

E-Expectations 2010

Focusing Your E-Recruitment Efforts to Meet the Expectations of College-Bound Students

With every passing school year, the online demands of prospective college students seem to grow and evolve. In the past decade, e-recruitment has gone from relatively simple Web sites and e-mails to complex, multifaceted electronic campaigns with video, interactive Web features, and now social networking. It is a challenge for even the most e-savvy campus to stay ahead of the technological curve.

Because there is such a wide array of electronic methods for communicating with students, it's more important than ever for colleges and universities to understand what prospective students expect, so that campuses can focus on areas that will produce the greatest enrollment results.

Early in 2010, the E-Expectations research group surveyed more than 1,000 college-bound high school students, polling them on their online behaviors and expectations, as well as other key enrollment-related topics.

Highlights of the study include:

- 1 in 4 students reported removing a school from their prospective list because of a bad experience on that school's Web site.
- 92 percent said that they would be disappointed with a school or remove it entirely from their lists if they didn't find the information they needed on the school's Web site.
- 76 percent of students said they use Facebook, while 33 percent reported using MySpace.
- 76 percent of students supported schools creating their own private social networks for prospective students.
- 52 percent of students said they have viewed videos about colleges, while only 10 percent reported watching them on YouTube.
- 46 percent claimed that the current economic crisis had caused them to reconsider the schools they would apply to or attend—an increase from 34 percent just last year.
- 23 percent of respondents reported searching college sites from their smart phones.

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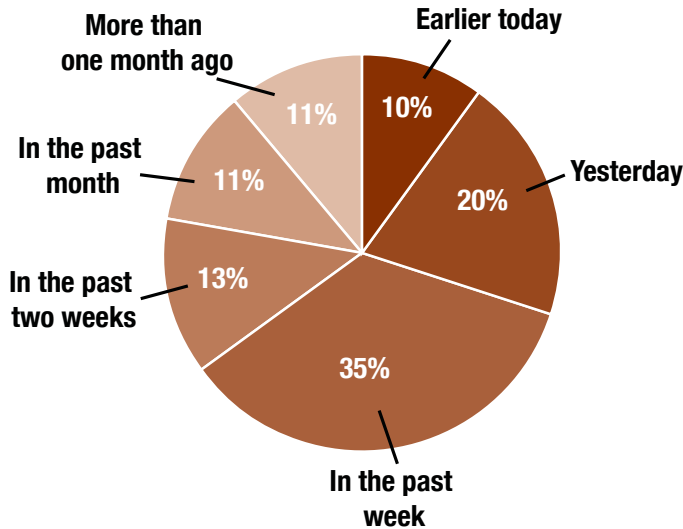
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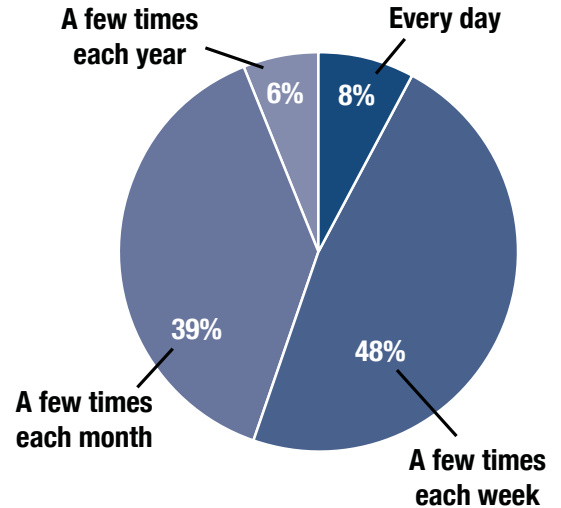
Your home page: The gateway to meeting student's expectations

Students may have a multitude of communication options on the Internet, but the college Web site is still their main destination and portal to your campus. In fact, 100 percent of respondents said they had viewed at least one college Web site. The charts and tables below also show how frequently they visit college Web sites, how many Web sites they have viewed, and where they are going online:

Last time they viewed a college Web site



Frequency of viewing college Web sites



100 percent of students said they had viewed at least one college Web site.

How many college Web sites have they visited?

1-2 sites	8%
3-5 sites	33%
6-9 sites	15%
10-14 sites	18%
15-24 sites	16%
25 or more sites	9%

Where are students going online?

At home	93%
At high school	66%
At a place with WiFi	25%
At a public library	25%
On a smart phone	23%

In terms of searching for campus Web sites, students relied mostly on Google or other search engines, but nearly one-third used college-matching services:

How students search for college Web sites	
Use Google or other search engines to find school names they've heard of from parents or friends	44%
Use a site that matches them with schools that fit their profiles	30%
Enter words or phrases in Google/search engine that describes the programs they're interested in	20%
Guess at the URL until they get it	3%
Use NCAA or other similar sites	3%
Research on social media sites	1%

Regardless of the search method used, 65 percent of students said that their searches landed them on a college's home page.

Regardless of the search method used, 65 percent of students said that their searches landed them on a college's home page (27 percent said they found a specific page of interest, while 8 percent said they landed on a random page). This means that your home page is the main portal to your campus. It makes the first impression and connects students with the resources they need to inquire, apply, and enroll.

However, many institutions struggle to identify a primary user for their external Web resources, resulting in home pages that attempt to serve every constituent but end up disappointing the users who rely on the site the most—prospective students. It is very important to formulate your main navigation choices, features, and resources through the lens of the prospective student so you can meet their needs and expectations.

How do students learn about schools?

Information received in the mail	89%
Parents, family, friends	80%
E-mail messages	79%
High school teachers or counselors	77%
Finding the school's Web site	75%
Online search (Google, Yahoo, etc.)	65%
Offline resource from library or counselor's office	62%
College fair	61%
Online college planning site	45%
Web site advertisements for schools	41%
School-specific radio or TV advertisements	35%
Sporting events/athletic programs	34%
Planning site sponsored by student's high school	32%
Camp, program, or competition at a school	31%
Billboards	21%

E-mailing prospective students isn't a new strategy, but clearly one that can pay off—especially when targeting the right students with the right message. Similarly, Web site advertisements (or pay-per-click) are another valuable method for building volume at the top of the enrollment funnel.

What students expect...and what they will do if their expectations are not met

Imagine if one out of every four prospective students considering your campus dropped your school from consideration due to a bad experience on your Web site. That's what 24 percent of respondents said they had done. Of those, 51 percent said it was because they couldn't find what they wanted.

On the positive side, 65 percent said they had become more interested in a campus because of a positive Web site experience. Thirty-one percent said it was because they found what they wanted, 21 percent because the site worked well, and 14 percent because the content was helpful.

Students also stressed the importance of content as being central to their Web experiences:

Importance of Web site content to students' enrollment decisions	
If they don't find what they need on the school's Web site, they'll drop it from their list	16%
They'll be disappointed if a school's site isn't helpful, but will find other ways to get information	76%
The school's Web site isn't really an important information resource for them	8%

These statistics reiterate the importance of giving students the information they desire. Failing to provide key content—or making it difficult to find that content—will at the very least disappoint a vast majority of students. With students looking at so many Web sites during their searches, you risk losing a key opportunity to grab their attention if you fail to provide the content they want.

24 percent of respondents said they had removed a school from their list because of a bad Web site experience. Of those, 51 percent said it was because they couldn't find what they wanted.

Academics and cost: The most valued Web content

When students arrive at a college Web site, what content do they find most valuable? Participants were able to answer this question in an open-ended format. The top answer (28 percent) among all responses was a list of academic programs or degrees. All together, 54 percent of students identified academic-related content as the most valuable. The top three academic answers were:

Most valuable academic-related Web content	
A list of academic programs or degrees	28.3%
Academic program details	18.6%
School rankings or reputation	2.5%

Thirty percent of students ranked cost-related content (tuition, financial aid, scholarships, loans) as the most valuable. The top three responses in this category were:

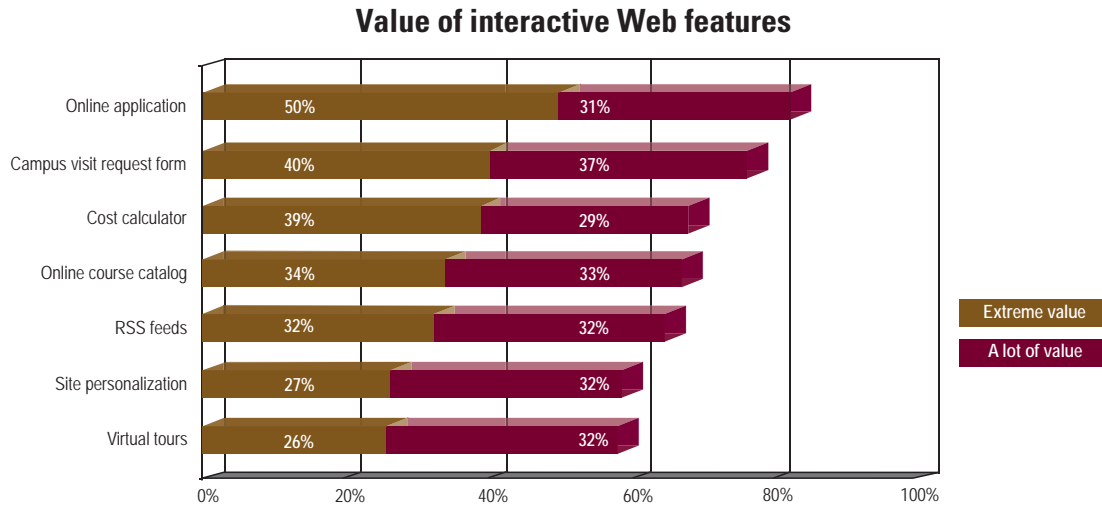
Most valuable cost-related Web content	
Cost/tuition/fees	20.9%
Financial aid	4.7%
Scholarships	3.6%

Ten percent of students ranked admissions information as most valuable, and 3.8 percent said student life content was the most valuable.

These responses do not mean that pages devoted to student life, location, and activities are not important. But when it comes to creating and organizing a Web site, it's imperative for colleges to make detailed information about academic programs and cost easy for students to find.

Web site features

Students also identified the following features as having the most value to their Web experiences:



The federal government has mandated that all colleges and universities post net price calculators on their home pages by fall 2011.

The value of online cost calculators

As the cost of college has become a growing concern for prospective students, the federal government has mandated that all colleges and universities post net price calculators on their home pages by fall 2011. E-Expectations research, however, shows that quite a few students are clamoring for these calculators now.

In responding to interactive features of a Web site, 68 percent of students said cost calculators had “a lot of value,” while 39 percent said they had “extreme value.” However, in practice, only 34 percent replied that they had used an online cost calculator. Of those who had used one, 31 percent said the calculator had increased their interest in the school, with just 5 percent saying their interest had decreased as a result of using a net price calculator.

This data suggests that online cost calculators can be a valuable recruitment tool, one that could help answer students’ demands for information about cost and financial aid.

Social media and video: Facebook, MySpace, and YouTube in the recruitment process

When asked which social media resources they use, Facebook was the clear front runner:

Which social media resources do students use?	
Facebook	76%
YouTube	59%
MySpace	33%
None	9%
Twitter	8%
Gaia Online	2%
High Five	1%

76 percent of students said schools should create their own private social networks.

Just last year, those numbers were at 50 percent for Facebook and MySpace.¹ Furthermore, 22 percent said they did not do any social networking last year, compared to 9 percent in this year's survey. Clearly social networking is up even as MySpace usage is on the decline.

However, the use of Twitter among high school students does not seem to match the meteoric rise of Twitter worldwide. Many colleges have launched Twitter e-recruitment efforts, and while it may be a valuable way to connect with college students, this still appears to be a niche area compared to other social networking options.

Respondents also affirmed that social media have become important parts of e-recruitment campaigns. Thirty-three percent said that they had searched for schools on social networking sites. Seventy-four percent thought schools should have a presence on social media sites, with 80 percent of those students saying they wanted both official and unofficial content through social media and 67 percent deeming it appropriate for admissions counselors they had worked with to contact them through social media. Finally, 76 percent said schools should create their own private social networks.

With nearly two-thirds of respondents saying they used YouTube, are these students watching campus videos on the world's most popular video site? Or watching college videos at all? The answers were rather surprising:

Have they viewed any videos about a college or university?	
Yes, on the school's site	42%
Yes, on a site like YouTube	10%
No	47%

Nearly half of prospective students said they were not watching college videos at all—surely disappointing news for colleges that have invested time and money producing videos for the Web. It also appears, at least for now, that most students are not looking to YouTube as a recruitment device.

Among students who did watch videos, they provided additional details about the types of videos they valued:

What video subjects are most interesting to them?	
Student life	46%
Academics/classes	30%
Location/areas around campus	11%
Athletic events	6%
Faculty/program details	5%

What videos are most valuable to them?	
Videos made by the college	7%
Videos made by students	26%
Videos made by both	67%

¹ Noel-Levitz et al. (2009) *Scrolling toward enrollment: Web site content and the e-expectations of college-bound seniors*. Coralville, Iowa: Noel-Levitz, 6.

Interestingly, while students ranked academic and cost-related Web content far ahead of student life content, students who watched college videos valued student life as a subject quite highly.

Furthermore, regarding professional videos produced by colleges, most students either preferred student-made videos or wanted those types of videos in addition to the college’s official ones. Again, this shows how students see social media as a way of supplementing official information about a college with unofficial perspectives that round out their impressions of a campus.

E-mail and text: Will students read messages from you?

“Secret shopping” is a growing concern for colleges, as campuses report that 25 to 36 percent of their first contacts with students occur at the application stage.² In an era of secret shopping and social media, is e-mail still as viable for e-recruitment as it once was? The E-Expectations respondents suggest yes.

Asked whether they would give a college an e-mail address, 91 percent of students said yes, with 70 percent saying they would offer their primary e-mail account and not just one set up for college application purposes. Forty-three percent of those respondents said that would provide it at the prospect/inquiry stage and 36 percent at the application stage.

These results show that e-mail, while perhaps not as pervasive as it once was, is still a big part of e-recruitment. If you invite students to provide their e-mail address on your Web site, this research suggests quite a few interested students will do so, helping you take the secret out of their shopping.

Respondents were much more guarded about receiving text messages from college representatives. While 78 percent of students said they currently use text messaging, 67 percent of them said they did not want college representatives contacting them by text. Fifteen percent said they would text message a college representative they had been working with, 9 percent said they would text if they needed a fast answer to a question, and 9 percent said they would text as a way of leaning more about a school.

Asked whether they would give a college an e-mail address, 91 percent of students said yes, with 70 percent saying they would offer their primary e-mail account.

Economic crisis increases its influence on college decisions

When asked if the current economic crisis had caused students to reconsider their school choices, 46 percent said yes—up from 34 percent who said yes last year. Those who answered yes elaborated on how economic conditions were affecting their decisions and how they compared to responses from the 2009 E-Expectations study:

How is the economy affecting students’ college decisions	2010	2009
Avoiding private school options	26%	11%
Commuting instead of living on campus	25%	13%
Working while going to school	25%	21%
Attending a community or technical college	19%	16%
Considering vocational/technical education instead of traditional education	4%	2%
Attending part-time instead of full-time	1%	7%
Not attending college at all	1%	2%

² Noel-Levitz (2010). *2010 E-recruiting practices and trends at four-year and two-year institutions*. Coralville, Iowa: Noel-Levitz, 3.

Conclusions

1) Recognize that your external Web site is your number one recruitment marketing tool

For an increasing number of students, your Web site creates their first impression of your institution. Most students arrive on your home page, making it their portal to researching and interacting with your campus. Make sure you have engaging content on the home page and navigation that makes sense to students so they can continue their explorations off the home page. Remember, content that is poor or difficult to find will at the very least create a negative impression and at worst cause students to drop your campus from consideration.

2) Make content on academics and cost to attend detailed and easy to find

Far and away, E-Expectations respondents valued information about academic offerings and cost of attendance above all other Web content. This is not to say information on campus life, location, or other features is not important, but it is crucial to provide students with information on academic programs, degree requirements, cost, and financial aid. Make it easy to find and access this information right from your home page.

3) Give students an easy way to estimate their cost of attending, right on your site

With two-thirds of students expressing great interest in cost calculators, it's a very smart move to make it possible for students to estimate their net price of attendance on your site. Furthermore, it's important to make these estimates as accurate as possible (including potential merit aid, for instance). If your campus does not have an interest in developing its own calculators, consider using third-party online net cost calculators.

4) Supplement your official content with unofficial social media content

Students certainly want official information on your campus. However, in the era of social networking, they don't necessarily want to receive all of it from campus officials. They want to hear from students and alumni about what an educational experience from your campus is like. Social networking sites and student-produced videos are excellent ways to provide that unofficial peek at your campus experience. There is an obvious temptation to try and manage these messages or produce stealth student content. Resist that urge as prospective students can usually tell such content was created by the campus. Instead, let current students and alumni get the message out for you, and simply keep an eye out for what they're saying. Even negative comments can provide you with valuable data.

5) Consider setting up your own private social networking site

One way to have more control over student-to-student interaction is to set up your own social networking site. This allows prospective students to not only connect with campus officials and current students, but with other students in the funnel. It's an especially effective method for forging strong connections with admitted students and pushing them toward enrollment.

6) Focus your social media efforts on the channels that will have the greatest enrollment impact

There are wide and often bewildering arrays of social media options available. You cannot possibly serve all of those information avenues at the same time, so be sure to focus on the ones that produce the greatest enrollment results for your campus. The research in this report is a good starting point, but it also is in your best interest to research your prospective students and track results from your social media initiatives so you know exactly which information pipelines are the most robust.

7) Unmask secret shoppers through e-mail

Students will certainly continue to research colleges anonymously, but according to the E-Expectations respondents, many of them are quite willing to provide e-mail addresses, even their primary e-mail addresses. Offer them ample opportunities to provide their e-mail, preferably in a way that provides additional information that can help you personalize forthcoming communications (for example, using analytics to see what page the student was on, asking qualifying questions, etc.).

8) Explore your competition the way students would

As this year's research shows, students are searching large numbers of Web sites in their college searches—at least a handful to perhaps a dozen or more. It's therefore important to know your market and what your competitors are doing on their Web sites. Research their efforts from the perspective of a student and compare it to your Web site from the same perspective. How do you compare in terms of content, navigation, detail, and other key factors? Do the same for any social media initiatives they may have. The more you know about other Web and social networking sites students are examining, the more information you have to create an integrated e-recruitment effort that stands out from the rest of the pack.

Conduct your own E-Expectations study

While this E-Expectations study offers a great deal of data on the online behavior of college-bound high school students, the students you hope to enroll certainly have their own set of expectations. Conducting your own research on your target audiences can provide even more useful data—information that can help you craft an e-recruitment plan that engages students and convinces them to enroll.

To learn more about how you can conduct your own customized E-Expectations study, contact Stephanie Geyer, associate vice president for e-communications and Web strategy at Noel-Levitz. Call 1-800-876-1117 or e-mail stephanie-geyer@noellevitz.com.

E-Expectations 2010 demographics	
Number of participants	
College-bound high school seniors, divided evenly between the Midwest, Northeast, South, and West	1,005
Gender	
Male	48.7%
Female	51.3%
Ethnicity	
African American	10.5%
American Indian	1.3%
Asian	6.4%
Hispanic	9.3%
Middle Eastern	0.4%
White	52.4%
Other/Multiracial	10.9%
Prefer not to respond	8.8%
Grade point average	
A	50.1%
B	41.5%
C	7.6%
Below C	0.8%
Family income	
\$10,000 - \$19,999	3.8%
\$20,000 - \$29,999	9.2%
\$30,000 - \$39,999	14.1%
\$40,000 - \$49,999	18.2%
\$50,000 - \$59,999	13.2%
\$60,000 - \$69,999	10.6%
\$70,000 - \$79,999	7.0%
\$80,000 - \$89,999	6.7%
\$90,000 - \$99,999	4.9%
\$100,000 or more	12.3%
Have either of their parents attended college?	
Yes	70.9%
No	29.1%
What types of colleges/universities are they considering? (Select as many as apply)	
State college/university	89.8%
Private college/university	36.9%
Community/junior college	13.5%
Technical college	9.2%
Vocational/career school	6.4%
Online college/university	4.5%

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Visit the E-Expectations series page to find reports on previous classes, parents, transfer students, graduate students, and more.

E-Expectations: Class of 2009

Scrolling Toward Enrollment: Web Site Content and the E-Expectations of College-Bound Seniors

Parents

Circling Over Enrollment: The E-Expectations of the Parents of College-Bound Students

Transfer students

Education on the Move: The E-Expectations of Transfer Students

Graduate students

Advanced Degrees of E-Recruitment: The E-Expectations of Prospective Graduate Students

E-Expectations: Class of 2007

Building an E-Recruitment Network: Connecting With College-Bound Seniors in the Era of MySpace

Engaging the Social Networking Generation: How to Talk to Today's College-Bound Juniors and Seniors

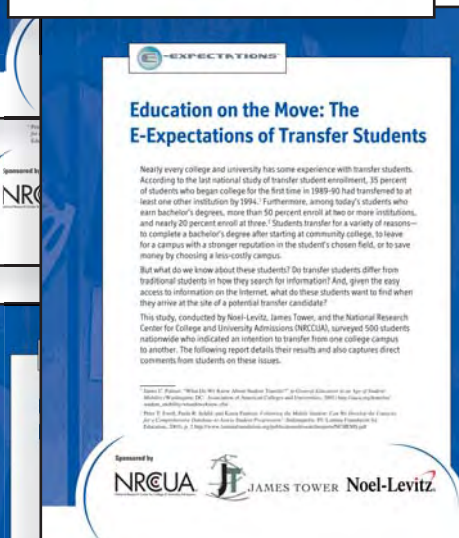
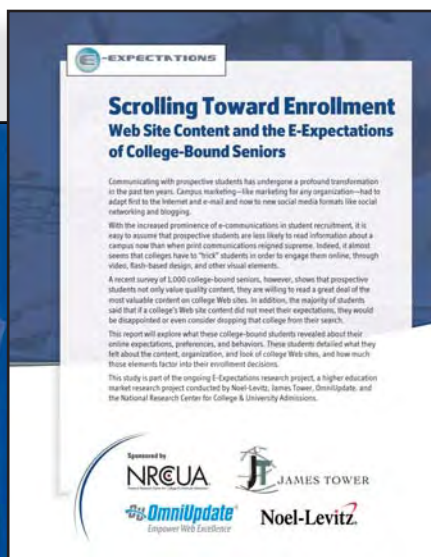
African American Students and the Web: The E-Expectations of College-Bound African American High School Seniors

Hispanic Students and the Web: The E-Expectations of College-Bound Hispanic High School Students

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Questions about this paper

If you have any questions or comments about the E-Expectations study, please contact Stephanie Geyer, associate vice president at Noel-Levitz. Call 1-800-876-1117, or e-mail stephanie-geyer@noellevitz.com.

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