

Navigating Toward E-Recruitment Ten Revelations About Interacting With College-Bound High School Students

They're out there. Looking at your Web site, making instant decisions about whether to remain an anonymous Web visitor or make contact with your campus. They are today's high school students, and they are turning to the Web in increasing numbers when they are searching for college.

But what do these students seek when they land on a college home page? What information do they want first? How much content do they want online? And do they want the e-experience to extend beyond the Web page, to instant messages, chat rooms, and text messages on their cell phones?

Noel-Levitz, James Tower, and the National Research Center for College and University Admissions (NRCCUA) recently conducted a survey of 1,000 high school juniors, from all regions of the United States, economic backgrounds, and academic abilities. Here are **10 findings** about how they use the Web, opportunities for interaction, and the validity of traditional recruitment tactics such as publications and campus visits.

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The logo consists of the letters 'NRCCUA' in a bold, sans-serif font, with a red dot above the 'C'. Below it, the text 'National Research Center for College & University Admissions' is written in a smaller font.

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The logo features a stylized 'JT' monogram with a figure holding a golf club, positioned above the text 'JAMES TOWER' in a serif font.

JT
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The logo features the text 'Noel-Levitz' in a serif font, with a red swoosh above the 'i' in 'Levitz'.

Noel-Levitz

1. Who's online? Nearly everyone

Almost half of the students surveyed (49%) said they were online every day, and 80% were online once per week or more.

Students from the Northeast were the most likely to be online every day (56%), with the South (49%), West (46%), and Midwest (44%) next in everyday use. Males were also more likely to be online daily (54%) than females (44%).

Fifty-five percent of A students used the Internet every day, compared to 47% of B and 44% of C and lower students. Children of parents who attended college were also more likely to use the Web each day—51% compared to 43%.

Clearly, the Web has taken hold with high school students, and these numbers will likely continue to rise. But what are these students doing when they get online?

2. Research, IM, and more research—top online activities

Students are definitely using the information superhighway for information. Three of the top five online activities (not including e-mail) involved research and news:

1. Research for school assignments—91%
2. Instant messaging—81%
3. Research colleges and universities—74%
4. Read news or feature stories—72%
5. Play games—65%

The one-to-one communication of instant messaging was considerably more popular than chat rooms—26% of students said they participated in chat rooms online.

As for blogging, 19% of students claimed to keep a blog, which is more than double the rate among the U.S. adult population (7%). Twenty-four percent of students said they read blogs, which was actually slightly lower than the U.S. adult rate (27%).¹

3. Make sure you have an inquiry form—top activities on college Web sites

Seventy-two percent of the students surveyed said they had used college Web sites—80% from the Northeast, 71% from the South, 70% from the Midwest, and 64% from the West. What are they doing once they arrive at your virtual campus doorstep?

The most popular activity was submitting an inquiry form—72% of students using college Web sites had submitted a form asking for more information from a campus. Here were the top 10 reported activities:

1. Submitted an inquiry form—72%
2. Completed an online survey—50%
3. Personalized a site²—39%
4. Forwarded a page—34%
5. Used a tuition calculator—33%
6. Read a student profile—31%
7. Read a faculty profile—26%
8. Submitted a campus visit request—25%
9. Used a financial aid estimator—24%
10. Completed an application online—22%

Interestingly, despite a heavy use of instant messaging by students (81%), only 6% said they had exchanged an instant message with a college counselor. Are schools missing a new communication opportunity? Several of the following questions indicated yes.

¹ Adult blogging data taken from Lee Rainie, "The State of Blogging," *Pew Internet & American Life Project Report*, January 2, 2005, http://www.pewinternet.org/PPF/r/144/report_display.asp

² "Personalizing a site" was defined as entering information and receiving a unique Web site experience.

4. Show them the money—provide personalized financial aid and tuition information on your site

When asked what activities **they would like to do** on a college Web site, here were the top responses:

1. Use a financial aid estimator—90%
2. Use a tuition calculator—88%
3. Complete an online application—86%
4. Fill out a campus visit request—84%
5. RSVP for events online—75%
6. Submit an inquiry form—73%
7. Complete an online survey—72%
8. Use instant message with a counselor—70%
9. E-mail a faculty member—70%
10. Read a profile of a faculty member—69%
11. Forward a page—63%
12. Read a profile of a current student—63%
13. E-mail a current student—63%
14. Read profiles of alumni—59%
15. Personalize a Web page—58%

Price and award information are clearly at the top of students' minds as they visit campus Web sites. They—and surely their parents/guardians—want to know how much school will cost and what their potential aid amounts could be. Having those estimators online could engage students and keep them connected with your site and your school.

While only 22% had completed applications online, 86% said they wished to do so. This group probably had not reached the application submission point yet, but the vast majority reported interest in online submission.

Students also rated the value of various types of information provided on college Web sites, from 1 (not at all valuable) to 5 (extremely valuable). The most valuable information to them (with the mean score listed):

1. Scholarship information—4.63
2. Tuition and fees information—4.61

3. Academic programs/majors—4.53
4. Financial aid information—4.48
5. Careers or internship information—4.28
6. Housing/residence life—4.01

These activity and value results show that students are most interested in information about cost and academics when they arrive at your Web site. This doesn't necessarily mean that information about campus life, student/faculty profiles, and such are not important. These have emotional impact that balances the "logical" information these students value.

5. Emphasize substance over style

While Web page design has evolved to include animation and flashy elements, students overwhelmingly believe college sites should put content first—and make navigation clear and quick. You should make sure students can find meaningful financial aid, tuition, and academic information right from your home page.

The study revealed content preferences by asking students to choose between a series of paired statements.

- College sites shouldn't be very flashy, but have a lot of great content—61%
- College sites should use a lot of technology and animation—39%

This reinforces the picture of what students are doing—and want to be doing—on college Web sites. They are not looking for a multimedia experience, they are looking for information experience. However, with this pair of statements, there was a big difference between academic levels. Among A and B students, 66% and 61% rated content more important. Among C and lower students, 51% placed technology and animation ahead of content.

- College sites should have a lot of detailed content to read/print—64%
- I want to do more than just read on a college site—36%

Once again, content was much more important. Give students as much as you can to read, print, and digest. But make sure that information is easy to find...

- I want to find answers within just a few clicks from the home page—73%
- I like to explore sites and find unexpected information—27%

While content and navigation are important, these results don't mean students disregard design and visuals. The following answers show that students place value on design—they may just not want to be overwhelmed by too much "flash":

- Photos are really important on a college Web site—73%
- The photos that are on most college Web sites are staged or fake—27%
- Colleges should look at other sites to get ideas to make theirs more interesting—74%
- I expect college sites to be conservative and low-key—26%

So what's the overall message? 1) Provide great content. 2) Make it easy to find. 3) Offer all this in a visually pleasing manner without going overboard on flashy animation.

6. Get the instant message out

As indicated by the results above, instant messaging is hugely popular with high school students. Many also expressed interest in using instant messaging with colleges.

- Would you send an instant message to a college to ask a question?
Yes—77%
- Would you be receptive to receiving an instant message from a college?
Yes—73%

Overall, the data on instant messaging illustrate colleges may be missing a communication opportunity with this technology. Instant messaging is clearly popular with high school

Internet users (81%), and large numbers are willing to receive IM communications from colleges. Yet, as indicated earlier, only 6% had actually exchanged instant messages with a counselor. Campuses would be advised to investigate this avenue of communication with prospective students.

7. Call me—at home, on my cell, and via text messages

In one of the more surprising results of this study, students expressed an overwhelming receptiveness to receiving calls at home: 70% said they **would be** willing to receive a call at home from a college.

Of course, more and more calls teenagers receive occur away from home, on their cell phones. Sixty-seven percent said they owned a cell phone. How did they feel about receiving recruitment calls on their cells?

- Would you be receptive to receiving a call on your cell from a college?
No—58%
Yes—41%

While the majority did say no, a strong minority did agree to receive such calls. Text messaging on cell phones showed similar results (82% of cell phone owners said they could receive text messages):

- Would you be receptive to receiving text messages from an admissions rep?
No—56%
Yes—44%

Considering the increased use (and acceptance of) cell phones, cell phone calls and text messaging offer yet another new recruitment communication option that most campuses have probably not tapped. While cell calls and text messaging are potentially invasive, they are excellent methods for personal communication with students who have opted in to calls/messaging—perhaps through an inquiry form on your Web site.

8. Who they want to talk to—and when

Students were asked to indicate, from a list, which campus personnel/students they would be interested in speaking with:

1. Admissions counselor—53%
2. Financial aid counselor—53%
3. Current student—46%
4. None of these—42%
5. Faculty member—40%
6. Alumni—35%

Students were also asked at what point during the enrollment process they would be comfortable interacting with campus personnel:

1. Before applying—40%
2. After submitting an application—29%
3. After acceptance for admission—27%

These results, taken with some of the other Web and communications answers, again show that many students place a premium on admissions and financial aid information.

9. Don't throw out your viewbooks yet

Given the cost savings of electronic communications, many campuses have wondered if they have reached a point where they can discard or at least downsize their more costly printed materials. The answer appears to still be *no*.

Students specifically answered a forced pair statement on the subject:

- I would rather look at a site than read brochures in the mail—56%
- I would rather read brochures to get details instead of reading them online—44%

Students with A averages preferred print even more (49%) than B (41%) and C and lower students (42%). So, while electronic communications have become favored by the majority of students, print still has a strong foothold and deserves to be part of your communications flow.

10. Human interaction is still important—campus visit results

Even more so than with print communications, the electronic age had not displaced the importance of the campus visit during the enrollment process. When asked if they had visited a college campus for the purposes of getting information, only 10% of students said no and that they didn't plan to. Forty-four percent said they had visited a campus, and 46% that they planned to in the future.

Of those that did visit a campus, 86% said that the experience increased their interest in attending that school. This number has risen considerably since a previous Noel-Levitz campus visit study, where 70% of college-bound high school seniors said the campus visit increased their interest in attendance.³

³*After 9/11: Campus Visit Expectations, Experiences, and Impact on Enrollment* (Iowa City: Noel-Levitz, 2002)

Conclusion—lessons learned

Clearly, students have embraced technology.

While that is unsurprising, this research shows that there are many untapped opportunities for your campus to use the Internet and communication technologies to connect with prospective students. Don't wait for the data to show that 100% of college bound students want instant messages, text messages, or calls on their cell phones. Do some testing on your own (with permission from the students, of course) to determine the effectiveness of these kinds of communication resources.

At the same time, remember that communication with students is still about information. They are seeking it from you about your

campus. Make it easy for them to find the most vital data that influences their decision making. Make sure each communication opportunity offers value to the student, so that you can move them closer and closer to enrollment.

For further discussion or questions, please contact Noel-Levitz

If you would like to discuss the results of the E-Expectations: Class of 2006 survey in more detail, or for questions, please contact Stephanie Geyer, executive consultant at Noel-Levitz. Call **1-800-876-1117** or e-mail stephanie-geyer@noellevitz.com.

About the research sponsors

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NRCCUA

The National Research Center for College & University Admissions (NRCCUA) is a non-profit education research organization based in Lee's Summit, Missouri. For over 30 years, NRCCUA has conducted the largest nationwide survey of high school students, which serves as a communications link between college-bound high school students and public and private colleges and universities.

Note: The margin of error (for a sample of 1,000 individuals) is +/- 3%, at a 95% confidence level.