

Like, Love, ~~Delete~~

Social Media's Influence
on College Choice

By Marcia Layton Turner

Ten years ago, NACAC published a report showing that 61 percent of college admission offices were using social media to recruit prospective students. The authors—and many people in college admission—could see the writing on the wall: Social media was becoming indispensable.

One of the study's authors, Nora Ganim Barnes, recently observed, "Social media is omnipresent on the campus. It would surprise me if you found a campus that was not heavily invested in their social media. Enrollments are generally down and competition is fierce. [Ignoring social media] is simply no longer an option."

And colleges have gotten on board, wanting to meet students where they are.

Barnes also reported finding that 41 percent of school officials "believe they can directly attribute an increase in enrollments to their social media efforts."

Social media is with us to stay. So how can admission professionals leverage these tools?

SOCIAL MEDIA'S PLACE IN THE PROCESS

First, it's important to distinguish between how prospective students use social media versus where they turn for college information, points out Gil Rogers, director of marketing for the National Research Center for College and University Admissions. "While students may spend several hours a day on Instagram or Snapchat, for example, that doesn't mean that those channels are used for college information-gathering and decision-making," he said.

During the college search, students are highly likely to use college websites to gather information, followed closely by review sites, according to the *2017 Social Admissions Report*, developed by Chegg, Target X, and the National Research Center for College & University Admissions (NRCCUA).

"It's not until later that students turn more to social channels for guidance," said Rogers. "Social is more of a decision-driver than a discovery engine."

As students begin to hone their list of potential schools, they turn to social media to get a sense of what the campus and students are like.

Perhaps most importantly, the report found that two in five students use social media to decide which school to attend.

The takeaway? Social media is not as useful for increasing student awareness as it is for influencing college choice.

WHERE STUDENTS ARE

"The four most popular platforms used by colleges are Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat," noted Ashley Dobson, communications manager, content and social media for NACAC. "Facebook is typically a way to connect with parents, since its users skew older," she said. "Twitter is primarily how admission officers connect with each other, and Instagram and Snapchat are almost exclusively student-focused."

Her assertions are backed by the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research, which shares stats about American teens' social media usage: 76 percent use Instagram; 75 percent use Snapchat; 66 percent use Facebook; and 47 percent use Twitter.

While these numbers point admission offices in the right direction, taken alone, the big four don't make a full social media strategy.

The *2017 Social Admissions Report* found that 63 percent of students use social media to research a college they are interested in and 60 percent have followed or liked a college they are considering. The breakdown by channel is 68 percent YouTube, 67 percent Instagram, 63 percent use Facebook, and 42 percent Snapchat.

The path of a student's search and decision process is fragmented," added Sasha Peterson, CEO of TargetX. "Students will start, stop, and restart the process across multiple channels and devices. Institutions need to be prepared for that.

The report makes it clear that nailing down which platforms potential recruits use isn't an exact science, so schools tend to be experimental, casting a wide net. Of course, this means where admission departments spend their time varies by school—and by what's trending among students.

For example, Megan Bernier Keniston, higher education marketing professional and social media manager at St. Lawrence University's (NY), said her priorities are Instagram, followed by Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, and YouTube. Melissa Richards, vice president for communications and enrollment management for Sweet Briar College (VA) said she uses a mix of Instagram and Facebook, while Graeme Menzies, director, marketing communications & social media at the University of British Columbia (UBC), said his strategy is all about Facebook, with Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, and a little bit of YouTube.

HOW TO CONNECT

Social media should align with your school's brand and marketing focus. For example, Richards said that for Sweet Briar—and most other schools—the campus visit is the golden nugget. "It makes a huge difference in the decision to apply," she said. Consequently, Sweet Briar's social media focus has two goals: to entice students to come to their campus and to give students who can't visit a good sense of what the campus looks and feels like.

They achieve this through three main social media tools: Instagram, Facebook, and a student-run blog. Instagram, where the college features a lot of campus images, helps students imagine themselves on campus, explained Richards. Their Facebook community is mostly alumnae and parents, so they tell more stories there. Their student-run blog is a way for prospective students to hear about what life is like as a student—the classes, culture, and how they fit.

Richards and her department have been doing more with video lately. She said it appears to be a big influencer. Facebook Live video sessions and 360 shots give an enhanced view of the campus and have high click-through rates. Richards believes this "is a testament to this generation's visual nature."

Menzies sees social media as a great way to push students to the UBC's website, he explained. Once there, they can dig into more about campus life, programs, and admission.

Additionally, Facebook and Twitter are great for answering students' questions, while Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube help students picture themselves on campus. Facebook is used frequently to attract, inform, and engage prospective students, and UBC also has a page specifically for prospective students. Menzies said this is necessary—Canada uses Facebook more than any other country, so UBC relies on it more heavily than many schools in the US.

But the plan could change at any time, given the ebb and flow of social media platforms and popularity. Menzies said it's crucial to remain flexible and "constantly evaluate the performance of channels and adapt the way we use them to play to their strengths." For example, a couple of years ago UBC evaluated Snapchat, saw that it was primarily a channel for young people to communicate with each other. "We didn't want to intrude," said Menzies. But in 2016, UBC re-evaluated and jumped onboard Snapchat. After running a



pilot, they decided the effort was worth it. “Now it’s going like gangbusters,” said Menzies.

UBC had been using Weibo, a popular social media site in China (similar to Twitter), to communicate with Chinese students. But after trying it, said Menzies, UBC wasn’t seeing results and dropped it. As social media usage shifts, UBC shifts with it.

KEEPING IT QUIET

“It takes an unconventional idea to convince students to share their college acceptances on social media,” observed Keniston. Five years ago, students didn’t hesitate to post online about where they got in. You would see frequent mentions of acceptances on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

“Now students wait until they have decided where to attend before announcing,” said Keniston. “They’re much more private about that information.”

Keniston strongly recommends that admission teams send admitted students something cool—visual or physical—that they can feature in photos for sharing on social media.

GETTING CREATIVE

Many schools are getting creative with social media, using it to get attention, then convey their institutions’ unique personality and community.

“The University of Virginia’s blog, *Notes from Peabody*, is one example of social media done right,” said Dobson. Posts shared by Associate Dean of Admission Jeannine Lalonde (or deanj) allow students to look behind the admission curtain.

When Lalonde created the blog in 2005, she did it quietly, making observations about the campus community and sprinkling in comments about the admission process. “I noticed that any time I talked about the admission process, traffic spiked,” she said. So she shifted the focus of her blog to demystifying the process.

Today, she still operates with that goal in mind and most of the posts feature her dog, Jack, creating a dogs-eye-view of campus happenings. Jack has also helped her expand on Instagram. While several of the photos feature him, Lalonde does a good job posting a mix of photos that show many sides of the school.

After sending a getting-to-know-you message to admits, Kristi Lafree Smith, associate director of enrollment marketing at Butler University (IN), used one question—what is your dog or cat’s first name—to build a connection with a large segment of students.

To students who responded, Butler sent “pet version” of their admit package. They were addressed to the cats or dogs from the Butler mascot, Butler Blue III (Trip) and had treats enclosed, said Smith. “In the print piece, Trip promised to look after the pet’s human for them while they were away!”

“We then encouraged students to share pictures of their pets on social media,” said Smith. “It was a huge hit and we saw a great response from admitted students, their parents, and current students and alumni.” With this one idea, Butler was able to create connection—a sense of caring about students personally—and engagement via social media.

MANAGEMENT TOOLS

While many tools exist, it’s up to individual schools to pick what they need, based on management and staffing.

To stay on top of what different departments and professors are sharing on social media, Lalonde keeps her phone on her and regularly monitors her Hootsuite account. When she spots something noteworthy, Lalonde shares it.

She doesn’t have a calendar for posts and she said thinks that’s part of the reason people respond so positively to her posts. “If it feels right to post and I know it would be helpful to students, I post,” she said. “Students prefer less produced, more authentic posts.”

Keniston said, while she still does a lot of social media monitoring manually, she relies on Sprout Social for scheduling of posts and tracking hashtags and Facebook. Facebook has introduced a new way to monitor comments and engagement, called Audience Insights, which St. Lawrence is using to track students who comment or engage. “Facebook Insights is a treasure trove of information,” said Keniston.

UBC has a full-time social media coordinator, said Menzies, who posts daily. The department has an editorial calendar designed on an Excel spreadsheet with broad themes that they create annually. Menzies also uses Hootsuite to schedule posts, evaluate open rates, and manage campaigns.

“Metrics and evaluation is the most important piece of the process,” noted Menzies, including measuring engagement levels and Facebook likes, as well as monitoring the profile of the audience UBC attracts, to ensure it matches the school’s strategic audience.

With social media channels and prospective student usage of them constantly in flux, staying on top of which platforms yield the best results is a big part of the challenge.

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