater learning from a professor's evaluation, etc. Since they cannot connect features with the benefits they deliver, all colleges in their mind are reasonably equal. Students, therefore, tend to limit their search, not widen it. Given the complexity of the colleges and all that a student needs to learn about them prior to purchase, it is logical then that they would not look too far or too long at too many.

►ASSESSING THEIR OWN CAPACITIES.

Students need a good sense of self and their objectives before they can choose an appropriate college. That's a lot to expect from an 18-year-old.

Many high-ability students do not apply to selective colleges because they do not feel they could get in and/or do the work required. Meanwhile, students of modest ability apply to institutions where their chances of admission and/or success are



highly unlikely. Both these groups of students have difficulty assessing their own capacities.

Additionally, students may suspect their high school is better or worse than it actually is. In either case, they will not know how to evaluate their place in the college selection world. Strong high school athletes can be devastated in college when they find they can't make the team. Another student may not try out for a team because she does not think she has the ability. There are endless numbers of examples of the difficulty students face in judging their own competence and strengths. Of course, they also do not have the experience to develop the necessary insight and perspective.

►DISTINGUISHING OR EVALUATING AMONG VARIOUS COLLEGES.

It is tough for academics to know how good a particular college program is — think how much tougher it is for a high school student. All colleges present themselves as outstanding according to their institutions' admissions materials. A student from central Pennsylvania who wants a small, co-ed, liberal arts institution within three hours of home can choose from about 15, including some of the state supported institutions. On paper, they all look very similar. This often means students adopt a "satisfying search strategy." Students are more likely to choose a college that satisfies some of their major needs. They are less likely to search very long for the optimal college, partly because the array of benefits and features to be considered is so large, and partly because it's so difficult for a first-time and only-time purchaser to judge colleges on so many features.

►REDUCING RISK IN CHOOSING A COLLEGE.

Students can easily make mistakes in resolving the issues just laid out. This compounds problems inherent in buying a high-risk service such as higher education. To reduce the risks associated with high price and few known alternatives, students may take the path of least resistance (or greatest familiarity). They may simply choose local low-priced state supported institutions that they have known all their lives. This is a simple, but reasonably effective, way to reduce risk.



Or they may exhibit brand-name loyalty. Brand names are safe choices. We all know the brand name colleges. The Ivies head one list. The major “flagship” state universities head a second list. A respected local institution is a “brand name” for people in its own locale. To a student faced with a high-risk decision, it is safer to go to the well-known institution regardless of personal fit.

► **RELYING MORE ON PERSONAL SOURCES OF INFORMATION.** What others say or think provides credibility for a “credence” product. What the college says in its publications is often suspected of self-serving bias.

“Each positive nod about a college from someone the student respects becomes a verification of quality...”

People who work for your college become proxies for the institution. In a prospective student’s mind, each admissions counselor reflects the type of person a student can expect to meet at the institution. Each positive nod about a college from someone the student respects becomes a verification of quality or, at least, acceptability. Graduates of the college, as well as its current students, create tangibility for the college and its benefits.

College Strategies: Responding to Students.

We suspect your college or university is doing many of the things prescribed by the services marketing theory. Yet, viewed within the context of the marketing model, the activities should make more sense and their interrelationship should be more apparent.

ASSESS WHAT STUDENTS YOUR INSTITUTION SERVES BEST

Despite the protest to the contrary, most colleges still attempt to be “all things to all people.” Most institutions, to our knowledge, have not assessed the kind and quality of students they serve best. In the name of diversity, colleges often unconsciously mislead students. The national data suggest that only about three of ten students withdraw from college for poor academic performance. In some cases, the college did a poor job recognizing the student’s motivation or academic capacity. In more cases, however, the college failed to live up to the student’s expectations. Many high-ability students become bored and jaded because the college cannot meet their need for intellectual stimulation.

Most strategic planning efforts start by examining what the institution currently does. They fail to evaluate these activities from the perspective of what students need and how well the college meets those needs. In fact, we have rarely heard a discussion on a campus about “what do we owe students” but rather “what kind of students would we like?”

Realistically assessing the students your college serves best makes targeting an audience far easier.

Surveying your current students is one of the first steps to learning what students you serve best. Current students are



successful “recruits” but we can guarantee you that not all are equally happy with the experience. A well crafted “marketing-oriented” (not satisfaction) survey can determine why students chose your institution and how well your institution is meeting their expectations as well as identify which students (demographically and attitudinally) are most excited about the experience. Obviously, a good survey will also teach you what student recruitment tactics worked with them. Through data analysis you can learn how groups (men, women, high ability, modest ability, higher income, lower income, students of color, etc.) differ in their attitudes and concerns. More importantly, you can identify “ideal students”— those students who the college finds most desirable and who are most satisfied with the experience.

The follow-up to the current student survey should be the survey of non-applying inquirers. Every year thousands of college-bound students request information about your college or university. Yet a college will convert only about four to 12% of these inquiries to applicant depending on the size and visibility of the institution. Imagine the increase in applications if the conversion from inquiry to application improved by five percent on an inquiry base of 10,000? Not only does an inquiry study tell you about the students considering your institution (gender, income, academic ability, hometown, region, etc.) it allows you to determine their attitudes, expected outcomes and desired characteristics of your institution. You can also compare the attitudes, interests and backgrounds of students in the inquiry pool with the successful current student.

One particularly effective analysis determines the real affinity for your institution. For example, at a small private college in a small town, you could look at inquirers who prefer a private institution, a college to a university, a small town location, and an enrollment of under 1,500. These are objective traits. Using this model, it is possible to predict how many in your inquiry pool are legitimate candidates for your college, and what messages and characteristics will attract them to your institution. Roughly, 60% of an inquiry pool are poor fits for an institution and are very unlikely to enroll.

You can also add more subjective traits to the model such as accessible faculty, interest in liberal arts or something distinctive to the institution. This provides an even better picture of the likely candidates for your institution.

Do not make the mistake of thinking that a geodemographic scan of your inquiry pool can replace attitudinal research on your inquiry pool. For the most part, geodemographics assumes that all students from similar backgrounds want the same kind of institution.

Geodemographics do not take into account the distance from home the student is willing to travel, the academic ability of the student, or even the family's willingness to pay. To better understand the weakness inherent in a geodemographic scan, think about your own neighborhood. Do all the students in your neighborhood go to the same college? Usually one finds that students from the same neighborhood go to many different kinds of colleges. Some will go to a small private college, some to a large state institution. Some will go to an Ivy League university, and some will travel across the country. Some neighbors are willing to pay more for college than others. Clearly, geodemographics is not a way to predict who is going to come to your institution.

COMMUNICATE YOUR EXPECTATIONS OF STUDENTS

Our research tells us that about half the college-bound students say the critical information from a college is “what does it take to be admitted” while the other half say they want to know “what kinds of students succeed” at the institution. In both cases, these students are asking for help in judging their capacities and likely “fit” with the institution. Unfortunately, there is “no job description” for a college student. Nor is there a “college syllabus” that explains what the college expects students to accomplish in their four years. Many students will enter a college seeking

a business degree and be surprised when confronted with all the general education requirements. Most colleges think they are communicating effectively, but in our experience, few are. Ask any student at a small college what surprised them most about the institution and most will say the “accessibility of the faculty.” Read the college's materials and accessibility is mentioned dozens of times. GDA Integrated Services has three suggestions for communicating more effectively.

“We have rarely heard a discussion on a campus ask ‘what do we owe students;’ the question is usually ‘what kind of students would we like?’ ”

►**FIRST, SPELL IT OUT.** Most admissions marketing materials are too subtle. Our rule is: tell prospective students what you are going to tell them about your institution, then tell them and then tell them what you told them.

►**SECOND, CONNECT THE DOTS.** Admissions materials and staff leave too much to inference. For example, small colleges tout their small classes, but do little to explain the benefits of them. They assume a student is inferring that small classes mean you must be well prepared for every class, that you will learn to defend your views, that you will learn from your peers and so forth. For the most part, our studies show that students infer small classes mean “academic support.” That is why large universities are viewed as better places to go if you seek academic challenge and

small colleges are viewed as the best if you expect academic difficulty.

►**THIRD, WALK THE WALK.** If your receptions for prospective students, or even new student orientation, focus primarily on getting to know each other in a fun environment, your institution is sending the message that relationships and enjoyment are the expectations. Some activities for prospective and new students must set the academic tone as well. Whether it is holding mini-courses or requiring new students to read a piece of literature, your institution must let students know that the life of the mind is highly valued.

DEVELOP EFFECTIVE SYMBOLS

As our model indicates, the college experience is intangible. A student searching for a college can't kick the tires, look under the hood or demand a warranty. Instead, students look for evidence through symbols. A large library building (not necessarily the number of volumes) is a symbol of academic quality. Yet, symbols go well beyond the state of the campus. Students look for symbols in all areas.

We have found that many colleges and universities do some things very well yet, to the prospective student, it looks like any other college of its type. For example, many small colleges have calendars with an intensive learning period (4-1-4, 4-4-1). We know from our research that the opportunity to personalize their education is a characteristic largely attributed to small colleges. A short intensive learning program affords opportunities to travel overseas, do an internship, conduct an independent study, practice for graduate school entrance exams and so forth — forms of personalizing the education. Yet few colleges with this option “package” these opportunities as a “guarantee” of personalization.

“...all of GDA Research’s surveys indicate that the campus visit is the only predictor of possible enrollment for all but the most prestigious institutions.”

Symbols take various shapes. If a rural college claims easy access to a major city, then it should have the symbol of access to prove it such as a van or a bus route to the city. Your college might do a particularly good job in serving the undecided students, but if there is no program to symbolize it, your institution will look like all the others. A college must demonstrate through symbols that it delivers what it promises.

GET STUDENTS TO CAMPUS

This statement is no surprise to anyone in college administration, but it is amazing how many colleges spend the bulk of their student recruitment budget on sending admissions counselors to far flung regions when the best use of student recruitment dollars is getting prospective students to campus. GDA Research finds that the four most important sources of information for prospective students are the campus visit (by far), academic department information, contact with current students and contact with faculty. All of these sources can come into play when a student visits.

Offering “free” transportation or providing additional incentives for a student to visit is key to student recruitment. Allowing students to experience life and learning on your college campus is crucial to the admissions process. Campus tours, overnight visits and summer programs for high school students are the college equivalent of “free trials.” Videos often

attempt to provide a free trial in the comfort of one’s home, but they are suspected as a highly managed sampling. Virtual tours on college websites are helpful but are not a substitute for the campus visit.

MAINTAIN FACILITIES

As stated above, all of GDA Research’s surveys indicate that the campus visit is the only predictor of possible enrollment for all but the most prestigious institutions. The upkeep of the campus, therefore, is an important tangible symbol of your institution’s quality. The money spent on mowing the lawn and painting buildings might be among the most important dollars spent for student recruitment marketing purposes. GDA studies also show that residence halls, including room size, configuration, cleanliness, upkeep and amenities, are by far the most important facilities to students visiting the campus of a residential college. More than half of the college-bound students say the residence halls are most important when they visit campus, followed by classroom space at about 20%. If you have many deferred maintenance issues on your campus, make improving the residence halls the top priority.

All this being said, do not fall prey to the notion that a new athletic center or a new student center will solve all enrollment woes. We have seen too often an investment in a wonderful recreational center that did not translate into more

students. We know of one college that improved all its facilities significantly, believing in the “build it and they will come” mystique, only to find itself in a spiraling enrollment decline. While amenities such as new recreation facilities or a new student center may be effective in yielding a student who is serious about your institution, investment benefits and name recognition will have greater impact on those students looking at your institution during the inquiry stage.

CUSTOMIZE INFORMATION

Individualization, as noted above, is one disadvantage of services marketing, overload is another. Students want specific information on what’s important to them. They may not want to hear everything your institution has to say. In our national studies, when asked to choose from three options, nearly two of three college-bound students preferred a college that “provides materials based on my interests” (64%) to a college that “provides me with the information I request” (22%) or a college that “provides the information it thinks I need to know” (14%). Assuming students are going to find the information they seek on your website or in your admissions publication is dangerous.

However, to provide materials based on a student’s interests — to truly customize your information — the admissions office needs to know as much as possible about each inquiry, not just each applicant. The more information your college has on a student’s ability, academic and extracurricular interests and goals and objectives, the more likely your admissions office is to convert that student to an applicant and an enrollee. The emphasis, therefore, should be on customization as well as personalization. Many colleges mistake personalization for customization. Simply putting a handwritten note on generic responses to an inquiry or as an acknowledgment of a meeting at a college fair is personalization.



Responding with special information that provides insights and information on issues of interest to the student is customization.

To be effective, the customization philosophy must pervade all segments of the campus. Our research shows that prospective students do not always consider admissions personnel to be credible sources of information. College-bound students may appreciate the attention and help of admissions counselors, but they expect other sources or people to verify claims made by the

staff. For this reason (as we describe below), current students, alumni and faculty must be brought into the mix. Additionally, because admissions materials are also suspect, “real materials” used by students on campus (weekly calendars, arts programs or career counseling materials) and materials that suggest a “third party endorsement” (newspaper clippings) are more effective than just another admissions brochure.

Technology has made and is continuing to make customization easier. In the days before personal computers and the Internet, we provided all customized

information to students by mail. Now, we have a myriad of ways of both personalizing and customizing information about an institution to prospective students. Examples include using electronic profile cards, pre-populated online applications, predictive models and telescreening to identify who is interested and what interests them to create individual print and electronic publications, targeted email campaigns, interactive mini-websites, personalized web pages and more that address the personal interests of prospective students.

USE PERSONAL CONTACTS MORE THAN ADVERTISING

It's not the admissions office, nor the college guides that generally alert students to a college. It is a wide variety of people with many or few ties to the college or university. In fact, in our national studies, only two of 10 college-bound seniors say they first learned of their enrolling college through materials mailed to their home, a college fair, an admissions publication or a meeting with an admissions counselor from a particular school. These are the sources over which the college or university has some control. On the other hand, more than eight of 10 college-bound seniors surveyed said they first heard of their enrolling college from friends/classmates, family members who attend/ed, a friend who attends, family advice, and, to a much less degree, high-school guidance counselors or high-school teachers. More important, a prospective student who learned of a college from a "third party" is nearly four times more likely to apply and twice as likely to enroll.

Appreciating the role of the various constituencies and effectively utilizing these groups requires approaching word-of-mouth marketing (or reputational marketing) in a deliberate way.

GDA Integrated Services has identified several keys to effective word-of-mouth marketing that colleges should consider adopting.

► DEVELOP YOUR OWN LANGUAGE

(consistent themes, use of phrases and so forth). The object is to provide a language that allows alumni, students and faculty to describe a college or university in a uniform and distinctive fashion. This will require a distinctive and consistent position.



► **FIND CHAMPIONS.** Champions are those people who continually say great things about a college or university. Champions can be trustees, alumni, current students, parents and past parents, high-school guidance counselors, employers and media representatives whom the institution has identified or who have identified themselves as great proponents of the college or university.

► **ASK FOR CRITICISM.** There is a concept called the Rule of 333. This rule says that for every three positive comments about an institution or product, 33 say something negative. The greatest damage occurs when you do not know that people are unhappy. Colleges and universities should ask their staffs to request criticism or insights from any groups with which they have contact.

► **LISTEN TO INSIDERS' TALK.** The faculty, staff and students play an important role in word-of-mouth marketing. If current students think your institution is not challenging, it is likely that they are saying that to their friends off-campus as well. If staff feels marginalized, they tell their friends who in turn tell their friends.

► **OFFER GUARANTEES.** Guarantees take the risk out of offering word-of-mouth advice. A person might say something nice about a store, but they confirm it by saying "besides everything is guaranteed to meet your satisfaction." Education in general shrinks from guarantees. But if you look carefully, you will find more and more examples of guarantees, such as graduating in four years, getting an internship, or finding a job. More institutions should use terms such as "pledge" or "commitment."

USE PUBLIC RELATIONS MORE THAN ADVERTISING

With traditional students, the mention of a college in one of the “rating” books or articles is likely to have more impact on its image than all the space purchased in special advertising sections of newspapers. In fact, in our studies, we could find only one percent of the traditional-age college-bound students who inquired about a college because of a television, radio, newspaper or billboard advertisement. (*This excludes specialty student recruitment publications.*) A news story on your institution, on the other hand, is a form of third party endorsement. A feature story creates a kind of tangibility that appears less “managed” than promotional publications or ads.

While mass media advertising does not attract traditional-age students (*it certainly works well with some non-traditional groups*), we do believe promotion, and especially promotion that provides a service, can play a great part in increasing the visibility, prestige and status of a college or university.

The key to low-cost promotion is providing services to secondary schools, independent counselors, community colleges and employers. The theory is simple: colleges and universities are at their best when they educate. Educational materials that are made available to already financially strapped high schools demonstrate the institution’s commitment to education, are low-key, and result in greater visibility. The materials may be posters, videotapes/ DVDs, computer programs or handouts. These services will also get far greater visibility than self-serving promotional materials.

Several of our clients credit much of their current success to a consistent use

of educational materials aimed at the classroom or the guidance counselor. Materials have included: “Information on DNA,” for a college trying to attract more science students, “Poetry Terms,” for a college pushing its creative writing program, A “Description of the European Community,” as a way to promote one college’s school of business, and “The Brain,” for a university with a strong neuroscience program. Each of these included a teaching tool for those who requested help in incorporating the information into their classroom work.

Materials for high school guidance counselors have included How to Prepare for a Selective College, Mythstakes about Financial Aid, 25 Myths about Colleges and A Glossary of College Terms.

We have seen colleges and universities produce low budget videos for high school classroom use on voting behavior, medieval music, moral theology, and the “magic” of chemistry.

On-campus workshops on how to choose a college, teen wellness and tips for teens and parents are other kinds of services designed to endear an institution to a student or his parents.

High schools, with their very limited resources, not only appreciate but also utilize materials and teaching tools that fit their programs and can bring an educational component to their classrooms. Adults, looking for ways to better understand the college selection process, also are great targets.

This is not to say that a college and university should stop its quest for that one story in *The New York Times* that will seal its future as the institution of the 21st Century. However, in the meantime, this form of guaranteed visibility can have a dramatic impact.

ENCOURAGE CONTACT WITH CURRENT STUDENTS AND ALUMNI

At the outset, college-bound students seek “investment benefits.” They questions they ask include: Will this college help me get a good job? Will it help me get into a good graduate school? Will I be well regarded by others after I graduate?

The search for “consumption benefits” usually begins during the summer between junior and senior year in high school, after students discover several institutions that they believe can provide adequate investment benefits. Consumption benefits focus on the level of comfort a student feels. Questions asked, consciously or unconsciously, by students during this period include: *Are there enough other students like me so I will be comfortable? Will I fit in? Will it be easy to make friends? Will I be happy there? Will I like the other students? Will there be enough things for me to do? Will it be fun? Is it an attractive place? Are the dorms and food good?*

Prospective students tend to use the alumni and their careers as evidence of investment benefits. Alumni represent the end product, the outcome students seek. Our surveys say that students are impressed by the big name alumni, but they are more impressed with the general successes of your graduates. Equally important is a pleasant contact with an alumnus or alumna in planned or spontaneous settings.

To determine consumption benefits, prospective students look to current students — who they are, what they are like and what they do — as well as at the college’s facilities. Putting prospective students in residence halls for the night is one way of reducing risk. Students will feel the life of the college directly and see how they fit with others at the college. Students who formally or informally return to their high schools have proven effective in attracting other students.

A Dangerous Stress Point.

The most impressive student recruitment efforts are wasted if the “product,” “price” and “place” are merely limping behind the “promotion.” Yet, all too often, the responsibility for the success or failure of student recruitment efforts is placed squarely on the shoulders of the promotion leader: the director or dean of admissions. It has gotten increasingly difficult to identify and hire creative and competent directors or deans of admissions. About once a month we get a call from a director of admissions looking for a job as an associate director, and we know many excellent people who have left the business entirely.

ASSESS WHAT STUDENTS YOUR INSTITUTION SERVES BEST

Frankly, in our view, serving as a director of admissions at a tuition-driven institution is the most thankless of any job we can imagine. If that director misjudges yield and admits too many students in an entering class, faculty and student services staff become angry about tripling up students in residence hall rooms and larger classes. If the admissions office falls short of its very difficult to predict goal, it is blamed for lower or no monetary raises or cuts in everyone’s budget. If the numbers are just right, the complaint is generally that the students are not bright enough, rich enough or diverse enough — as if those characteristics are not in some respect mutually exclusive.



The services marketing model demonstrates clearly the difficulties of marketing the complicated package of services we call “higher education.” It also provides a method whereby a college or university can accurately identify and describe its product and target its consumers — the students most likely to enroll. Most important, the model demonstrates why and how the ultimate success of student recruitment efforts falls on the shoulders of the entire institution.

Bibliography available upon request.

For additional copies of this article, please contact GDA Integrated Services at 860-388-3958 or gdais@dehne.com.



GDA Integrated Services

GDA Integrated Services is a market research, consulting and services company that specializes in customized, integrated marketing solutions designed to help colleges and universities gain visibility, recruit students and raise money.

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Broadcast E-mail
Communications Assessments
Consulting/Counseling
Custom Designed Communication Flows
Direct Mail
Interest Prediction Model
Operations Assessments
Paper & Electronic Expanded Profile Card
Recruitment Assessments
Recruitment Training & Mentoring
SnapplicationSM
 Recruitment & Retention Application Program
Tele-Recruiting
Tele-Screening

CREATIVE SERVICES

Branding/Positioning
Communications Assessments
Institutional Identity Programs
Print Publications
Special Message Mini-site
Website Assessments & Design

FINANCIAL AID

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Financial Aid Modeling
Leveraging Matrix
Program Audits

PUBLIC RELATIONS

1 to 10 Visibility & Image Enhancement Campaign
Consulting/Counseling
Development Communications
Guaranteed Visibility Campaigns
Program Assessments

RESEARCH & STRATEGIC PLANNING

Attrition/Retention Surveys
Branding Research
Custom Admitted Applicant Surveys
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