



The Career College Information Source

The Future of Admissions: Connecting with a New Generation

By Jean Norris, Ed.D., Norton|Norris, Inc.

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Beyond all of the reasons the career college industry is being “forced” to alter business practices, I’d like to suggest even more changes. Yet the changes I’m suggesting aren’t really a choice either; that is, if we want to successfully address the alignment of our practices and processes to today’s student. It’s really no surprise that this technology savvy generation is challenging the rules of recruitment. In fact, non-profit colleges and universities are struggling to connect with today’s students, too. Let’s take a closer look at this generation and a few ideas on how we can adapt to reach more of them.

The first step is to realize what has worked for the industry in terms of admissions practices, and approaches that don’t work as well anymore. Second is the ability to do something different. This concept is known as requisite variety (Richardson, 2000). Sometimes people recognize they’re not getting the results they’ve been used to, but oftentimes continue to do the same thing. This is either because they have a system in place that mandates a specific approach, or they simply don’t have a clue what else to do in place of it.

The person who has the ability to recognize that admissions results aren’t yielding the same outcomes must have the courage to step up and really examine what is happening from various angles. It’s especially critical not to settle on a single reason or accept anecdotal evidence. Oftentimes we hear things like, “The leads are bad,” or “It’s our admissions reps; they don’t work as hard as they did in the old days.” Perhaps. But could it be something else?

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Let’s explore why common admissions practices may not be working as well as they once did, along with some suggestions to add other approaches to increase requisite variety.

Typical Admissions Practices

Let’s take a closer look at three typical admissions practices.

Admissions Practice 1 – You have to come on campus to get information.

The belief behind this practice typically is centered on the idea that a prospective student couldn't possibly understand the value of what they're getting for their money without "kicking the tires."

Today's Student:

According to Carter (2010), those aged 14–32 are the most technologically savvy generation yet. "Social media

Web sites such as Twitter, MySpace and Facebook have been incorporated into (their) daily lifestyle. Online research, online price comparison and social media

marketing play an important part in (their) purchasing decisions." In *Growing Up Digital* (2008), author Dan Tapscott claims that today's student is

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Predictions for this generation are something we must adapt to as they make their college decisions (to enroll and to stay in school). In *Future Minds: How the Digital Age is Changing Our Minds, Why This Matters and What We Can Do About It* (Watson, 2010), the term "screenagers" is used to describe how today's teenagers (our future students) are attached to screens. Think about it. They awaken to an alarm on a cell phone; check stories of the day on the same phone; work on a computer at school; and interact with friends and video games via the Internet when they get home. A study by Small and Vorgan (2008) found that the amount of time American kids devote to media is equivalent to a full-time job.

Also, consider the growth in online education. Online enrollments have



DR. JEAN NORRIS

began her own educational pursuit in a 10-month medical assisting diploma program. In the 25 years since, she has served as a faculty member, dean and senior admissions and marketing administrator at for-profit and traditional higher education institutions. She is one of the

leading advocates of the admissions profession and is often called upon to speak on behalf of the sector. Just this past year, Jean and her team were asked to investigate the findings of the Government Accountability Office (GAO) used against career colleges in HELP committee hearings. Their work significantly strengthened the position of the sector and contributed to the replacement of the director in charge of the investigation.

Since 2004, she's written about ethics in recruitment and admissions beginning with her dissertation research, which has been widely referenced as one of the few national studies on the topic of ethics in admissions. It is appropriately titled, *"The Moral Judgment of Admission Counselors at For-Profit and Not-for-Profit Baccalaureate-Degree Granting Colleges and Universities."* Her works have also appeared in *The Journal of College Admission*, *The Link*, *Career*

Education Review, and *Career College Central*. She has recently been interviewed by *The Wall Street Journal* and *USA Today*.

Jean also is dedicated to the development of the admissions professional through improved training. After four years of research and development, EnrollMatch® was launched in 2010 as a comprehensive training solution offering workshops, eLearning, discussion forums and coaching to help staff stay compliant and increase effectiveness. Participants begin a journey of self-discovery and learn new skills that are grounded in best practices from communication, relationship building, Neurolinguistic Programming (NLP®), psychology, sales, leadership, guidance counseling, motivation and MORE! Participants also learn to use a new framework to stay compliant yet maintain enough flexibility to connect with today's students in the most ethical and effective ways!

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continued to grow at rates “far in excess of the total higher education student population,” according to the Sloan Consortium, which studies online education trends (Tatu, 2011). More than 5.6 million students were taking at least one online course during the fall 2009 semester. That’s an increase of nearly one million students since the previous year, and about four million since 2002. My guess is many of these students didn’t need to come on campus to decide to enroll either.

These statistics suggest that more and more students are interested in learning via an online modality than sitting in a classroom. Perhaps this could be true for how they want to consume information about your school, too. In 2003, I was the vice president of marketing and enrollment management for a traditional university. We had some big budget cuts and were struggling with how to recruit students in our 100+ off-site locations across the U.S. The methods used up to that point were to fly our admissions representatives all over the country to present information sessions. The belief was we had to meet them face to face in order for them to enroll. They say necessity is the mother of invention, so we had to rethink the entire process.

We offered prospective students the option to speak with an admissions rep over the phone. Our team of nine admissions reps enrolled students at all these locations at a program tuition cost of over \$40,000. And do you know what? None of those prospects ever met the person on the other end of the phone. It simply wasn’t a requirement for them to see the person, the classrooms or the building. They were buying the relationship and reputation our trained admissions reps shared virtually.

Admissions Practice 2 – There is an established, and singular, methodology of how to move a prospective student through the college enrollment process.

This practice further assumes everyone presents to admissions in the same stage.

Today’s Student:

Although the old and new buying processes include the same steps of awareness, research, shopping, interest and purchase, today’s student may move through much of this on their own given their access to and reliance on technology. Treating each and every prospective student as if they are in the beginning stages of a decision process, when they may

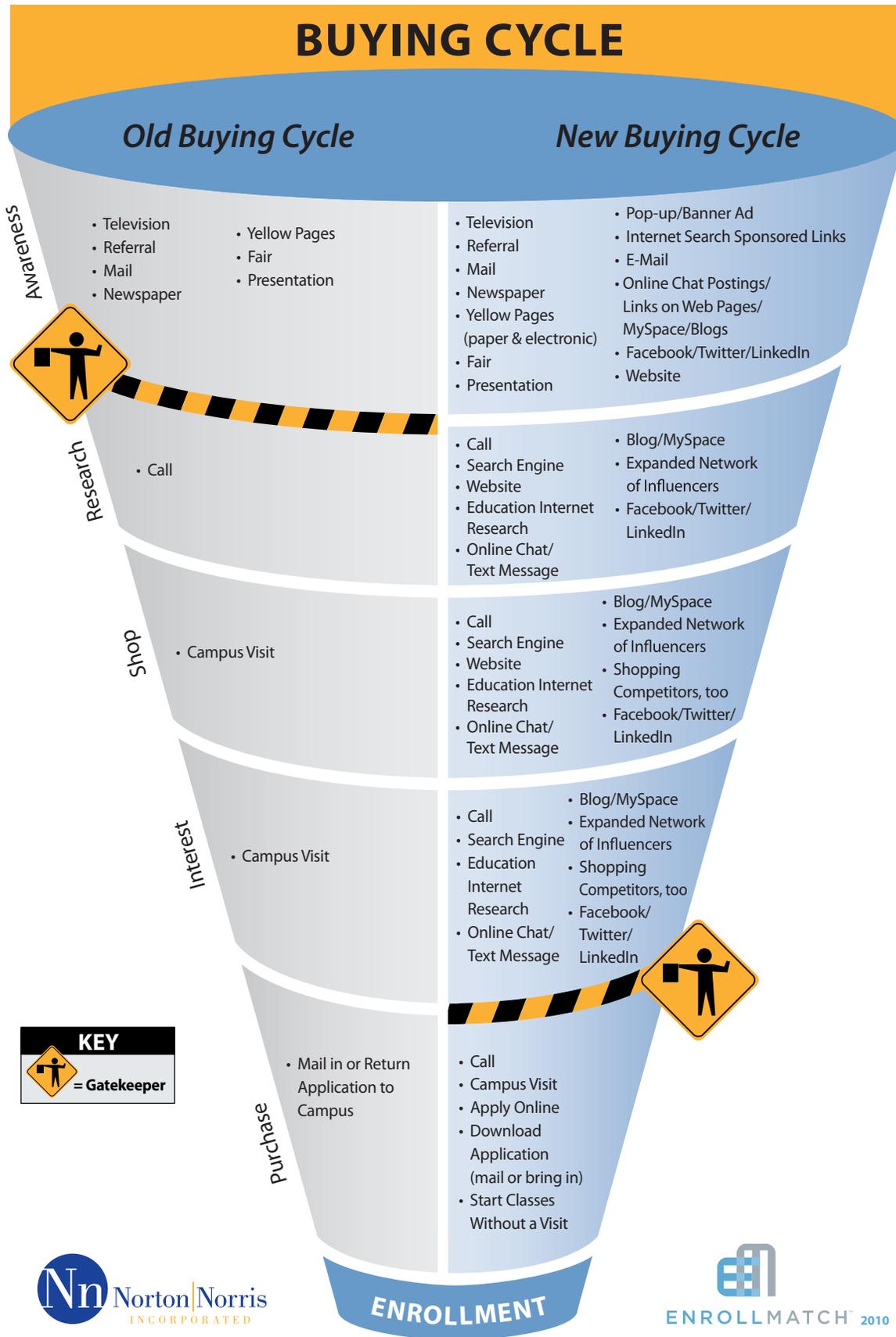
actually be at a different stage, will only frustrate the prospect since it is apparent their needs aren’t being met. They may also feel a sense of “being sold”

if the admissions rep doesn’t meet them in their buying cycle stage.

Even traditional colleges and universities are seeing a rise in “stealth applications” or prospective students who apply with no known previous interaction with the institution. In a 2011 *University Business* article, the author shows evidence from colleges across the country that students are taking control of how they want to experience the college selection process. “I think students are really redefining how they conduct their college search process,” concludes Sewanee’s Afton. “There is so much in the media about college admissions, and students are often bombarded with publications and e-mails from colleges, that stepping away from the traditional approach is a way for them to have

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***– Lee Ann Afton, dean of admissions and financial aid
Sewanee: The University of
the South (Tenn.)***



more control over the search. These students are tuned in, but have chosen to tune out many of our traditional approaches. They are dealing with the process on their terms.”

Admissions Practice 3 – Call your Internet leads immediately to get them on campus.

The belief behind this practice is the admissions representative that reaches the prospective student first has the best chance at enrolling them. It also is assumed that the telephone is the best method to reach an Internet lead.

Today’s Student:

Yes, this generation desires instant response, yet they may also question why the information wasn’t up on your Web site to begin with, thereby invoking a sense of distrust. Additionally, phone calls may be the preference of the admissions rep, but today’s “screen-ager” tends to prefer dealing with a machine over a human especially in situations involving confrontation and commitment (Watson).

This reality presents some interesting obstacles for those with limited tools to connect with Internet leads. Perhaps it’s as simple as not taking such a big leap initially (contact to show). Offering prospective students alternative ways of getting information other than talking over the phone or coming on campus can build trust and the start of a meaningful relationship. If we do this first, they may be more inclined to show up to campus. The face-to-face visit then becomes a custom experience based on where they are in their decision cycle with special focus on tour, testing and meeting with financial aid.

In Closing

As government oversight of career colleges increases, it’s easy to focus solely on being in compliance with

rules and regulations. We mustn’t lose sight of what has always made this sector one to be envied, though—the ability to identify emerging trends and implement change quickly. Let’s not forget, this technologically savvy generation is dramatically different from any other that’s come before. A big opportunity lies in front of those colleges who can adapt processes to meet today’s students on their terms.

This article touches on a few admissions practices and yet there are so many more. You now have the opportunity to keep dissecting current admissions practices to determine if they’re working, and, based on that reality, explore options to change or add new skills to what you’re

currently doing. As Richardson (2000) notes, “the law of requisite variety states that in any system, all other things being equal, the individual with

the widest range of responses will control the system. In plain terms, this means that if you have more variety in your behavior (and more tools) than another person (or institution), then you can control your interactions with that person.” Yes, it’s hard to think about anything else right now given the political environment, however let’s not let this opportunity pass us by either.

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