

It's Your Turn to Spin – Recruitment & Admissions in 2014

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As a kid, did you ever play the game of “Life”? We remember always choosing the college route over getting a job right out of high school. Everything we’d learned from popular culture meant that we just knew college would pay off in the long run. Surely there would be a high paying job, fat stock market holdings, mansions, and 2.5 kids in the back seat of our insured, luxury cars. Well, it didn’t always work out that way in the board game; and now the very value of a college education is playing out in the court of public opinion and through government interventions.

Here in the real world, there are questions being posed about the value

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of an investment in college; how consumers want to experience the college search process; how the future work environment should be considered; and what needs to change for educators and admission offices to stay relevant.

Is College Worth It?

It’s interesting to note that the concept of higher education was originally based on Jeffersonian principles including access for all and the importance of educational options. Jefferson believed higher education should be available for all who want the experience and a variety of educational options was essential to drive quality through competition.

In 1932, James Truslow Adams, who edited the book *Jeffersonian Principles and Hamiltonian Principles*, wrote about how Jefferson would have viewed America’s system of education today:

“Public education had been carried to a height almost undreamed of by him, yet he would realize that its results have been disappointing. He would observe that schools and colleges may make people literate but cannot make them learned or wise, and that the mass of the

people whom he would have educated with such care for the purpose of making them citizens preferred reams of the headline-tabloid press and sensational movies to any five minutes of genuine consecutive thought." (Stepman, J. & Feltscher, I)

It makes one wonder what he would have thought about the educational system today. The addition of measuring the value of a college experience based on a financial return on investment laid out in *Gainful Employment Regulations* is a stark contrast to the Jeffersonian ideal. Preparing graduates for lives as active and educated citizens contrasts sharply with equipping students for the job market.

The regulations are also very selective. Only certain types of programs and schools fall under their mandate. While those in the for-profit education sector are well aware of the proximate reasons for these new regs and "tough" attitude on the part of regulators, the trend towards measuring the value of a college education in financial terms has a much deeper and more pervasive history. And there are a number of recent social and technological developments driving that trend.

The Power of the Consumer

First some background on the huge changes in both consumer behavior and the availability of information about college and career options

since the 1990's. Once upon a time, prospective students had to write letters or fill out postcards requesting information from any college they were considering. In this world, the number of choices was limited to those schools with a local presence, that appeared on a list provided by a guidance counselor, or that had been

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mentioned by friends or other influencers (think family members, neighbors, a pastor, etc.)

This model (and the technological limitations that came along with it) allowed college admissions and marketing offices to act as information gatekeepers. Their brochures and communications assets told the entire story available about a school outside of hearsay. The psychological investment required to make the initial inquiry meant that prospects were pre-disposed to take what they received from a school at face value. It also predisposed them to limit the number of schools initially included in the search process.



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Norton | Norris, Inc. (Nn) is a full-service marketing, training and consulting firm dedicated to the education vertical. Founded in 1998, Nn provides innovative approaches to all facets of

enrollment including direct mail (Print on Demand), creative services, radio/television production and placement, high school presentations, mystery shopping, eLearning, public relations, vendor management, digital media, and training - featuring **EnrollMatch® - The Ethical Enrollment Process**.

Perhaps **Norton | Norris** is most well known and respected for taking the lead and responding to the negative attacks on the for-profit college sector led by the Government Accountability Office (GAO). Nn authored two reports, *Mystery Shopping Reveals Important Information Withheld from Prospective Students* and *GAO Bias Evident in Report to HELP Committee* that significantly strengthened the position of the career college sector.

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Beginning in the mid-1980's, third party College Guides and rankings (think of the feared and hallowed US News rankings) became more widely available. In addition, the advent of the World Wide Web and email created both new media channels as well as larger audiences. If the effective radius of awareness of a "local" college was its geographic market in 1980, by 1995 that radius was limited only by how much awareness

The net effect of these trends is to make prospects ever more accessible to college marketers by virtue of technology adoption and low costs. This rush into the digital landscape leads to an increase in the amount of "noise" that prospects experience.

they could drive to their website. And that website was available to anyone with an Internet connection regardless of where they were on a map.

As colleges began taking advantage of this freedom from the limitations of geography by setting up informative, marketing driven web sites, they also gave up the gatekeeping power that came with the old "request info" model. In essence, a college's website became its brochure/viewbook and was available 24/7 to anyone who stumbled across it.

This meant that, not only did schools no longer **know** who had "inquired" (because they could not track and identify individual website visitors like they could individual postcard "fillerouters"), they also lost the psychological advantage of "investment" on the part of prospects that was at the heart of the old model. The disruptive effect of eliminating geography as the determining factor in the awareness of an institution came at the cost of radically expanding the universe of viable options for prospects... and drastically reducing the initial investment required to initiate a relationship with a college. If you can find any info you want with the click of a mouse button – and you can find any number of third party sources of info in the bargain – then your investment in any particular information request is really quite low. The cost to the prospect in time, attention,

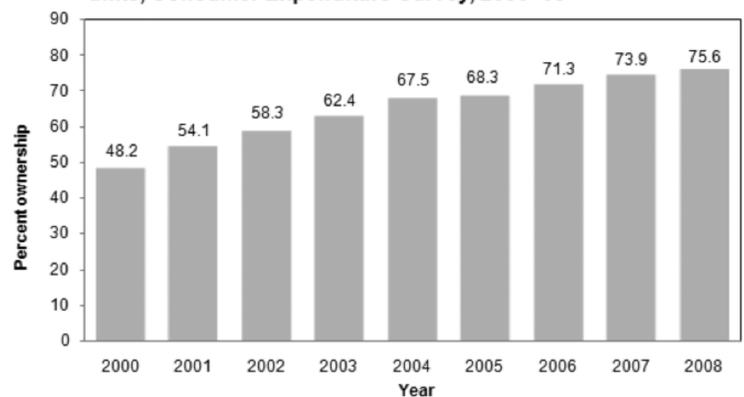
and effort is so low that it reduces the emotional attachment to any one college until deep into the decision making cycle.

In addition, the number of channels available to marketers of all stripes has expanded quickly. Websites, email marketing (both as initial contact and for ongoing communications plans), social media networks, low-cost call centers, and on-demand lead vending/generation have all made it possible to communicate with prospective students at a low cost and asynchronously.

The cost comparison between sending an email to 40,000 prospects in a school's database versus sending a postcard to those same 40,000 prospects hardly bears pointing out. (This does not imply that the email is more **effective** than the postcard.) In a world where communication options are relatively cheap and can be executed on very rapid turnaround times, it becomes easy to simply increase the volume of outbound words and pictures in the hopes that some (or enough) of it "sticks".

As the number of channels has increased, so has the number of methods people use to access those channels. Desktop computers, laptops, tablets, and smartphones have all made it possible for marketing channels to become ubiquitous features of every day life. But more important – the percentage of the population having access to these devices has skyrocketed. The increase in computer ownership alone between 2000 and 2008 is startling in its implications.

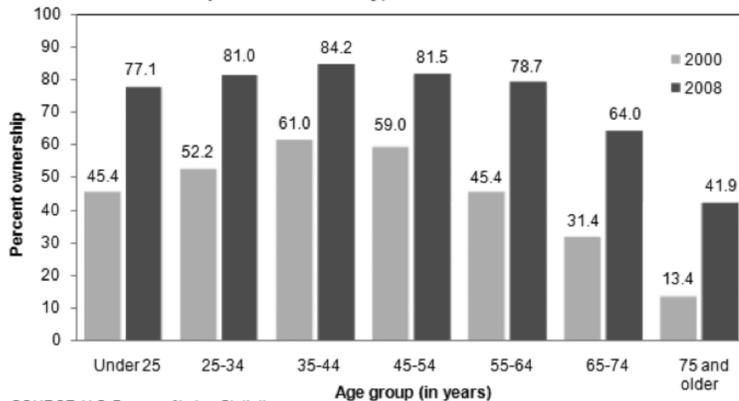
Chart 1. Percent of computer ownership, all consumer units, Consumer Expenditure Survey, 2000–08



SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

The percentage of computer ownership in the general population has almost doubled as prices have decreased and processing power has increased.

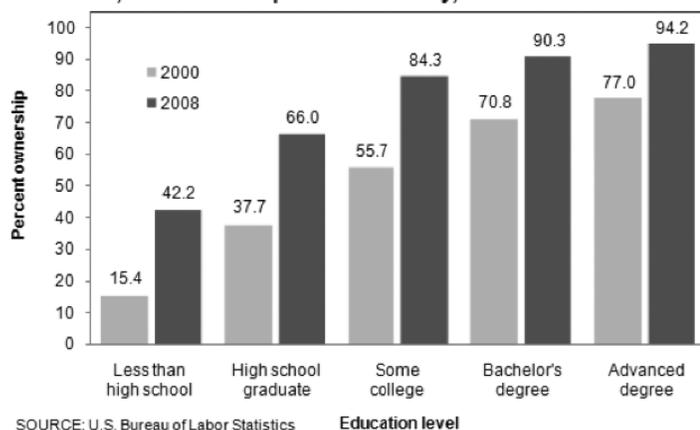
Chart 2. Percentage of computer ownership by age group, Consumer Expenditure Survey, 2000 and 2008



SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

In addition, the fastest overall growth in computer ownership has taken place in older “late adopter” demographics as the devices have become easier to use.

Chart 3. Percentage of computer ownership by education level, Consumer Expenditure Survey, 2000 and 2008



SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

Finally (and of most interest to the career college market), those Americans with the least amount of formal education have experienced the most rapid growth of computer adoption.

The net effect of these trends is to make prospects ever more accessible to college marketers by virtue of technology adoption and low costs. This rush into the digital landscape leads to an increase in the amount of “noise” that prospects experience. When prospects inquire at an ever-increasing number of schools – and those schools in turn bombard them with more and more communications, the raw amount of information prospects see becomes overwhelming.

This set of trends created a perfect environment for the kinds of abuses and poor practices

that have placed for-profits under increased federal scrutiny and public scorn. Quota driven admissions offices given access to cheap, push-button access to prospect’s voicemail and inboxes, creates a situation where there will inevitably be an increase in consumer complaints. And the tendency of information to spread rapidly **and** be available for years means that the actions of a few dishonest agents can taint the perception of the entire sector more powerfully than could happen when information was doled out by gatekeepers and relatively hard to come by.

The explosive expansion of ecommerce rounds out the profile of today’s college “consumer”. Just take a look at the sales stats on Cyber Monday. Online spending was up 18 percent versus a year ago (\$1.735 billion in online spending), representing the “heaviest online spending day in history” (ComScore, 2013). 24-hour availability of information as well as transaction capability (ordering from Amazon, checking your bank balance, etc.) has created the expectation that the consumer/prospect drives the process.

They want answers when the question occurs to them – not tomorrow or the next day. And they want online tools that will allow them to weigh options, complete “paperwork”, and apply for admission.

Colleges who look to control this process need to present an extremely compelling reason for doing so if they are to avoid irritating their potential students.

Finally, even as colleges have begun to adapt to the changes wrought by the personal computer and the 24/7 Internet, the landscape has changed again with the growth of tablet and mobile devices. The most recent Gartner survey of worldwide device shipments predicts that 2014 will see the combined number of monthly tablets and “ultramobile” devices (like the new Chromebook) will surpass that of desktops. Mobile phones (smart or otherwise) already dwarf both desktop and tablet sales combined by a factor of three (Gartner, 2013).

The Changing Landscape of Work

A brief look at the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) projections for the fastest growing job fields by 2018 is instructive. Here are 22 of the top 30 fields that the BLS lists as having the highest growth. (Note: duplicative entries have been eliminated).

- Fitness Trainers
- Occupational Therapists Assistants & Aides
- Environmental Engineering
- Technicians
- Personal Financial Advisors
- Physical Therapists
- Software Engineers
- Pharmacy Technicians
- Environmental Engineers
- Compliance Officers
- Physical Therapists Assistants & Aides
- Medical Assistants
- Dental Assistants
- Veterinary Techs and Assistants
- Dental Hygienists
- Athletic Trainers
- Biochemists/physicists
- Skin Care Specialists
- Medical Researchers
- Personal & Home Care Aides

It's interesting to note the complete lack of fields like Art Historian, English Teacher, Attorney, or Business Administrator. Instead, we see a list populated with fields that require both a highly specialized set of skills and have a significant regulatory framework governing their practice. The traditional world of college is simply unsuited to prepare students to work in these fields while the old manufacturing model of apprenticeship doesn't suit the small size of most businesses in these fields either.

Career colleges have stepped in to address the need for effective instruction in these areas – and have also concentrated on providing access to traditionally underserved populations. In doing so, they have been forced to wrestle with the problems inherent in an information based instructional model and have begun exploring more effective, competency based models that can effectively address the need for quality training.

The rapid growth of technological change is also leading to competency-based learning. Like it or not, we are now living in a post-literate world. *YouTube* is the third largest search engine on earth (and will soon be number two), which means that a tremendous amount of the content being consumed by web surfers is in the form of sound and video rather than written words.

Career colleges have a unique opportunity in this environment because they tend to be more nimble in terms of program design changes and because they are already focused on areas of study with high skill components rather than knowledge mastery components. Most non-profits are entrenched in a model of education perfected during the renaissance and aimed at

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upper class/upper middle class students. Lots of reading, writing and discussion about a very broad range of topics combined with more or less rigorous memorization of whatever body of facts and ideas is relevant to the class at hand. While the traditional “Liberal Arts” methodology has served well for a long time, the growth of largely skill-specific careers means that programs devoted to focused, rapid training of those skills can gain an advantage.

Career colleges are at the forefront of new models and increased access. Here are some key elements in the most successful career college models out there.

Increasing focus on outcomes based programs/education. No one goes to a career college because they think it would be neat to major in being a Pharmacy Technician. They embark on that program of study because they want a job. This trend towards “getting a job” as the logical outcome of the college experience has been encouraged both by the economy (see the list of fast growing professions above and compare to current unemployment figures) as well as the entire post-secondary education

market's dogged determination to equate college attendance with the attainment of the American Dream. Given that the vast majority of college students will need to have some kind of employment (in order to pay for housing, food, and student loans) the notion that employment is a logical and desired outcome of education makes enormous amounts of sense. We see the problem with the new Federal Gainful Employment requirements to lie in the fact that they are so selective and do not go far enough! Why shouldn't all colleges, regardless of their profit/non-profit status be held to the same litmus test if they are to take taxpayer dollars of any kind?

Intern/externships and active partnerships with companies and organizations. The most successful career college models concentrate heavily on partnerships with potential employers and intern/extern opportunities for students. The culinary school framework has used this model for years as young chefs graduate to externship positions in real restaurants. Those schools who make real-world work experience part of the curriculum will benefit not only in terms of perceived value to students (and better employment numbers), but will also have an active laboratory of students and employers providing feedback on which skill progressions are the most effective.

Competency based learning over Information based learning. The traditional model of education (read "Medieval" if you like) amounts to the notion that mastery of a discipline = a layered structure of knowledge in a field. In this model, knowledge is broken down into principles and facts and delivered in a progression of increasing complexity. Sometimes technique (lab) and skills (writing – a soft skill) are promoted, but not by and large.

Competency based education is suited to the technical fields that career colleges focus on – a layered set of actual skills that are essential to the understanding of a field and the performance of a job. If you are a digital animator, you have a work product to produce using particular techniques and tools. Technical fields are the "new manufacturing" – and can be taught outside of an apprenticeship model, providing workers

to business who cannot afford lengthy ramp-up times. These fields also have a tendency to fall under very specific (and often rapidly changing) regulatory structures. In effect, the potential liability associated with a skills-based career is quite a bit higher than one that is purely information based. Few, if any, bloggers get sued for malpractice.

How Can Schools Stand Out in this New World?

Create distinction. As always, having a strong and emotionally powerful marketing message is the key to both attracting interest and qualifying potential leads. The challenge lies in making sure that message passes regulatory muster and can be backed up by fact-based data about outcomes. Most of the prospects considering career education and the unique opportunities it provides (see below) are passionately interested in jobs with some degree of security and a path for advancement. Demonstrating a powerful academic program, unique instructional or experiential opportunities, and a solid track record of placement should be the core concerns of any for-profit (or in our opinion non-profit) college.

Target spending and drive changes based on rigorously collected data. The ease of gathering data on prospect/applicant behavior and characteristics is a double-edged sword. Lots of data and charts means lots of information... and also means lots of time spent poring over the information... and lots of effort put into understanding the information... just in time for the next wave of reports to arrive. Be sure to use the ever increasing (and ever more awesome) set of data gathering tools – reports from student information systems, keyword data from PPC campaigns, inbound links and searches from webmaster tools at Google and Yahoo – to guide actual decisions rather than serve as meeting agenda items. Don't be afraid to bet on your winners and either put your losers into triage or out to pasture.

Understand the admissions officer's role as advisor. There are very few trusted advisors and a heck of a lot of info-bombers/lead churners. Become an advisor who can genuinely connect to student interests and needs. The crucial

element in your forward facing marketing work (**before** the prospect ever sits down one-on-one with one of your reps) is to convey that the institution and the prospect are both best served if and only if the fit is right. Position your school in all of your marketing materials as a place that cares more about doing the right thing for students than it does about “putting butts in seats”. This alone will help forward thinking schools stand out from the sea of noise that assaults today’s prospective students.

For most people who have spent any time at all in admissions, it’s no secret that the recruitment models are outdated. Admission representatives struggle to even get in contact with an inquiry and when they do, they resort to the old standard – come on campus for an interview. And then they wonder why the prospective students don’t show up. While there is comfort in generating a copious bank of inquiries to make up for all the spillage pouring out the sides of the enrollment funnel, inquiries are not new students. And there is more we can do.

While the career college sector has been busy deflecting the blows of increased federal scrutiny and fighting for their existence against declining market perception, an opportunity has unveiled itself. High school students do not currently have the resources they need to make an informed decision about college choice. According to the American Counseling Association, the average student to school counselor ratio is recommended to be 250:1. In reality, the average stands at 451:1 with some states over 800:1 (California is over 1,000:1).

Think about it. The students needing the most guidance have the least resources to explore options related to what careers exist and what options are out there. Could this be one of the reasons students are underprepared?

Another key audience is that of the adult student who was never college material or has been out of school for a long time. Don’t they need guidance more than ever? And couldn’t the admissions representative of the past become the guidance coach they need now?

The bar to certification as a guidance counselor is quite high – generally involving a master’s

degree in school counseling and various additional certifications. That said, there are key skill sets that can be taught to and admissions representative to improve the interaction with prospective students and make it more meaningful. We don’t all have to be guidance counselors to adopt a model

Remember, would-be students want to know why a particular program is for them and want to understand that program in the context of the future opportunities it can bring them.

of admissions communication that offers more and better counseling on the best college options.

Develop quality content and make sure your basic Internet bases are covered. Many schools have a hard time keeping up with the basic blocking and tackling type work that comes with having a consistent and well-established presence on the Internet. An exhaustive list of what needs to happen in this arena is beyond the scope of this article, but good places to start are accurate and updated Google+ and Yahoo directory listings, regular review of the accuracy of the information included in the school’s top inbound links, accurate and complete Facebook and LinkedIn profiles, and search friendly web pages. In addition, schools would do well to develop content that is both authoritative and meaningful to prospects. Remember, would-be students want to know **why** a particular program is for them and want to understand that program in the context of the future opportunities it can bring them. They also want to better understand what they are getting into and how your school is different (and better) than other options. Make sure your web copy (or video assets) address these problems rather than just providing “keyword rich” bulleted lists of program features.

Conclusion

College admissions and marketing staffs have unprecedented access to an ever growing prospective student population. The explosive growth of technology has created an expanded

toolset for communicating with students. But this very growth has also made it impossible for admissions offices to control how and where prospects get information while at the same time making prospects ever more sophisticated shoppers. Add to this mix a new found interest on the part of federal regulators to “measure” the value of a college program based on the employment of its graduates and you have a volatile market fraught with uncertainty.

Sources

ComScore (December 3, 2013). **Cyber Monday Jumps 18 Percent to \$1.735 Billion in Desktop Sales to Rank as Heaviest U.S. Online Spending Day in History**

Gartner’s “Forecast: Devices by Operating System and User Type, Worldwide, 2010-2017, 2Q13 Update.”

Thomas Jefferson and School Choice (Stepman, J. and Feltscher, I.). *American Thinker*, April 14, 2013.

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics

But in every challenge and crisis lies opportunity. There are, in essence, two competing models of higher education in the U.S.. The old information based model aimed at helping students master a body of knowledge relevant to a field and the newly evolved competency based model aimed at helping students master an increasingly complex series of skills. Yet this distinction between program types and their suitability are often lost for a particular student because of the severe shortage of guidance professionals available.

Colleges who are willing and able to create a recruiting strategy based on powerful messaging and a consultative/guidance based model of building relationships in the admissions process will ultimately win both student approval and the regulatory war being waged against them.