

Information Overload

Students are Overwhelmed
with Marketing Chatter.

How Can Colleges Get
Their Attention?





High school senior Fritzgerald Duvigneaud has been deluged with college mailings since he took his first Advanced Placement exam.

“At first, it was exciting to be getting all the attention,” he recalled. But as the volume increased, Duvigneaud and his family took to creating huge stacks of mail. “The flood of pamphlets and letters has been a huge inconvenience,” he grumbled. “And dealing with it is a major waste of time.”

Duvigneaud’s inbox has also been clogged-up with emails, but he’s never cataloged the intake. That was a chore undertaken by another high school senior who posted to Reddit a tally of 2,175 emails received from 115 different colleges and universities.

In response to the Reddit post, some on the discussion board shared one-upmanship accounts of marketing avalanches. One student wrote, “They’ve been bombarding me since probably 10th grade and the flow only increased once I got The Hispanic National Merit Award.” A parent shared that her high-achieving son—ranked sixth in a class of 650—had been sent 6,263 emails by January of his senior year.

College outreach efforts are sometimes received as nuisances, or worse, as maddening spam and junk email. New digital technologies and data-driven targeting innovations are reducing the amount of paper materials distributed, yet they are not reducing the oversaturation experienced by many prospective students.

LEAD GENERATION 101

How did 115 colleges get the Reddit-poster’s contact information? There’s a good chance that many of them acquired the student’s information from The College Board’s Student Search Service or Encoura, its ACT equivalent.

The College Board created Search (the shorthand name of the program) in 1972 at the request of high school counselors eager to expose students to information about colleges that the students might not already be familiar with. Search and Encoura are now sprawling reservoirs of contact information that colleges draw from for their mass marketing efforts.

The College Board’s website lists the cost of each Search record at 47 cents to license. According to Zachary Goldberg, a spokesperson for The College Board, 1,900 colleges and scholarship organizations participate

in Search. A November 2019 *Wall Street Journal* article indicates that institutions can select from over 2 million student records.

Colleges use Search and Encoura to target their outreach by a variety of demographic, academic, and college interest characteristics. For instance, if a college seeks to recruit female Hispanic students from the Southeast, with intended majors in the life sciences, SAT scores within a certain range, and an expressed preference for small-size campuses, it can license a set of data that matches such criteria.

But colleges don’t always target their communications narrowly. Some schools reach out to broad sweeps of students with tsunami waves of emails. The *Wall Street Journal* profiled a private college with a freshman class of 2,000 that purchased 300,000 names—and this number may be significantly less than what other colleges acquire.

And, increasingly, colleges reach out to students using a multitude of channels, creating a college admission marketing juggernaut.

“In the dark ages, there was print and video,” said Michael Stoner, the president and co-founder of mStoner, a creative agency working with higher education clients. “Now there’s a whole lot more.”

He’s referring to multichannel marketing, the generic term used to capture the vast ways in which potential applicants can be reached today. Students and parents are marketed to via email, text messaging, live chatboxes, social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn, and, for the media savvy, Snapchat, TikTok, and whatever emerges tomorrow), and digital retargeting—those advertisements that follow users around the internet. “I’m not surprised some teens find it annoying,” Stoner acknowledged.

Sasha Peterson, the CEO of TargetX, an enrollment management software company, links this heightened marketing intensity to increased



Katiana Wieser, right, used college brochures, booklets, and postcards to create a "college confetti" dress and mortarboard for Halloween. Wieser, a senior at Naperville North High School in Illinois, estimates that she received 50 pounds of mail from colleges in one three-month period. Wieser applied early decision to one school and submitted other early applications this fall.



competition among colleges over a decreasing pool of students. "The demographics of the traditionally aged undergraduate population aren't going in the right direction for colleges."

A shrinking number of students are graduating from high schools, which makes each college-bound prospect more sought after. "Highly desired students are going to get hammered with outreach," Peterson said.

Stoner describes college marketing professionals as caught between a rock and a hard place. "The crux of the problem is that if you don't send out a lot of stuff, you risk people not paying attention," he said. "But if you do send out a lot of stuff, you may alienate some."

New high-tech customer relationship management (CRM) systems are increasingly being adopted, including one developed by TargetX. CRMs enable admission offices to target prospective students with customized communications. As an example, a college may send a prospect invitations to an open house by text message, email, and postcard if the prospect has clicked on a number of emailed links, sent SAT scores to the college, and has characteristics that mirror prior applicants to the college. Meanwhile, students who have taken no actions that indicate interest and attend non-feeder high schools may only receive the invitation via email.

George Mason University (GMU), a large public university in Northern Virginia, is one such institution segmenting its prospects. "We make strategic choices to send mail to students who we think are most likely to enroll, or who fit important aspects of our mission," explained David Burge, vice president for enrollment management and a NACAC past president. "We don't mail to those who are least likely to enroll unless they take certain steps, such as visiting the campus, filling out a form, et cetera. Savvy colleges make these types of decisions in line with their financial constraints."

Marketing ratchets up the overall stress for students and makes it easier for them to lose track of important emails from financial aid offices, as well as emails related to special support programs and even acceptance emails.

At GMU, some prospective students only demonstrate active interest after a few email contacts, Burge said. Therefore the enrollment marketing valve doesn't get shut off after just one or two emails.

The practice aligns with what many other colleges are doing. "You really have to have lots of touches and build communication campaigns that reinforce each other," Stoner explained—which brings us back to Duvigneaud and his overloaded inbox.

SOME MATERIALS ARE ACTUALLY USEFUL

Duvigneaud, who attends an independent school in South Florida, says he ignores most of the paper materials and the majority of college marketing materials that land in his inbox.

"A minority of the emails are informative," he said. The emails about his academic area of interest—engineering—and those that mention scholarship opportunities in the subject line are the only ones he immediately reads.

Katiana Wieser, a senior at Naperville North High School in Illinois, has also been flooded with college marketing materials. In one three-month period, she estimates that she received 50 pounds of paper mail. She described the college materials and emails as looking very much alike, all featuring diverse students, green quads, and blue skies. But "just because you made me look at your email doesn't make me like you," she said.

According to Wieser, marketing had little impact on her college application decision-making. By her sophomore year, she had already formed her college list, developed with help from her family. It's a process that worked for Wieser's two older siblings. However, the senior admits that the fun, quirky, and personable materials one college sent reinforced her perception of that institution and validated her decision to apply there.

Wieser applied early decision to one school and submitted other early applications. Now that her college application process is wrapping up, she's found a second life for her hefty haul of brochures, booklets, and postcards. For Halloween, she crafted "a college confetti dress" from the leftover materials. "I de-stress and relax through crafting," she said.

THE COLLEGE BOARD'S DATA AND COUNSELORS' PERSPECTIVES

The actual data from the College Board tells a different story about marketing than the one told by Duvigneaud and Wieser. In fact, it suggests that Search impacts students' choices in ways that they may not be aware of, or willing to admit.

The probability of a test-taking student sending their SAT scores to any particular institution is extremely low—about 0.5 percent—but when a college licenses the student's information via Search and presumably markets to that student, the probability that the student sends his/her

scores to the college rises to 0.6 percent. This figure is a substantial 20 percent difference from the baseline. The probability of score-sending goes up the highest for African American students, first-generation college-bound students, and low socioeconomic status students, thus making Search a useful tool for advancing access and equity.

For Maggie Farnsworth, the director of college counseling at the New Hampton School, an independent boarding school in New Hampshire, small differences in piqued interest due to marketing outreach are not easily observable and don't emerge in her day-to-day conversations with students. "They are being bombarded left and right," she observed.

"I don't know the last time I heard a kid say, 'Thank goodness for this well-made viewbook. It changed my mind!'"

At Whitefish Bay High School in Wisconsin, Bill Barbeau, a school counselor, asserts that "location, cost, and major availability" are the big factors driving college decision-making, not the background noise of college admission marketing.

Yet Sarah Hall, a fellow school counselor, has noticed that when the marketing includes a concrete incentive to apply, students are sometimes more likely to do so.

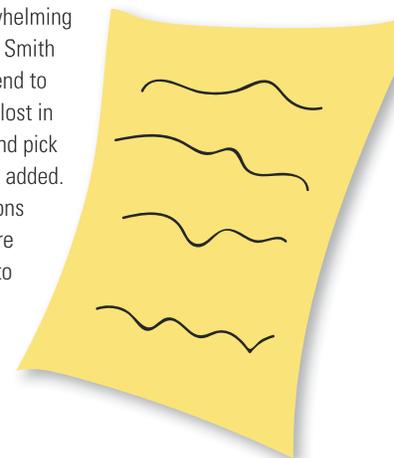
"I've seen students drawn to schools that waive the fee or essay," she said. "However, they may not necessarily wind up attending those schools."

David Smith, the executive director of Roaring Fork PreCollegiate, a first-generation college access program in Carbondale, Colorado, is unsure

whether admission marketing motivates students to apply to certain schools. However, he's absolutely certain that marketing ratchets up the overall stress for students and makes it easier for them to lose track of important emails from financial aid offices, as well as emails related to special support programs and even acceptance emails. He recently encountered a student who had been accepted to two colleges but didn't know it because the acceptance emails were "buried" in an inbox with 1,500 college-related unread messages!

"The college admission process is overwhelming and the sheer volume of emails adds to it," Smith said. Then, because financial aid emails "tend to be pretty businesslike," they especially get lost in the shuffle. "Sometimes you have to hunt and pick around to find the (financial aid) emails," he added.

While Smith recognizes the good intentions of college marketers to make students aware of their institutions, he also implores them to consider how their marketing may add to the challenges faced by first-generation students.



Colleges should send out emails with two big buttons—one for more information and another with a huge red “X” for quick unsubscribing!

TIPS FOR THE MARKETERS

The interviewed students, counselors, and enrollment management consultants all acknowledge that the fire hose of marketing communication can't be turned off, but they also believe that it could become more targeted, more impactful for colleges, and less intrusive for students and parents.

Here are six tips for college marketers trying to get the attention of both students and parents:

- 1) **Be creative with the content.** Stoner's advice is to “be clever, but not too clever” and to cultivate a “sense of humor that grabs students' attention.”
- 2) **But if you're going to joke around, it better be funny!** Duvigneaud and his friends found colleges' “boo, just kidding” subject lines around Halloween to be trite.
- 3) **Avoid text-heavy outreach and big viewbooks.** “Our students don't read anything lengthy,” reported Farnsworth. “Anything that's small with quick facts is good.” Stoner adds: “Colleges are making a mistake if they are sending a lot of paper,” especially in a time of heightened environmental consciousness.
- 4) **Focus on academic majors, affordability, and campus visit opportunities.** “The biggest thing that moves the needle is getting students on campus,” said Peterson, the CEO of TargetX.
- 5) **Improve the visual design of messages related to financial aid.** Then, as Smith said, financial aid communications might get more attention.
- 6) **Invest in high-quality social media content.** “It's fun and it's not intrusive,” Wieser says. The senior would rather have the option to view a high-tech video on a social media page than to have more spam hitting her inbox. Plus, as she and others point out, sending viewbooks, brochures, letters, and postcards is incredibly wasteful.

A final big idea is from Duvigneaud: Colleges should send out emails with two big buttons—one for more information and another with a huge red “X” for quick unsubscribing! He acknowledges the idea may be wildly unrealistic, but wouldn't it be refreshing if a college tried it? [L](#)

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