

Student Recruitment Technology

Issues and Opportunities within the Campus Admission Office

This white paper is based on an independent research study conducted by Admissions Lab between June and August 2004. The study focused primarily on the use of technology in support of critical recruitment and admission business processes across a range of colleges and universities. In particular, the study examined the specific types of functionality needed to effectively build relationships with prospective students as well as issues surrounding the availability, deployment and management of this technology.

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The research study consisted of phone interviews with senior enrollment managers at 54 colleges and universities across the country. These individuals represented a broad spectrum of institutions based on type (i.e., public, private, church-affiliated, baccalaureate, doctoral-granting, Etc.), geographic location, and overall size (from FTE less than 800 to more than 50,000). The common denominator that connected these institutions together was their history of proactive recruitment activity over the past five years.

For the purposes of the study, “technology” was defined as a specific set of related electronic functions used to execute and/or support specific student recruitment and/or admission business processes that impact the size and shape of a new student class.

Study Parameters

Each participant in the study was informed that the purpose of the interview was to assess the use of technology across their recruitment and admission processes and to solicit feedback on issues related to the availability, deployment and management of technology.

Participants were asked to comment specifically about institutional use of the technology to support recruitment and admission activity, particularly as it related to building relationships with prospective students. Participants were also asked to describe desirable functionality that was not currently in place and to identify the barriers that were preventing acquisition and/or deployment.

Interviews lasted an average of 24 minutes including discussion about the issues related to acquisition, deployment and management of various technologies.

General Findings

It is clear from this research initiative that several key factors are influencing the acquisition, deployment and management of recruitment and admission technology. Although these factors cannot be described specifically as “technology” factors, they are clearly having an impact on the use of technology across recruitment and admission operations:

1. **A more competitive landscape:** Regardless of selectivity or location, and in spite of favorable demographics, institutions reported that competition for the right mix of students is more competitive than ever. This appears to be the result of more aggressive, consistent recruitment activity within the higher education market space combined with the introduction of new technologies and new recruitment strategies that put more information, and, therefore, more control, in the hands of consumers. In particular, institutions participating in this study cited more intensive prospecting activity by institutions in their competition sets and more aggressive yield-enhancement strategies—particularly aggressive discounting—among private institutions at all competitive levels.
2. **Increased demand for immediate, personal interaction:** “Live by the sword, die by the sword” seems to be an appropriate analogy to describe the increased reliance on real-time communication technology by colleges and universities. The more that institutions rely on electronic vehicles such as Web sites, e-mail campaigns, and personalized Web portals to reach out to prospective students, the more demand they create among those students, as well as parents and counselors, for immediate and continuous interaction. Institutions that are capable of generating large quantities of slick, outbound, personalized communication—either on their own or through a partnership with an e-mail vendor—are often unable to meet and/or keep up with the demand they create through this communication in an effective, personalized manner. By default, and out of necessity, they end up directing prospects to various Web pages through hyperlinks embedded in their messages but in doing so often give up an opportunity to interact on a one-to-one basis with those prospects.
3. **Increased emphasis on business metrics:** As more and more resources are being expended on prospecting and yield-enhancement activity, more and more attention is being paid to outcomes—both qualitative and quantitative—by enrollment managers, campus financial officers and senior college administrators. Many of the enrollment managers participating in the study (68%) cited an increased need to justify their operating expenditures through return-on-investment (ROI) analysis and to validate their enrollment strategy

through continuous monitoring/reporting of progress-toward-goals (PTG). This increased accountability has led to a demand for better analytic and reporting tools that can bring information from different sources together and present it in an actionable manner to enrollment managers.

4. **Communication preferences have shifted:** Although it may seem obvious, the study confirmed that colleges and universities are making much greater use of e-mail as a communication medium and dramatically decreasing the frequency of, and investment in, print mailings. The number one reason cited for the shift was cost-savings followed closely by the need to meet response demands quickly and consistently. While fully committing to e-mail as an obvious channel for one-on-one communication with students who have achieved applicant and admit status, institutions continue to assess where and when electronic communication can be most beneficial to them as a proactive *prospecting* tool. While some institutions have committed to e-mail as a first contact with prospects, others continue to rely on more traditional activities that build toward an electronic relationship.
5. **Recruitment is starting earlier and ending later:** Because students have access to a wealth of online college search resources as well as actual college information—both through 3rd party sources and college Web sites—they are able to initiate the search for colleges at a much earlier point. This has forced colleges to respond to prospects at an earlier point and to maintain relationships with them over a longer period of time. On the other end of the recruitment continuum, colleges are finding that new forms of communication technology are helping them reduce the number/percentage of deposit-cancelled students by smoothing the transition from admission to orientation to matriculation through a continuous chain of contacts that span the gap between May 1 and the beginning of the fall term. They are also finding that significant follow-up e-mail contact with admitted, packaged students is crucial to “closing the deal” in this era of financial aid bargaining by students and, subsequently, financial aid re-packaging by colleges.

Specific Findings

For purposes of this white paper, we've broken the most relevant technology findings of the research study into two categories: technology management and technical functionality. The management category addresses issues and opportunities related to the acquisition and deployment of technology resources that directly impact the functionality and strategic use of technology in support of recruitment and admission business processes. The functionality category addresses specific uses of technology in the recruitment and admission office as well as specific functional needs (gaps) that technology could address.

We'll begin with findings related to management:

1. **Enrollment managers are seeking a comprehensive technology “solution” from a single partner rather than multiple technology applications from multiple vendors.**

Every one of the 54 institutions participating in the study reported that they worked with at least one technology vendor to support the success of their recruitment and admission operation. In fact, the enrollment managers participating in the study reported working with an average of 3.8 technology vendors to manage recruitment and admission business processes in addition to working with internal IT staff and other external vendors that handle creative functions, provide consulting services, and support data transfer (e.g., test scores, prospect mailing lists).

The technology vendors were supporting a range of business processes through software and hosted Web services. Among the most-frequently mentioned business processes being supported were:

- online data collection—through inquiry and application forms (78%)
- overall prospect communication management (65%)
- e-mail campaign management/tracking (57%)
- data mining/interpretation (35%)
- document imaging/storage (24%)
- admission-related Web content management (19%)

Enrollment managers clearly understand and appreciate the value of partnering with best-of-breed software companies and other types of technology vendors to support critical business processes and achieve desired enrollment goals. However, they find that managing an increasing number of vendors and independent software applications has created a significant burden on their time and resources. Furthermore, a number of enrollment managers reported having to continuously justify the need for multiple outside vendors and best-of-breed software applications within their existing institutional technology infrastructure.

As a result, enrollment managers participating in the study conveyed a strong interest in partnering with a single vendor that can address a range of technology and communication needs across their recruitment and admission operation. Over 77% of the institutions represented (42 of 54) said they would prefer a single “solution” partnership to relationships with multiple vendors if the partnership could address a comprehensive range of processes such as online data collection/sharing, electronic campaign management, data analysis/manipulation and general prospect management functions. This type of

single solution approach was also viewed favorably from the perspective of interoperability with existing campus-wide systems.

2. Enrollment managers want options when it comes to the acquisition and deployment of technology.

Although there are clearly similarities across institutions of higher education, each one has its own issues, politics and structure. Therefore, enrollment managers are looking for flexibility when it comes to the acquisition and deployment of technology applications.

More specifically, they want options that fit their budget, their IT infrastructure, and their specific functional needs. For example, some institutions are capable of making a large capital investment in technology (and related implementation costs) during a single budget cycle. Others prefer a subscription pricing model that can be managed within the context of their operating budget each year. Subscription pricing is most often associated with the application service provider (ASP) model described below.

The ASP model presents an opportunity to outsource much of the maintenance and support activity associated with a software application but also requires the institution to give up some control—and potentially some sense of security—related to the application. For those institutions that have the infrastructure (both hardware and networking) and IT staffing to support “in-house” deployment of specialty applications in support of recruitment and admission business processes, an ASP model may be less desirable because the institution is capable of taking on the burden of hosting the application(s) on its servers and within its network.

However, many institutions either don't have the necessary infrastructure and/or staffing, or simply cannot make the case to enhance or displace existing functionality within their institution's campus-wide system. (Interestingly, this seems to be true even when the existing functionality is recognized as being woefully inadequate to support the functions necessary to effectively recruit and enroll a new class of students.) For these campuses, an off-campus software “hosting” option through an appropriate ASP is very desirable. This option eliminates the need to purchase and maintain additional dedicated hardware resources and also out-sources the burden of supporting the technology to an organization that specializes in this type of service. In most cases, hosted applications are accessible either through an Internet browser or an Internet-savvy smart client and, therefore, have the added advantage of being available to enrollment managers anywhere they can connect to the Internet.

3. **Managing e-mail communication effectively means different things to different institutions.**

E-mail communication is a core component to every recruitment and admission operation. All of the institutions participating in this study indicated that they were using e-mail in a strategic manner to support their communication with prospective students.

However, “using e-mail in a strategic manner” depends heavily on whether an institution is attempting to manage a large volume of *in-bound* e-mail or drive a large volume of *out-bound* e-mail.

For those institutions that have national visibility and, as a result, receive a significant volume of unsolicited in-bound e-mail, “using e-mail in a strategic manner” means effective e-mail response management—setting-up a process to receive, evaluate and respond to messages in a timely manner. (One institution participating in the study handles as much as 3,000 individual in-bound e-mail messages *each day* during peak months of the recruitment cycle and attempts to respond to each individual message by using work-study students and volunteers.)

In particular, managing large volumes of in-bound e-mail has created a great deal of interest in automated response software that reacts to “trigger” words in the body of the in-bound message and generates an automated response that addresses the message. Although this does present an alternative to a generic auto response or a time-consuming personal response, it doesn’t always achieve the desired effect. This is particularly true when the same sender is generating multiple messages and, in turn, receiving multiple responses from an institution that purports to be personal but fails to recognize the ongoing dialogue and continuously uses identical language and references the same Web links.

However, for most institutions (four-out-of-five in our study) “using e-mail in a strategic manner” refers to pushing html messages out to thousands of prospective students as part of their longer-term recruitment strategy. These messages carry the burden of having to capture the attention of prospective students and lead them into a deeper relationship with the institution through links and online registration options.

These outbound e-mail campaigns involve html design components, delivery components and, most importantly, tracking components. Well-executed campaigns can offer a remarkable return-on-investment when used as an initial search contact and can also provide options for low-cost, continuous contact (e.g., a prospect newsletter) throughout the extended recruitment cycle. The

tracking components, in particular, are critical since they provide a link between general campaign success and sustainable interest that leads to follow-up activity and further qualification.

In the context of these management findings, we will now explore specific findings related to technical functionality and related gaps:

1. **E-mail is driving prospecting activity:** As stated above, all of the institutions participating in the study said they were using e-mail in a strategic manner to support recruitment and admission. Eighty percent indicated that their use of outbound e-mail campaigns (scheduled group mailings rather than individual messages) would continue to be the primary communications strategy to support prospecting activity.

In particular, the majority of these institutions were using html e-mail as their primary student search strategy. (NOTE: The phrase "student search strategy" is used here to refer to the process of purchasing names of college-bound students from vendors such as the College Board, ACT and NRCCUA and initiating contact with these "suspects" as a means of building the size and scope of an institution's prospect pool.) By using e-mail, institutions were able to substantially reduce mailing costs and reinvest these funds into the purchase of additional prospect names. Although most institutions would not share, or did not know, their average response rates for search-related e-mail campaigns, three out of four participants indicated that a 10% response would be considered acceptable and that a 15% response would be considered desirable. (Response was defined as initiating a requested action rather than simply opening a message.)

Over half of the institutions using outbound e-mail campaigns were outsourcing all or part of the operational components to third-party vendors. For those that weren't outsourcing the entire process, vendors were handling actions such as development of specific html e-mail templates for the institutions, distribution of messages through dedicated mail servers, and tracking of campaign success metrics.

In fact, tracking campaign metrics was the number one reason cited by participating institutions for outsourcing e-mail strategy. These metrics include the number/percentage of messages that are being opened, the number of bounce-backs occurring as a result of bad addresses, and the number of "click-throughs" to specific pages on related institutional Web sites. Enrollment managers are using this information to evaluate the overall success of e-mail campaigns at an aggregate level and to judge the effectiveness of campaign

messaging and timing across various sub-cohorts of prospects.

One major gap identified by participating enrollment managers related to the use of e-mail as a prospecting strategy is the disconnect that seems to exist between the use of large-scale e-mail campaigns (whether outsourced or generated in-house) and the broader set of strategies and information being used to move students through the admission funnel. In particular, the inability to bring campaign-level metrics down to an individual student record level (i.e., which students are opening which mailings and what links are they clicking-through) is preventing enrollment managers from using this information in conjunction with other prospect activity data to drive follow-up communication and broader prospect qualification activities.

2. **Analytical tools are in demand:** Of the 54 institutions participating in the research study, 41 (76%) indicated that their complete reporting needs were not being met through current technology resources. When asked to be more specific, participating enrollment managers focused on performance management metrics related directly to the recruitment and admission process.

Generally, participants were comfortable with the range of data elements being captured through campus-wide information systems and/or best-of-breed recruitment management tools. However, their ability to easily get to this data, view it at various levels of detail, and incorporate it into decision-making was limited. In particular, they expressed strong interest in being able to easily build data views that help them address "just-in-time" information requests.

Specific reporting needs that were identified by participating enrollment managers ranged from Web site and e-mail campaign metrics to detailed tables focusing on admission status broken-out by student type, geography, gender, ethnicity, and prospect rating. Although some of the participating enrollment managers wanted this enhanced reporting simply as a way to support their effectiveness, most indicated that it was becoming essential to have access to this information to justify budget and strategy. In many cases (37 of 54), participants reported that they were being held more accountable for their actions on a month-to-month basis rather than simply on the basis of the final outcome of their efforts (as measured by the size of the class, the academic profile and net-tuition revenues).

3. **Customer service means online information sharing:** The ability to collect information from students and share information with students via institutional Web sites and portals was another clear theme revealed through the study. All of the participating institutions were collecting information from students through online forms (inquiry/application) and/or Web registrations. In addition, over

85% of the institutions were either interested in, or had already begun, making admission status information available to applicants through a secure Web interface. For a smaller set of institutions, the sharing of data had been elevated to a more sophisticated level at which admitted students were also able to view information about recruitment events, financial aid packages (when available), and, eventually, orientation programs through personalized Web portals.

Several participating schools also expressed interest in extending the concept of secure online information sharing to include guidance counselors. In these instances, counselors would be able to log-in to an institutional Web portal and view missing items and admission status information for students from their school at an individual and aggregate level (with the permission of the students to do so). In one case, an institution was also planning to make high school-specific admission trend reports available to counselors to help them gauge the best fit between their students and the institution from year to year.

4. **From online applications to electronic portfolios:** The participating enrollment managers also expressed a strong interest in extending their current use of online admission applications to the much broader concept of electronic admission portfolios. Electronic (online) portfolios already have a strong presence within the academic arena because they provide a channel for information sharing between faculty and students, as well as an electronic repository for documents, files and other essential course materials. A number of independent portfolio services are also being made available to college-bound and college-enrolled students as a means of collecting and managing important documents and files throughout college and into the world of work.

Within the realm of college admission, electronic portfolios could provide a means of not only gathering a range of documents (applications, transcripts, essays, recommendations) and files (electronic college transcripts, test scores) from students, but also a channel for sharing this information with admission staff.

When connected to the admission module of a campus-wide information system or a best-of-breed recruitment/admission solution, electronic portfolios could also provide an excellent alternative to traditional folder reading processes. Staff members would be able to access applicant files and supporting documents remotely and take action on those files through a secure Web interface. They would also be able to share comments and actions with other staff members, engage in online group discussions and avoid having to exchange paper files with colleagues. Two of the participating institutions had already developed paperless evaluation processes that enabled readers to access documents remotely and enter comments and decisions directly into an admissions database

via a secure Web interface.

5. **Geodemographic-based modeling services offer promise:** Although only a handful of participating institutions were currently using geodemographic and/or predictive modeling services to support recruitment activity, there was significant interest in these concepts among the majority (29) of participating institutions. In particular, institutions are looking at these services as a means of identifying particular types of students early in the recruitment process so that limited resources can be targeted more effectively. For some institutions, the goal would be primarily quantitative—they simply want to identify and target those prospects that are more likely to apply for admission and enroll if admitted. For others, the goal would be primarily qualitative—they want to cultivate certain types of prospects (e.g., female science majors, high-achieving minority students, full-pay candidates) regardless of their likelihood to apply or enroll in order to shape the profile of the class.

Access to relevant institutional and market data, the ability to build and maintain models, and the ability to effectively act on this type of information within current information systems were the three primary concerns cited by participants when asked why they were not employing these services.

Conclusions

The research study confirmed that while technology has clearly become an integral part of recruitment and admission operations, there are still gaps in functionality that impact overall effectiveness.

In particular, the absence of a true recruitment/admission solution that can handle the broad spectrum of relationship management functions while simultaneously addressing a range of analytical and marketing communication needs (electronic and traditional) is apparent. While institutions have found effective work-arounds by contracting with multiple vendors and deploying multiple software applications, the return-on-investment—of both staff time and monetary resources—is less than desirable.

Enrollment managers are also learning that it's not enough to simply drive a significant volume of visitors to an institutional Web site; they need to know who the visitors are, why they are there, and, when appropriate, how to connect them to a broad, long-term prospecting strategy. While there are numerous metrics that can be used to measure the effectiveness of an institution's Web presence (e.g., page views, click-throughs, session times), there are few satisfactory ways to integrate these metrics into the broader set of key performance indicators that enrollment managers need to monitor—particularly at an individual student level—while they build a new class of students.

Related to key performance indicators, enrollment managers are clearly seeking enhanced analytical and reporting capabilities that address progress-toward-goals and return-on-investment as these concepts relate to specific recruitment and yield-enhancement strategies and overall enrollment objectives.

The need for better analytical tools and reporting capabilities is being driven in large measure by an increased emphasis on accountability and fiscal responsibility across many institutions. Another contributing factor driving this increased emphasis on outcomes is the increased level of competition for the right mix of students among colleges at every level of the competitive ladder. Regardless of the drivers, enrollment managers are finding that there's an increased need for actionable data that can drive "just-in-time" recruitment and yield enhancement activities. It's also becoming more critical for enrollment managers to be able to set more specific month-to-month goals and measure progress toward those goals rather than simply monitoring cumulative progress toward a set of annual enrollment goals.

As a result, there is an emerging need for "plug-in" tools that can synthesize a range of data elements and present a meaningful picture of where institutions stand with regard to progress toward enrollment goals. These tools need to be unique to recruitment and admission business processes, allow month-to-month goal setting, and have the ability to represent KPIs ranging from general Web metrics through status counts for prospects, applicants, admits and matriculants—broken out by geodemography, gender, ethnicity, academic ability, prospect rating, and program of interest. Ideally, these tools would be hosted off-site to minimize additional overhead, accessed through an Internet browser (without the need for additional software installations), and integrated with existing campus-wide systems and/or specialty recruitment solutions.

Technology is also presenting opportunities to enrollment managers to take a more cohesive, holistic approach to data collection, storage and sharing. Institutions have moved beyond the use of simple Web forms to collect data from prospects and applicants and are beginning to adopt more interactive strategies. One way this is being done is through secure Web portals that allow students to check their admission status, identify missing application items (for both admission and financial aid), and access other institutional resources.

Institutions are also experimenting with electronic admission portfolios as a means of capturing application data and supporting documents (e.g., essays, recommendations) and files (e.g., test scores, transcripts). Because the electronic portfolios can be attached to campus information systems and be accessed through the Internet, they support remote application reading and document review by admissions staff and faculty.

As the use of technology continues to permeate the world of enrollment management, institutions will be able to make greater use of data to drive business decisions, support

recruitment and yield enhancement strategies, and facilitate the “best-fit” between prospective students and institutional opportunities. Concepts such as geodemographic clustering and predictive modeling provide examples of existing data services that can be operationalized more effectively through the use of technology applications that are designed to support the unique communication and relationship-building activities that are inherent to enrollment management.

About Admissions Lab

Admissions Lab is an Atlanta-based technology and professional services company founded in 2004 to help colleges and universities manage enrollments more effectively. Admissions Lab staff members have over 80 years of experience in marketing communications, software development and enrollment management. They have developed and implemented software solutions and data services for organizations such as Sequitur Corporation, PeopleSoft and the College Board that are being used at nearly 500 colleges and universities in the U.S and abroad.