

## **Friend or Foe: Exploring the Impact of Social Media and other Technology on the College Admissions Process**

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I have neither given nor received unauthorized assistance while preparing this assignment and I have written the code myself.

### **Issue Identification**

The communication landscape is rapidly changing, as new technologies are improved and introduced. As today's youth have been raised with advanced technological expectations, those who provide services to and interact with them must find ways to keep up with their pace and meet their changing expectations.

According to Roush (2006), "technologies are ushering us into a world of what would be called continuous computing – continuous in the usual sense of "uninterrupted," but also in the sense that it's continuous with our lives, in all their messy, social, biographical richness." (p. 3). If these are accurate observations, which they are in many cases, we should explore ways in which we can utilize this "continuous computing" to benefit or enhance our society and lives. Barnes and Mattson (2008) echo Roush's idea, indicating that young people who are now graduating from high school wear the moniker "wired generation". They go further to explain that the world is characterized by "interactivity and hyper-communication".

Roush (2006) indicates that one blog reader talked about how this concept now pertains to the college admissions arena. In fact, the reader reportedly explained how his institution began blogging about the admissions and financial aid processes with the then incoming freshman class. Their efforts were apparently successful in "providing students a much more interactive way to get their questions answered and their issues addressed" (p.16). Just as technology continues to evolve, changing how and when we communicate with others, so do the ways in which colleges and universities recruit and "vet" their prospective students.

In relationship to my assertion that we must be creative in meeting the expectations of today's youth, Roush (2006) reports that the blog reader stated that he walks "around with my AIM channel always open on my cell phone and constantly am monitoring the blog for feedback. Not only does the technology exist to allow this, but the next generation of customer is expecting it" (p.16).

Many colleges and universities are appealing to the high-tech generation through the increasing use of advanced technology (Smith, 2009). They are incorporating more technology into their admissions policies, including the use of social media sites. Many of these institutions are also moving towards, or have already adopted, completed paperless processes. This serves to expedite the communication exchange and often better positions them in the college choice process.

### **Literature and Resource Review**

Higher education institutions are using various technologies to control the information that they gather about potential students, as well as the information that those same individuals gather about the institution. In order to understand the use of technology within the context of the college admissions process, we must examine what is important to prospective students and identify the current trends and their overall impact on the process, through a review of the current literature and research which addresses this issue.

## **Student Priorities**

According to Cabrera and La Nasa (2000), the three stages of the college-choice process are predisposition, search, and choice. Each stage has several characteristic factors, but I will focus on the characteristics most directly relevant to the use of technology. Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) state that the search stage of the admissions process “involves the accumulation and assimilation of information necessary to develop the student’s short list of institutions” (p. 9). One of the most relevant elements of this stage is ‘students’ access to information’. Cabrera and La Nasa (2000) also state the following, in their description of the choice stage:

Applying to college and actually enrolling have been scrutinized under two lenses: one is economic in nature, and the other is sociological (St. John, Paulsen, and Starkey, 1996). The economic perspective regards enrollment as the result of a rational process in which an individual estimates the economic and social benefits of attending college, comparing them with those of competing alternatives (Manski and Wise, 1983). (p. 11-12)

In order to determine the saliency of potential institutions, a prospective student must gather enough information about each, in order to determine which one would be the best fit. This includes evaluating their ability to meet admissions standards and identifying the financial resources available to them for covering the cost of attending that particular institution (Cabrera and La Nasa, 2000). This directly correlates to students’ access to information, because they need to have access to the necessary information about each institution, in order to assess and compare how each would best fit with their own aspirations and goals.

There are several methods and mediums through which an individual institution may provide prospective students with access to information about that institution’s admissions standards and what they have to offer. According to Hesel (2004), institutional websites now have greater impact on prospective students’ decisions than their written publications. Hesel (n.d.) also states that “the Internet has become one of the most important communications tools in college choice” (p. 1).

According to Noel-Levitz (2000), “the communication flow is meant to steadily build the student’s interest in the institution” and is “especially effective in competing with other institutions and in persuading or influencing students to enroll” (p. 1). Noel-Levitz (2000) also identifies seven variables through which there exists a relationship between a student’s enrollment decision and the institution’s communication with that student. These variables include awareness, image, fit, flow systems, messages, mix of media, and barriers to enrollment.

Messages should relate to the identified interests of prospective students, and should be sent to prospects at appropriate times based upon their status in the process. In fact, Noel-Levitz (2000) even indicates that the institution should develop and utilize different communication flows for the different target markets which have been identified in the enrollment goals. Noel-Levitz (2000) states that “letters should come from different persons/offices depending on the

message/purpose” (p. 3). The level of prospective student interest in the institution is also directly related to the type of messages communicated, and the timing of when they are communicated (Noel-Levitz, 2000).

The mediums used in the communication process should include a mixture of media, print, and personal contact, although Noel -Levitz (2000) suggests that emphasis should be placed upon personal contact. Donehower (2003) states that “it's the personal touch in a recruitment message that can help applicants and their families distinguish” between different institutions. Noel-Levitz (2000) also states that in order “to work successfully, the communication system must combine and integrate written and personal communication over the period when prospective students make their college/university decisions” (p. 1).

### **Trends**

Although not every college or university has incorporated technology into their admissions processes, we have already seen some significant changes, often making it easier for students and their parents to gather information about institutions, and to then submit applications. It also becomes easier for the institutions to communicate with prospective students who they are recruiting for admission.

Smith (2009) states that Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are some of the social networking sites being used nationally to recruit prospective students. Some institutions have created Facebook fan pages and some allow prospective students to “follow” them on Twitter. Smith explains that one northeastern university even allows students to submit a Facebook video essay, in lieu of a traditional, written one. Appelrouth (2009) shares that a southeastern university requires a 20 to 30 minute interview of each applicant, which often takes place through Skype. Some institutions are also creating and utilizing blogs to connect with prospective students, keep them updated on campus events, and answer questions that they may have. As of 2008, 41% of all the four-year accredited U.S. institutions reported having a blog (Barnes and Mattson, 2008). One institution even began using Skype, so they can host sessions for prospective students, during which they answer questions over the internet through video-capable voice calls (Vaughn, 2010).

Another manifestation of this trend is the creation of online admissions communities. One such community is Admish.com (2007). This community was officially launched in September 2007, and is designed to include prospective students, parents, admissions officers, teachers, guidance counselors, and others involved in the admissions process. In addition to Admish.com, Wood (2008) references Zinch.com (launched in March 2007), Cappex.com and EdSoup.com as sites designed specifically to assist with the college admissions process. She suggests that Zinch.com can provide a medium for prospective students to highlight their skills, which I believe makes it akin to an online portfolio. Wood (2008) believes that colleges are onboard with the use of these online communities, as evidenced by the fact that 400 colleges signed on to Zinch.com in its first year of existence.

Appelrouth (2009) states that Skype, YouTube, and email are the usual mediums for communication. He further explains that admissions officers prefer email over Facebook for communication, due to ethical issues that may result from its uses. Although Facebook is rarely used for communication, Appelrouth suggests that institutions are still using technology to reach out to prospective students in a number of ways. This includes the use of student blogs, which often ties into the access to current students and alumni. It helps convey the personal side of the student experience. Both audio and video podcasts are being used, providing access to classes, lectures and information sessions. Appelrouth indicates that some universities are even posting courses via i-Tunes. Courses, lectures, and other activities are also being uploaded onto YouTube channels. Finally, college fairs and open houses are also held online, so the student can participate without ever even leaving home.

Appelrouth (2009) also states that “paper applications are historical artifacts”. This idea is reinforced by the development and use of [www.commonapp.org](http://www.commonapp.org). This website allows applicants to apply online to more than one college or university, without having to complete several institution specific applications. In my own experience, a school where I worked in 2008 made the decision to completely eliminate paper applications, canceling print orders for additional applications and shredding the remaining ones we had in stock. Although it also meant revising our marketing materials, which obviously involved a cost, our administration was committed to making the process easier for students and staff. Unfortunately, there were supporting documents that still had to be provided in hard copy, so the application process was not completely paperless. In order to address this concern, many institutions are also using tools such as the College Board’s Institutional Documentation Service (IDOC), which helps eliminate the need for documents to be provided in hard copy.

### **Benefits**

Kobayashi (2009) suggests that the real-time nature and conciseness of Twitter updates, make them a useful way to answer admissions questions posed by applicants. Although they don’t necessarily share the same level of conciseness, the use of other technologies, including Skype and chat rooms, also offers information in real-time. There is never a need to wait for new marketing materials to be printed, and it is much more cost-effective.

Another benefit identified in the literature is the opportunity for prospective students to obtain information from current students and alumni, through social networking sites and online communities (Vaughn, 2010). This can be accomplished through the use of message boards, one-on-one conversations, or question and answer sessions. This can improve an institution’s chances in the college choice process, because it provides a totally different perspective than just speaking with an admissions officer. This enhances the experience for the prospective student, because they learn from someone who has “lived” the experience.

In general, the benefits of incorporating technology into the admissions process fall into two major categories. They are simplification of the process and access to information. What could be simpler than completing one application online, which allows the applicant to apply to 7 different colleges or universities? What could be simpler than going to the internet to “attend”

a college's open house? It reduces the cost to the applicant, saves time due to no need to travel, and allows the students to control their participation in the process.

### **Concerns**

Although few colleges have implemented official policies regarding if and how internet information can be used in determining an applicant's admission status, a number of institutions are unofficially utilizing internet information (primarily gathered from social networking sites) in their decision making. In fact, Lawson (2009) cites a study which indicates that only 13% of the institutions completing that survey had official policies.

Sinrod (2009) observes that the time young people spend on these sites is "inordinate" and that this use may have some "serious repercussions". He then cites a National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) paper, which reports that ¼ of colleges search the web visit social networking sites to research their applicants. Again, the absence of an official policy does not guarantee that it won't be used. According to Barnes (2006), "schools are warning students that college admissions officers and future employers are checking social networking sites to read what applicants have written online."

At the same time, institutions must be careful in their use of the information referenced above. Kobayashi (2009) urges institutions to consider whether or not the practice is even acceptable. He believes that the future will usher in a debate about information from social networking sites which may have directly impacted an admissions decision.

In his article about Texas Tech and their admissions staff's use of social networking, Lawson (2009) quotes the director of undergraduate admissions as stating, "To come in and go this is something that we evaluate for our admission criteria, that's not the case. We're more interested in developing the communication, developing the relationship with these students as best we can on a one on one level." In fact, the director continues on to explain that their ultimate goal is to use social media to connect with the students while maintaining personal and professional lines.

It may be possible that this is the direction in which other institutions should move. However, there still remains a chance that the institution may experience significant difficulty in trying to prove, if required to, that they did not consider information which they may have been able to access through a social media site. If an applicant challenges a denial of admission, the burden may be on the institution to prove that the compromising pictures or inappropriate language on the applicant's Facebook page did not impact the admissions decision. When explaining why he doesn't use information from social networking to disqualify applicants, an associate director of undergraduate admissions was quoted by Wood (2008) as saying, "When we get an application, the student and a counselor have signed it to verify that it is accurate. The internet provides no such guarantee." Although this may be an institutional policy, the staff member's use of Cappex.com and Zinch.com could make it difficult to prove that it was put into practice.

One final concern is that technological advances may in some ways increase the control parents have in the college admissions process, instead of the students (Appelrouth, 2009). They may make it easier for helicopter parents to 'hover' and to "become overly plugged in". Although it is important for the parents to be involved on some levels, it is important to avoid the situations where parents are writing personal statements and filling out the housing applications for their children. As Appelrouth (2009) states, "Success in college requires a great deal of self-direction and self-regulation. A student who is denied the chance to oversee the application process is missing an important developmental opportunity".

## **Recommendations**

### **Assessment and Evaluation**

It is important for any institution to base decisions for change on factual data, and an assessment of what has been proven to work well. This assessment should focus on similar institutions and student populations with demographics similar to their own, as well as identifying their own target audience. Noel-Levitz (2007) states that "by tracking" certain "data and derivatives that apply to each situation", enrollment professionals (and institutions by extension) are able to "make the changes necessary to sustain a competitive edge" (p. 1). That should be the ultimate goal of any college admissions process assessment.

### **Outcomes-Based Research**

I was surprised that there was not more literature directly addressing the use of social media sites and other technology in the college admissions process. Although some offices and personnel have embraced technology, it is not yet utilized by all of them, and the related research is limited. Even in the literature that I did find, I found a significant number of references to the same longitudinal study about social media and college admissions, which was conducted by Nora Ganim Barnes and Eric Mattson. This study (Barnes and Mattson, 2008) was the first of its kind, and I could find no evidence of any similar studies conducted since its completion.

It would be important for additional research to explore whether or not the level of familiarity, usage, or importance has changed for those institutions that currently utilize social media and other technologies. Although the research may also identify increases in the number of institutions that utilize the technology, it would be more important to determine the level of success experienced by institutions that had already incorporated technology into their process. This relates to the role of assessment and evaluation in the admissions process, as referenced above. What has been the impact? Have the intended outcomes been met? This would help institutions determine how best to incorporate technology, or modify their use of technology, in the admissions process going forward.

### **Conclusion**

As is evident in current literature and research, the use of technology in the college admissions process is expanding. In 2008, 85% of college admissions offices reported using a minimum of one form of social media, up from 61% the year before (Barnes and Mattson, 2008). However, it is important to remember that we should proceed with some caution. Institutions and

prospective students must be critical of the authenticity and validity of information that they access with technology, especially as personal publishing becomes more readily available and commonplace. The sources are often unofficial, and the information presented may not be verified. There is typically no peer review process, nor is there a system of checks and balances to ensure the information is accurate. In addition, institutions and prospective students must be cognizant of how damaging the use of negative information can be to both parties. Institutions may use technology to locate information that reflects negatively on a potential student, but that same individual may use it in a similar way to gather and/or share negative information about various institutions.

If we relate it back to personal publishing, what would stop a disgruntled applicant from posting something negative about an institution, after they are denied admission? What would stop someone from creating a fake MySpace for a prospective student out of spite, after they had an argument? An example from my own experience is that someone created a Facebook page under the name Lisa D I, listing my email address as their contact email, although I already have a legitimate page. If I had not received a friend request, I would have never known the page existed. If the page creator wanted to, they could have posted anything on the page, claiming to be me.

There are benefits to the use of technology in the college admissions process. Just as the use of technology in teaching and learning continues to increase, so will its use in gaining access to higher education. Institutions should consider using it to recruit and attract prospective students, especially as they lead lives filled with continuous computing, as described by Roush (2006). The prospective students can also use this technology to narrow their college choice, gathering information about the different institutions they are considering, without the limitations of time and distance. Regardless of individual preferences or skill sets, there is likely some technology that will meet the diverse needs of prospective students. We just need to make sure we know what technology is available, what type of delivered functionality it possesses, and how to use it properly. This will help ensure that we are not left behind as the relationship between higher education and technology continues to evolve.

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