

# Is Your Website Hurting Your Student Recruitment Efforts?

**Stephanie Geyer and Lance Merker**

Could a poor experience on a higher education institution's website lead a prospective student to remove that institution from his or her list of possible schools to attend? Yes, according to the results in the E-Expectations 2010 report, sponsored by Noel-Levitz, OmniUpdate, and the National Research Center for College & University Admissions. The report surveyed more than 1,000 college-bound high school students about their online behaviors and expectations.

The survey reveals that 92 percent of prospective students would be disappointed or even consider dropping a school from their search if that institution's website content did not meet their expectations—an increase from 88 percent in 2009. Of these students, 25 percent said they would remove a school from their prospect list because of a bad website experience.

The E-Expectations data indicate that an institution's website remains vital throughout the entire student life cycle, from recruitment to graduation and beyond. The website is especially critical for prospective students, who, according to E-Expectations findings, visit college websites on a regular basis (see chart, page 5).

The report also includes findings about the following web-related topics:

## The most valued web content

What type of content is most valuable to prospective students when they visit a college's or university's website? The 2010 E-Expectations survey allowed participants to provide open-ended responses to this question.

Altogether, 54 percent of prospective students identified academic-related content as the most valuable to them. Within academics, the top response, at 28 percent, was a list of academic programs or degrees.

Academic program details ranked second, at 19 percent.

Thirty percent of those surveyed ranked cost-related content as the most valuable, including details on tuition, financial aid, scholarships, and loans. Within cost-related content, the top three responses were cost, tuition, and fees (21 percent); financial aid (5 percent); and scholarships (4 percent).

Admissions information also plays a noteworthy role in desired content, with 10 percent of those surveyed stating it was the most valuable. Four percent of respondents said that information on student life was the most valuable.

## Mobile device use

Not only is content critical, but the way students access school sites is also of significant importance, the report indicates. For instance, 23 percent of those polled stated they used a smartphone to access school websites. As a result, institutions must consider not only making useful interfaces and tools available from a tethered PC or wireless laptop, but also how to make their websites accessible and user-friendly from other media such as the smartphone.

Mark Greenfield, director of web services at State University of New York at Buffalo and the driving force behind the University Web Developers (uwebd) social network, states, "The era of the mobile web is on the horizon and something we all should be preparing for. The move to mobile represents a complete paradigm shift that will be the most significant change since the introduction of the browser."

## How students find and land on sites

Institutions must also consider how students are finding their websites and where students initially land on the sites.

Prospective students have turned

primarily to search engines and college-matching services, the report reveals. Google still reigns supreme, with 44 percent of surveyed students using it to find schools by name. And a notable 30 percent of students said they used sites that matched them with schools fitting their profiles. Another 20 percent said they used key words or phrases in a search engine to describe programs in which they are interested.

Sixty-five percent of those surveyed stated that regardless of the search method used, their searches landed them on a school's home page. This illustrates the importance of the home page as the main portal to a campus for important information, such as initial inquiries, applying, or enrolling.

Not only is it important to make the school website easy to find, but once students are on the site, they must also be able to easily find the information for which they are looking.

Of the one in four prospective students stating that they would drop a school because of a bad website experience, 51 percent said they would drop the school if they couldn't find what they wanted on the site. Conversely, 65 percent of those polled said their interest in an institution grew because of a positive website experience, 31 percent said it was because they found what they wanted, 21 percent said it was because the website worked well, and 14 percent said it was because the content was helpful.

## The importance of interactivity

Regardless of the industry, effective websites are often those that offer interactive features in addition to relevant content. Higher education websites are no exception. In fact, the U.S. federal government has mandated that all U.S. colleges and universities

► *continued on page 4*

▼ **Your Website** *from page 3*

post net price calculators on their home pages by fall 2011.

The E-Expectations survey found that 39 percent of college-bound students believed cost calculators to be of extremely high value, with another 29 percent identifying them as providing a lot of value.

Slightly more than a third of respondents said that they had already used an online cost calculator. Of those who had used one, 31 percent said the calculator had increased their interest in the school and 5 percent stated that their interest had decreased as a result of using a calculator.

Respondents rated online applications as the most valuable interactive feature, with 50 percent saying that online applications are of extremely high value and another 31 percent saying that online applications offer a lot of value. Other highly rated interactive features include the following:

- Campus visit request form—40 percent said the form is of extreme value, with another 37 percent saying it has a lot of value.
- Online course catalog—34 percent said the catalog is of extreme value, with another 33 percent stating it has a lot of value.
- RSS feeds with details about admissions processes and deadlines—32 percent said these features are of extreme value, with an additional 32 percent saying that they have a lot of value.

These statistics show that a significant percentage of prospective students view interactive features as part of a positive website experience. It's also worthwhile to note that virtual tours have gained in popularity as the economy continues to slump and the cost of travel rises.

**The growing role of social media**

It's no surprise that social media

continues to play an influential role in the higher education web world.

The 2010 E-Expectations study confirms that Facebook is the primary social media resource that prospective students use (76 percent indicated that they have used it). Fifty-nine percent of respondents said that they have used YouTube, while 33 percent said they have used MySpace, and 8 percent said they have used Twitter. Interestingly, in the 2009 study, student use of Facebook and MySpace was nearly the same, at 50 percent and 52 percent, respectively.

Perhaps the most impressive finding was that a mere 9 percent of prospective students stated they did not use a social media resource. This is a significant decrease from the 2009 study finding of 22 percent. Social media resources are continuing their growth in popularity, especially among college-bound high school students.

The E-Expectations study respondents also confirmed that social media has become important in e-recruitment efforts, with 33 percent stating that they had searched for a school on social media sites. Seventy-four percent of respondents said that higher education institutions should have a presence on social media sites; among these students, 80 percent wanted both official and unofficial content through social media, and 67 percent deemed it appropriate for admissions counselors with whom they had worked to contact them through social media.

Seventy-six percent of the surveyed students said that schools should create their own private social networks. Niche social networks allow institutions to offer password-protected access and invitation-only membership, if desired. Content can be more easily moderated in private sites, enabling more control of messaging and incorporation into an institution's marketing and communications strategy.

Many colleges have launched Twitter e-recruitment efforts; however, the study uncovered a low use of Twitter among

high school students (although there was a significant increase from 2009 to 2010). Although Twitter may be a viable way to connect with college students, this channel still appears to be a niche area compared with other social networking options.

**Video preferences**

With the surge of social media use, video sharing has gone viral. Nearly two-thirds of the E-Expectations 2010 respondents said that they used YouTube, yet only 10 percent of the respondents said that they have viewed videos about a college or university on YouTube or a similar site. Forty-two percent said they watched videos about a school through the institution's public website. However, that means that nearly half of the prospective students have not watched college videos at all—a disappointing statistic for institutions investing heavily in video production.

Of the students who did watch videos, 46 percent were most interested in videos about student life, while 30 percent said they preferred videos about academics and classes.

Slightly more than two-thirds of the video-watching students said they preferred videos made by both the college and enrolled students. Twenty-six percent said that videos created by enrolled students were the most valuable; only 7 percent stated that videos made by the college were valuable. Prospective students clearly want to get a feel for a campus from both perspectives, rounding out their impression of the institution as a whole.

**Conclusions**

Higher education institutions must recognize that their external websites have become their top recruitment marketing tools and set the stage for prospective students' first impressions. Institutions should have engaging content

► *continued on page 5*

### ▼ Your Website *from page 4*

on their home pages and navigation that makes sense to students so that they can continue exploring the site.

Prospective students desire an easy way to find the website content they want, particularly information on academics and attendance costs. During the recruitment process, the website must provide students with information on academic programs, degree requirements, cost, and financial aid. Students would be best served by having this information right on the home page.

With the U.S. government requiring U.S. institutions of higher education to include cost calculators on their websites by fall 2011, the need for cost calculators has already been established. Students' ability to thoroughly and accurately estimate attendance costs is vital to their searches.

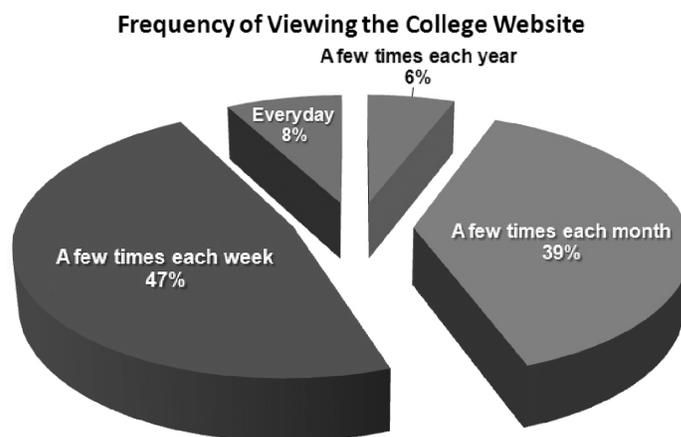
When it comes to campus life, prospects find both official and unofficial content important. Social media plays a significant role in this strategy. The E-Expectations 2010 results illustrate that students want to learn about an institution's educational experience through a mix of campus officials, students, and even alumni.

Social networking sites and student-produced videos are desirable ways for institutions to provide unofficial glimpses into their campus experiences. Marketers at institutions may be tempted to manage these messages, although this can backfire if prospective students catch on and feel that the messages are too contrived. Marketers may instead consider letting current students and alumni get the message out through private social networks, while the institution simply monitors the interactions. Remember, even negative comments can provide valuable information.

### For more information

The E-Expectations 2010 study uncovered additional data of interest to higher education marketers, including email use, text use, how prospective students view current economic conditions, and how the economic conditions are affecting their higher education decision-making processes. The full report is available at [www.omniupdate.com/e-expectations2010](http://www.omniupdate.com/e-expectations2010). For more detailed information not found in the report, such as a breakdown of the responses by ethnicity, contact Stephanie Geyer at Noel-Levitz ([Stephanie-Geyer@noellevitz.com](mailto:Stephanie-Geyer@noellevitz.com)).

Stephanie Geyer is the associate vice president for web strategy services at Noel-Levitz. Lance Merker is the president and CEO of OmniUpdate. ✓



### ▼ Changing Times *from page 2*

challenging junior staff to work on higher-level projects).

Whenever I'm looking to restructure after a recent hiring or to reassign staff duties, I try to evaluate the strengths of individuals on the team. Perhaps you have a junior-level staff member who shows promise in the area of strategic planning. To challenge this person and make the most of what he or she can contribute, I pull the junior member into a higher-level process to help generate new ideas. Similarly, you may have a longtime staff member who is

not especially suited for higher-level strategic work but has a gift for managing details and for training new staff members on the day-to-day functions.

The key is to communicate to your staff that all these things are important contributions and critical to your success. You don't necessarily have to follow the traditional admissions hierarchy to encourage people to grow

and contribute something different.

Aaron Basko and Tracy Manier will lead the online seminar "Managing Staff Change: Admissions Teams in Transition" on February 22. More information is available at [www.magnapubs.com/catalog/managing-staff-change](http://www.magnapubs.com/catalog/managing-staff-change). ✓

**Recruitment & Retention 2010 Index now available online at:**  
[www.magnapubs.com/publications/newsletters/rr2010index](http://www.magnapubs.com/publications/newsletters/rr2010index)