



ACTIONABLE INSIGHT
REMARKABLE TOPICS
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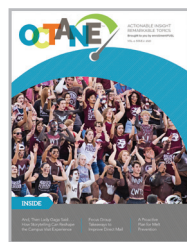
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More than ever,
stories of strength,
resilience, and
success will matter.
Tough times never
last, but tough
people do.



enrollmentFUEL would like to extend our gratitude to West Texas A&M University in Canyon, Texas for allowing this photo to be featured on the cover of our magazine.

Octane the Magazine: A publication of enrollmentFUEL

A collection of innovative thoughts from a team of people bonded to clients in a way to prevent the knocking that comes with the "one size fits all" Student Search strategies. Adding *Octane* to your thinking fuels creativity and releases positive energy among enrollment professionals.

Dear Octane Booster,

As we prepared this issue of *Octane*, institutions throughout the United States were dealing with events that were both unfortunate, unexpected, and without precedence. During times like this, I am glad the enrollment management community is a rise-to-the-occasion group of people who are highly skilled at coping with changing circumstances.

With the cancellation of many events and the need to reassure students and parents, FUEL's VP of Operations, Michelle Stundstrom's article addresses melt prevention, which will be critically important. In our Q&A session with Sarah Weise, best-selling author of *InstaBrain*, she shares valuable information on how Gen Z thinks, providing insight on communicating with both current and future students.

And while it is crucial to deal with current situations, you must also plan for the next cycle. To help you improve outcomes from your investment in direct mail, we have an article by Becky Tankersley, M.Ed., the Director of Communications for Strategy and Enrollment Planning at the Georgia Institute of Technology. In her article, Becky shares takeaways from focus groups conducted during 2019 and 2020 to help you maximize the return from printed communications.

And, finally, my article on storytelling can help you rethink your campus tour delivery and how you prepare marketing materials moving forward. More than ever, stories of strength, resilience, and success will matter. Tough times never last, but tough people do.

We are always looking for ideas for future issues of *Octane*. If you have any thoughts you would like to share, feel free to pass them along to me, or anyone on our team.

All my best to you and the other storm-weathering professionals in the *Octane* community.

Jacquelyn D. Elliott, Ed.D.
President



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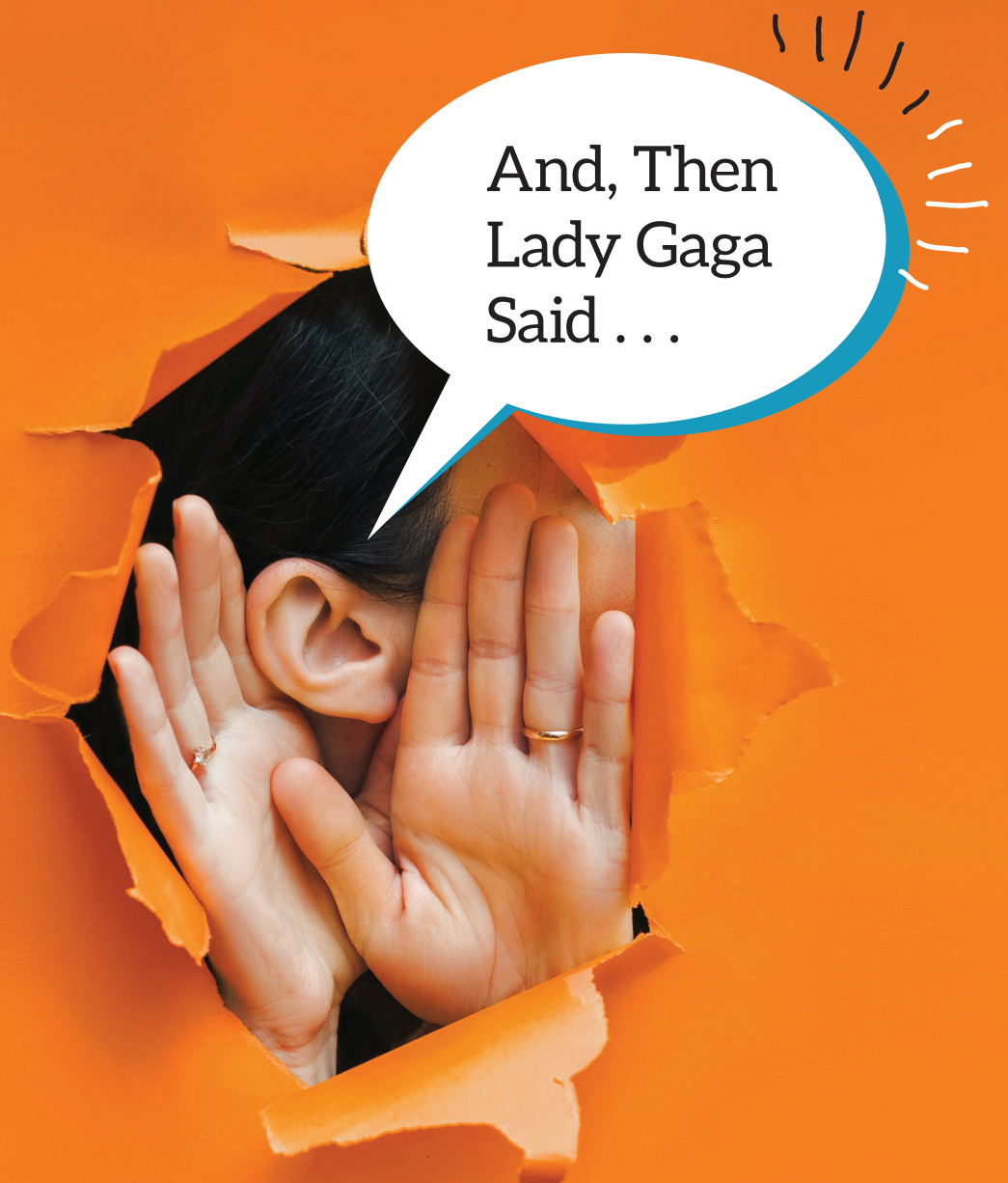
To see past issues of *Octane*,
visit our online library at
enrollmentfuel.com/octane-library

enrollmentFUEL Expands National Account Coverage

We are proud to announce the addition of two new Regional Vice Presidents to our team.

- **Nick Balk, Regional Vice President of University Partnerships - Northeast** will provide client coverage in New England and the Ohio Valley
- **Martin Smith, Regional Vice President of University Partnerships - Southeast** will provide client coverage in the southern United States

Please visit enrollmentfuel.com/team to read Nick's and Martin's biographies.



And, Then
Lady Gaga
Said . . .

How Storytelling Can Reshape the Campus Visit Experience

By Jacquelyn D. Elliott, Ed.D.

Imagine you are starting your first day as an admission professional. You walk into the office and are given a list of travel procedures, along with various checklists filled with boring facts and processes, including instruction on high school visits. It goes something like this:

“So, this is how we conduct private high school visits. One thing you will want to do is call ahead and schedule your visit with the guidance office. Make sure you send the information about which students are interested ahead of time to try to get better attendance. Arrive early in case you get lost, so you have plenty of time to make the appointment.”

Now, imagine a storytelling approach to the process above:

“Oh my gosh. Do I have a funny story to tell about when I was a new admission counselor! Part of my travel territory was Florida. One day, I was on my way to a high school. I had called a few weeks earlier to schedule the appointment and sent my list of interested students, so I was excited to get there and tell the students all about my college. When I arrived at the gate, the guard wasn't in the guardhouse to let me through. So, I circled the campus, but all the entrances were blocked. I circled again. I kept looking at my watch, thinking, 'Thank goodness, I came early, or I would be late.' I went back to the gate, and still, the guard was missing. I was starting to get frantic about missing my appointment because there were quite a few students interested.

I don't recommend you use the solution I did. However, it sure is funny looking back on it. I went ahead and parked outside the school, threw my travel bag over the fence, and climbed over in my skirt. Back then, we wore pantyhose, so I had a big tear when I went into the school. I told the students waiting what I had done. They laughed and laughed. I told them I was serious about them coming to my school and climbed over the fence just for them. The story got out, and I was dubbed 'Spidey' in the state association newsletter that year.”

Now, compare the two methods. In the first, the information is conveyed. While brief, it's dry and dull. When given a TON of information in that way back-to-back, everyone finds it hard to remember the details. When you compare the story version, which still contained the facts, it's something you can visualize because of the details. This visualization helps you better remember what to do (and not—like climbing over a fence!).

I propose the experience of a campus visit is often the same for a family and student. They arrive on campus. During too many tours, dry, boring facts and figures are thrown at them. The information often replicates what could be viewed on your website or is included in your print collateral.

Human beings are wired for stories.

“In fact, we are story-making machines. That means you are, too. You simply need to remember what you already know.”

—SUSAN O'HALLORAN





People come to your campus to learn what your web and print material cannot convey. Don't miss the opportunity! The campus visit should help students and families visualize the experience of being a student on your campus. Stories make that happen in an engaging way.

For example, we often say, "The student-faculty ratio is 15:1, or the average class size is 24." Instead of merely stating a fact, turn that into a story. Try something like this, instead:

“ *I was talking with one of my students, Rachel, during her work-study hours this week, and she mentioned how much she was enjoying classes. Rachel said she could feel the impact of being in an average class with only 24 students. She has had the opportunity to be called on to share her ideas and opinions, and to participate in the hands-on experiential activities the professor prepares. The 15:1 student-to-faculty ratio allows professors to create engaging class assignments. Rachel mentioned her professor knows every student in her class by name. The professor assigns different groups to the assignments, so she gets to work with all 23 other people in her class. So, Brandon (I would then ask with a smile), if you were in a class with 23 other students, how would the smaller class size impact you and your learning style?"*



MORE STORYTELLING RESOURCES
ARE AVAILABLE ONLINE AT
**[coursesguide.org/
storytelling-classes/](https://coursesguide.org/storytelling-classes/)**

I advocate the use of storytelling in campus visits and tours for many reasons. First, it is more interesting for us as the conveyers of information to construct meaningful stories to share. Memorizing facts and figures often bores us, too. More importantly, using stories to educate creates major wins:

- It can clear up misconceptions
- The process draws more volunteers and attracts the best people as tour guides and counselors
- It generates stronger alliances with other departments on campus
- It can create a buzz across campus
- It enlists champions for the campus

Human beings are wired for stories. "In fact, we are story-making machines. That means you are too. You simply need to remember what you already know."¹

Stories create connections and loyalty, stir emotions, and make complicated things much easier to understand.² Perhaps one of the most critical aspects of the storytelling process is that of credibility. I say this because most people want to know, "What's in it for me?" Today's consumer focuses on three people: Me, myself and I. So, the only thing your student cares about is, "Will this be the right place for me?"

The old adage of, "What do you want the numbers to prove?" is often in the back of minds when facts and figures are tossed out. However, a story that elicits emotion on the part of the student visualizing their experience on campus creates a level of credibility not gained any other way. The power in storytelling lies in the fact that when people hear a story, they aren't *told* what to think. Rather, they participate "in a conclusion and, therefore, the story feels as if it's theirs. Anything that is connected with us is more memorable."³

When I was the Vice President for Enrollment at a small private school in Tennessee, one of the first things I did was retrain our tour guides to start using stories in the tour process. This training took place in a credit-bearing mini-course I created with faculty committee approval. The course was six weeks long and brought guest faculty members in with the content needed to help the guides create the stories. If you are interested in creating a campus course or training session, there are many online resources for storytelling (see the inset).

So, what are the mechanics of storytelling? How can you start making this shift to make an impact during the campus visit? Let's focus on two areas—a more conceptual framework, and then, the actual logistical process.

In terms of the conceptual framework, there are three important takeaways. The first is the audience needs to be able to reach their own conclusion through the story you tell, allowing them the space to be active participants in the process. When you do that, the story also becomes theirs. To build your story, start by asking three simple questions:

- **What do I want my audience to feel?**
- **What do I want my audience to know?**
- **What do I want them to do after they hear my story?**

Second, the art of storytelling is about skill and persuasion. It is not manipulative or pushy. It is about making a *connection*, allowing participants to be part of an experience, and then helping them cognitively process their emotional response to one of rational realization, and close the loop on a conclusion. To get someone to care enough to take these steps, you have to help them *feel* something.

Now, for the logistics. I use Susan O'Halloran's Story Power System™ as the basis of my storytelling process. I will share a brief overview of the six elements that she focuses on, as explained by Susan, herself:



1 Setup. You tell a story to a specific audience, for a specific reason, in a specific format, and always within the context of your institution's on-going story. The most important thing to remember here isn't what you say or how you present the story. It's the *confidence* you have in telling the story and what is *inside YOU* that makes it credible and makes your family connect to you. It strengthens your position and your case.



2

Speak. Susan is accurate when she says the definition of a story can be summed up in one sentence. Here it is: "You know it's a story when the audience you want to reach can picture a particular time and place where someone they care about faces greater and greater obstacles while trying to reach his or her goal."⁴

To talk in story-speak, you must produce word pictures. Your story has to create a movie in the mind of your audience.



3

Setting. A setting is critical to your story. Usually, the setting for the tour is obvious—your institution. However, there are many sub-settings you can weave to direct your mental movie in the minds of your audience. Perhaps it's the office of a top executive of a Fortune 500 company where your students intern. Or, maybe it's on the lacrosse field or the art studio on campus. Either way, crafting the right place makes your story better. Your job is to be the *human handbill*. Think of the program handed out by the usher at a play and become a live version of that document. You will set the stage for the story much like Sophia in the *Golden Girls* did at the beginning of each of her stories—"Picture it . . . Italy, 1924."



4 star. The star of the story is critical because they get the story moving and make it real and engaging. Think of the last book you read and enjoyed. I am betting the plot was nothing without the main character with whom you related. The best story often centers on a single character, not a group that distracts the audience's attention. This is because relating to a group is harder than relating to one person. Perhaps Mother Teresa said it best when she said, "If I look at the masses, I will never act. If I look at the one, I will."⁵



5 Structure. O'Halloran's Story Power System is clear when it talks about the power of structure in the storytelling process. "A story is not a collection of ideas, themes, or even images. To make sure you are telling a story, ask yourself, 'What is the situation or problem, and what happens next because of it?'"⁶

Teach your guides and counselors to plot out the story showing the star moving forward and the obstacles faced. When the setup is done correctly, your family will want to know what happens. Obstacles create cliff-hangers, and your audience will be eager for a resolution.

To be sure you understand *how* to structure your story, make sure it consists of the following, in this order:

1. A situation introduced by your **star**
2. A **seesawing action** that creates suspense
3. A **seminal moment, a moment of stillness, or a turning point** where the star makes a decision
4. A **solution, resolution or insight** is reached at the end



6 Sharing. This is the most challenging part, since it requires time, focus, and help from the campus. Collect stories, curate them, and help connect the story content to what you want to market or sell. You have to keep the stories fresh every few years. I often think this is why we revert to boring old facts and figures. It is because it's the easy way out. Sharing requires your guides, faculty, alumni, and students to present their stories and for someone on your team to actually do something *with* them. My suggestion is that one person is assigned to this task. It is similar to when you appoint someone to be over campus visits, supervise student work-study, and be responsible for student tour guides. Trust me—the time and effort will help you close sales from the campus visit experience.

The last thing I want to share with you as I wrap up are ideas for where you can find stories. Here is a list of ideas presented by O'Halloran:

- Creation stories
- Who we are stories
- Why we are here stories
- Fresh start stories
- Challenges faced stories
- Unusual connection stories
- Man bites dog stories
- Right now stories
- On the home front stories
- Celebrity stories
- Big impact stories
- Testimonial stories
- In a galaxy far away stories

In closing, I opened my article with a *celebrity story* title, and I hope it made you curious. When the tabloids quizzed Lady Gaga about her relationship with Bradley Cooper after they starred together in *A Star is Born*, she said, "Bradley Cooper and I are not in love. Yes, people saw love and, guess what, that's what we wanted you to see."⁷



As storytellers, our job is to be Lady Gaga and Bradley Cooper.

As storytellers, our job is to be Lady Gaga and Bradley Cooper. Get people connected, feel some sort of emotion, and *tell a story*. As you work to train your counselors and tour guides on better ways to shape the campus visit experience, consider holding a day training on storytelling. Allow time for people to engage in the preparation of the stories using the structure above. You should then assign a lead counselor to be in charge of the curation aspect of the stories so they can be shared and used. Transform your campus visit experience through the power of storytelling.

1 O'Halloran, S. (2014). *Compelling Stories, Compelling Causes: Nonprofit Marketing Success*.
2 Ibid.
3 Ibid.
4 Ibid. p. 49
5 Retrieved from <http://journal.sjdm.org/7303a/jdm7303a.htm>
6 Ibid. p. 94.
7 Retrieved from <http://www.startribune.com/lady-gaga-bradley-cooper-duet-was-acting-not-love/506491712/>

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Focus Group TAKEAWAYS

to Improve Direct Mail Communications



By Becky Tankersley, M.Ed.

As educators, assessment is required for growth, improvement, and compliance. As communicators, analysis is crucial to determine the success of a campaign. Yet, sometimes those of us in higher education marketing find ourselves overlooking the basics: assessment and analytics.

The analytics piece has become quite simple thanks to our digital landscape. We can quickly measure everything from open rates and clicks to applications and yield. While this data is an important cog in the machine of outreach and recruitment, nothing can replace taking time to talk to actual students and ask them how they think your institution's communications are working.

My team at Georgia Tech recently conducted a series of focus groups and online surveys to gauge student reactions to a variety of recruitment collateral and yield pieces. Faced with shrinking marketing budgets, we sought to answer one question in particular: **Is print valuable, or is it dead?** In a climate where expanded search buys and mass marketing result in communication overload and stuffed mailboxes, what, if anything, catches a student's eye and grabs their attention?

While conducting focus groups is time-consuming, the information we gathered was extremely beneficial. We have already utilized the feedback when creating travel brochures and targeted mailers for the year ahead. We now hope to

help others in our industry by presenting our findings at regional conferences, in campus presentations, and right here in *Octane*.

METHODOLOGY

Three focus groups were held over a year. The first focus group was held in April 2019, with first-year summer students involved in a living-learning community (LLC). The second focus group, conducted in October 2019, included first-year and second-year students involved in a variety of LLCs. The final focus group, held in February 2020, specifically engaged first-year students from rural areas of Georgia.

In addition, an online survey was sent to 818 first and second-year students in an LLC program. 115 students participated in the survey, with a response rate of 14 percent.

The April and October sessions lasted approximately one hour each, with an open discussion format. Print pieces from a variety of institutions were on display, including everything from postcards to viewbooks to unique yield mailers. The discussion was led by our graphic designer, who asked open-ended questions regarding the samples spread throughout the room. The communications manager observed and typed notes as students made comments and suggestions. Here is what we learned.

#1 Think outside the box.

With more than 4,000 colleges and universities in the United States, students receive an outlandish amount of mail during their high school years. Students told us the majority of this mail went straight to the recycle bin. In some cases, a parent or guardian would first look through the mail, then pass along interesting pieces to the student. Most students said unless a college was already on their radar, or had a print piece that "stood out," the mailer quickly found its way into the trash.

This led us to ask, "What makes a piece stand out?" Information in plain white envelopes and standard postcards were often tossed aside. What *did* catch their eye were unique mailers created using die-cut technology to make the physical dimensions of the piece unusual. Examples included trifold pieces, hexagons that folded out to a larger image, and pop-up postcards. Students liked the use of clear envelopes because it let them know what to expect and often enticed them to open it (although some expressed concern over the environmental sustainability of such envelopes).

When asked about viewbooks, students liked when colleges made the pieces pop by die cutting the college name into the cover or included an unexpected touch, such as gold foil on the college logo. They were turned off by overly large brochures, with some stating that these pieces reminded them of travel magazines.

WE ASKED:

"As a student receiving so many mailings from multiple colleges, what makes a piece of mail stand out to you?"





Die-cut techniques can be used to create unique print pieces that stand out in the mail.

WE ASKED:

“When you received a mailer or brochure in high school, what TOP FACTORS about the college were important to you?”

- ☐ Statistics (rankings, admit rates, etc.)
- ☐ Information about my major
- ☐ Activities on campus and the surrounding area
- ☒ Photos of campus
- ☒ Stories from or about other students



Lastly, students responded well to anything they could have a tactile experience with, such as die-cut pieces that were mailed flat but could pop out to assemble an object, such as a box or paper mascot.

YOUR TEAM’S TAKEAWAY: Don’t be afraid to stretch your creativity, and your budget, to create unique pieces. Years ago, the name of the game was to send as much mail to as many students as possible in hopes of increasing applications and ultimately, yield. This outdated method no longer works in today’s digital consumer landscape. If budget is an issue, be more strategic in your lead generation, targeting specific subsets, according to your institution’s priorities. Our team found success in mailing to half as many students as we had in the past and giving those students a unique experience and exclusive opportunity to engage with our brand. If you go the extra mile to create a particularly unique piece, don’t hide it away in a plain white envelope! These have “recycle bin” written all over them. Create a separate mail panel and insert the piece into a clear envelope instead (There is an environmentally-friendly option available!).

#2 Keep the buyer’s journey in mind.

I once heard someone describe higher education as a unique industry because “our customers and our product are the same: students.”

We live in a digital age where companies like Amazon and Google seem to know what consumers want to buy before the consumers themselves even know it. Students expect outreach and communications to be tailored to *them*, and where they are in the buyer’s journey.

When students are in the prospect stage, they aren’t looking for deep dives into mission statements or long-form student profiles. Instead, they are looking for broad overviews highlighting what majors are offered and how the campus looks. One student stated, “The first thing I looked at was the list of majors. Nothing else matters if my major isn’t there.”

While students are looking broadly in the prospect stage, they seek, and expect, targeted content by the time they are admitted and in the yield stage. At this point in their journey, they are ready to read more, research more, and do a deeper dive into overall campus ethos. Admitted students no longer needed to receive broad-based brochures with sweeping photos and generic content. They do enjoy receiving “stuff” from schools to which they had been admitted. Examples of well-received items included socks, posters, USB drives with useful content (some mentioned personalized content would be ideal), and even stickers. Students wanted to be able to *show* to those around them where they planned to attend, by using the items they received.

YOUR TEAM’S TAKEAWAY: Always operate with an awareness of where students are in the enrollment funnel. A prospect doesn’t need a lot of dense text that links them to the college catalog and explains how their dual enrollment credits will transfer. Prospective students need broad content focused on the primary factors that will lead them to investigate further and consider your institution.

An admitted student is ready to engage more deeply with your institution. They want to know more about life on campus, the types of opportunities available, and what kind of return on investment they can expect by earning a degree at your school. Admitted students are excited and relieved to have successfully navigated the admission process. Targeted items that congratulate them on their achievement, whether in the form of posters, stickers for their car or laptop, socks, or a USB drive they can use all played well with this audience.

#3 Tell a story.

Segmented communication and personalization have an essential place in enrollment marketing. However, *stories* are what really stand out to students. Students are hungry for stories from current students about life on campus and how their college experience has shaped them as a person and set a path forward for their future. This generation of students is wary of mass marketing efforts from enrollment professionals—they want to look behind the curtain and know what life is *really* like on campus.

High achieving students stated they knew the academic offerings were strong at all of the institutions to which they were admitted. It was the other offerings, such as housing, clubs, community, and campus culture, that mattered deeply in their college selection. Students want to know what, aside from academics, makes each campus different. Will they fit in, and will they find community?

To answer this question, students said they often went to YouTube to search for “a day in the life” videos of current students. Organic content was vital in this area, but students said they would still watch a video even if the college produced it.

Students utilized video as a tool to learn more about the student stories on campus. They liked reading student blogs when available. And when it came to printed materials, they enjoyed reading a brief story about the students included in the piece, in three to five sentences or less.

YOUR TEAM’S TAKEAWAY: Ditch the boilerplate copy and tell a story! Dry, traditional content with altruistic catchphrases and mission statements feels trite to this audience. Find current students who are willing to share, and let them tell your institution’s story for you. Use student highlights in your viewbook and other print collateral. Don’t have access to a professional video team? YouTube,

Instagram, and Snapchat are ideal places to house organic content. Ask some of your current students to do a social media takeover for a day, and let them highlight spaces on campus, what classes are like, and the clubs they are involved in. This is also a great way to show what housing is really like and give a glimpse into the dining options available on your campus. All content doesn’t have to be professionally polished, so long as it tells a true story of what life is like for your current students.

#4 Focus on photography.

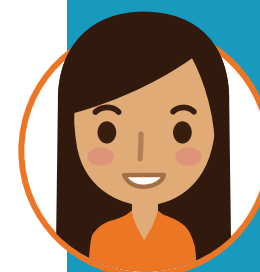
Students want to see photos that show them the campus. When presented with a variety of layouts, students leaned towards those with full-bleed photos that showcased the campus, culture, and architecture. Students would rather see the campus than see close-up images of individual students—especially if those students may or may not be actual students at the school. However, if those individuals are current students, they want to read a few sentences about that particular student’s story.

Photography is especially crucial for students who live far away from campus and may not have a chance to visit, since these images set the stage for what they think the

STUDENTS SAID:

“Though it is nice to know that you’d be joining a community with rich, interesting traditions, I personally cared more about pictures of the campus/buildings, student life and seeing students involved in meaningful work.”

“Seeing a lot of nice pictures of campus does draw students to a school and offers them a window into what life would be like as a student here.”



campus will be like. Photos that show some scale (e.g., a building with people walking by as blurred images) were also well received.

Photographs used for a virtual tour of campus were, again, helpful for students who could not visit campus. However, some commented that virtual tours could sometimes make a campus seem larger than it is.

YOUR TEAM’S TAKEAWAY: Avoid stock photos, and eliminate the standard “three in a tree” photo of students on campus. Focus group students were instantly critical of staged photos, especially those that displayed a perfect blend of all types of students congregating in one spot. Several students stated they felt colleges tried too hard to show a perfect mix of all kinds of students on their campus, while that may not be the reality of the institution.

Prominently feature your student center, primary classroom buildings, and labs in your collateral. Highlight unique spots on your campus, and use photography to bust any myths that may surround your campus. If you have an urban campus, but considerable greenspace, highlight that feature. If you are a suburban campus with access to your city’s downtown center, highlight that opportunity. Just like storytelling, photography will tell the real story of campus life to your prospective students.

#5 Don’t underestimate a personal touch.

We may live in a digital age, but a personal touch still matters. Students appreciated receiving handwritten notes, even if it was just a post-it attached to the outside of a booklet (though some expressed disdain once they realized it was sometimes just a fancy font).

Students enjoyed receiving specialized pieces that included their preferred name in a location other than their address. They expect to be targeted as individuals, not just another name on a list.

Aside from print and email communication, students also liked to receive phone calls, emails, and/or texts from current students. Having someone reach out to them to talk about life on campus was a valuable way to learn if a school was the right fit for what they’re looking for in their college experience.

YOUR TEAM’S TAKEAWAY: When personalizing your print pieces, ensure you are using the student’s preferred name rather than their first name. Using the first name is a major signal to a prospective student that you don’t really know them as a person.

Utilize your current students, whether those are student ambassadors, tour guides, or members of a particular recruitment team, to write notecards or make phone calls

to admitted students. Making these efforts and going the extra mile to initiate a personal conversation is a meaningful touchpoint. Calls from admission counselors are also helpful if your staff has the capacity to do so.

Becky Tankersley, M.Ed., is the Director of Communications for Strategy and Enrollment Planning at the Georgia Institute of Technology. After starting her career as a television news producer, she shifted to higher education, serving in a variety of roles in undergraduate admission and communications. She is an active member of the American Association of Collegiate Registrar and Admission Officers (AACRAO), serving as a content coordinator, presenter, and author of newsletter articles. Becky can be reached at becky.tankersley@gatech.edu.

WE ASKED:

“Which types of communications do you prefer most?”

- ☒ Booklets/pamphlets
- ☒ Email
- ☐ Letters
- ☐ Postcards





STUDENTS SAID:

“Getting texts/calls is rare but interesting. Otherwise, emails and postcards are nice. Booklets are more stressful, but definitely get poured over.”



“I liked booklets if it was a college I really liked, but pamphlets if I was somewhat curious.”



Tips for Conducting Your Own Focus Group

By Becky Tankersley, M.Ed.

Focus groups are a treasure trove of data and feedback on your recruitment efforts. Our first focus group was not perfect, but with each group, we refined the process. Here are a few tips to help you get started:

- Choose your focus area. Where do you most want to gather feedback? We focused on print pieces, but research can also be done on digital collateral and other recruitment efforts. Once you identify what area you want to assess, you can then formulate questions for your group.
- Collaborate with campus partners. Look for a campus unit that has a diverse group of students with a wide variety of interests and majors. Ask if you can talk with their students for an hour or so and offer to provide them copies of feedback you gather.
- Provide lunch (or breakfast). College students respond well to incentives, such as a free lunch or breakfast. Budget to provide food as a thank you to the students for their time.
- Be clear. Be transparent with students and campus partners about what you’re doing. It is unethical to quote students or gather data without their knowledge. Let them know ahead of time who you are, what office you work with, and what you hope to learn by talking to them.
- Prepare a qualitative and quantitative assessment. If your focus group will be conversational, designate one person to lead the conversation and another to jot down notes during the discussion.

- Create a brief survey of 10-12 questions. Send it to attendees, as well as those who could not attend, and collect more in-depth feedback with a bigger sample size.
- Refine, refine, refine. After your first focus group, you’ll find many ways in which you could have presented information more clearly or asked better questions. Note how you plan to do things differently on the next round, and plan accordingly.
- Identify different cohorts for each focus group. While current students are wonderful participants, they do not paint a full picture of your recruitment efforts. Many students do not choose to enroll on your campus. Consider surveying other groups such as campus visitors, high school counselors, or parents. Each of these groups brings a unique point of view to the table that can help paint a more complete picture of how recruiting efforts are working in particular areas.

An added bonus to conducting a focus group is the opportunity to connect with your audience. We often get lost in the day-to-day shuffle of administrative tasks, and we gradually lose touch with those we are tasked to talk to if we aren’t careful. Spending time with students proved to be a big boost to our team as a whole.







A PROACTIVE PLAN

for Melt Prevention

By Michelle Sundstrom, M.Ed.

For decades, members of NACAC were prevented from poaching committed students from other schools because they had agreed to be bound to a code of ethics containing the following four provisions within the rules.¹ They were:

- Colleges must not offer incentives exclusive to students applying or admitted under an early decision application plan. Examples of incentives include the promise of special housing, enhanced financial aid packages, and special scholarships for early decision admits. Colleges may, however, disclose how admission rates for early decisions differ from those for other admission plans.
- College choices should be informed, well-considered, and free from coercion. Students require a reasonable amount of time to identify their college choices, complete applications for admission, financial aid, and scholarships, and decide which offer of admission to accept. Once students have committed themselves to a college, other colleges must respect that choice and cease recruiting them.
- Colleges will not knowingly recruit or offer enrollment incentives to students who are already enrolled, registered, have declared their intent, or submitted contractual deposits to other institutions. May 1 is the point at which commitments to enroll become final, and colleges must respect that. The recognized exceptions are when students are admitted from a waitlist, students initiate inquiries themselves, or cooperation is sought by institutions that provide transfer programs.
- Colleges must not solicit transfer applications from a previous year's applicant or prospect pool unless the students have themselves initiated a transfer inquiry or the college has verified prior to contacting the students that they are either enrolled at a college which allows transfer recruitment from other colleges or are not currently enrolled in a college.

¹ Retrieved from <https://www.insidehighered.com/admissions/article/2019/09/30/nacac-agrees-change-its-code-ethics>



COPING WITH THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

As we were preparing to go to press, institutions everywhere were dealing with exceptional challenges while working to recruit their incoming class. In view of the disruptions caused by COVID-19, our team discussed this article. We decided to remain focused on general best practices. While some circumstances may have changed for your institution, such as hosting on-campus events, we are confident you can reshape the ideas to serve you now, as well as the future.

By voting to eliminate the provisions in September 2019, NACAC avoided legal action by the Justice Department, who believed the “ethical rules” violated antitrust laws and created an environment of collusion that took away student choice. One driving force behind the push by the Justice Department were concerns over student debt.

Forbes.com reports, “Student loan debt is now the second highest consumer debt category – behind only mortgage debt – and higher than both credit cards and auto loans,” and now totals about \$1.56 trillion.²

Now that the rules no longer apply, the doors have opened, allowing schools to embrace aggressive financial incentives and yield-improving promotions. Eric Hoover, in his article titled “‘Act Now!’ Say Hello to the New Enrollment Playbook” published by *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, shared stories about schools using a variety of tactics that were once taboo, including³:

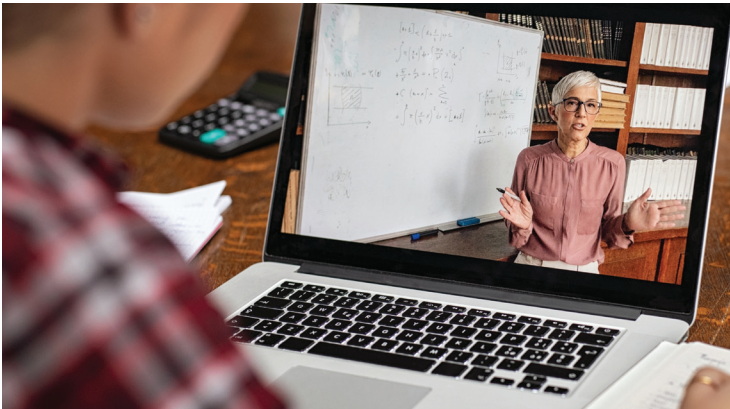
- Limited time offers for special scholarships tied to early deposits
- Financial aid packages sent earlier in the cycle
- Bidding wars, where schools must match offers to compete with aggressive competitors
- Four-year tuition guarantees
- Active recruiting of transfer students
- Incentives to attend that include preferred housing, four-year scholarship commitments, and invitations to dinner with the college president

Student melt has always been a concern, but the potential impact of competitive poaching requires every enrollment leader to take a fresh look at current strategies.

YIELD EVENTS

Spring yield events held on campus are a great way to showcase your school, gauge interest, answer financial aid questions, and collect deposits. You should also consider taking your show on the road and hold yield events in locations that make it easy for students and their families to attend. When planning a local meet-up, consider ways to involve alumni. Graduates make great spokespeople, providing real-world testimonials about the value of an education at your school.

Keep in touch with high school counselors at schools where you have admitted students, letting them know about upcoming events.



POWER IN YOUR PEOPLE

Every school has dynamic professors, dedicated coaches, student ambassadors (who excel at building relationships), and successful alumni. If you believe the phrase, “People buy from people,” is true, then you want to find ways to actively involve teachers, coaches, student ambassadors, and alumni in an anti-melt campaign. One starting point is looking at how you onboard students who have deposited. Look for where you could add an impactful personal communication from someone other than the admission counselor, such as:

- A letter, email, or even a personal video from a department head sharing information about research or internship opportunities
- Communications from coaches letting students know more about training regimes or program specifics
- Personal stories shared by student ambassadors about their first year at the school
- Personal notes from alumni sharing stories about how they overcame challenges or how their alma mater prepared them for their career or graduate school

YES, YOU NEED ENGAGEMENT MARKETING

With the elimination of NACAC rules, our protection measures are reduced. It is, therefore, critically important to include engagement marketing as a part of your overall recruiting

strategy. Marketing automation software company, Marketo, defines **engagement marketing as a way to connect with people as individuals based on what they do, continuously over time, everywhere they are, directed toward an outcome.**⁴

One way to tackle engagement marketing is by setting up a communications flow within a CRM with the goal of onboarding students. These work best when the communications are a blend of informational and aspirational communications. As much as possible, messages should be personalized by name and for different populations, such as in-state versus out-of-state, or by degree interests.

As part of the communication flow, an excellent piece to include is one that reinforces the value of your institution and what you stand for. This could be something simple, such as a personalized letter from the president. It could also be an elaborate, picture-heavy, coffee-table brochure with lasting souvenir value. This piece can help you sell deeper in the funnel to parents who value these mementos.

Other useful campaigns to consider are yield campaigns, intention surveys, and anti-melt campaigns. All of these help you identify engaged students – and those who may be at risk – by providing data on open and click-through rates, and by monitoring students who unsubscribe to communications.

Experience with multiple campaigns has proven digital advertising, such as IP targeting or retargeting ads, improves performance. For more thoughts on the topic, read, “Digital Advertising: How to Spend Dollars to Reach Enrollment Goals,” written by Lisa Branson, enrollmentFUEL’s Vice President of Enrollment Systems. This article was published in *Octane* Vol. 4., Issue 1, 2020, available online at enrollmentfuel.com/octane-library.

SOCIAL CONNECTIONS

Social media is a powerful relationship-building tool that lets schools put a human face on their brand. It is also a type of self-selected media. To reach your audience through

this channel, they must choose to participate. Ideas for encouraging participation include:

- Allow direct communications, and answer questions quickly
- Post content that interests the future audience, such as short profiles of students in the incoming class
- Run contests
- Use online content to drive offline events and meet-ups
- Encourage multi-directional communications, where people comment on topics
- Create your own school-centric emojis
- Curate news stories highlighting how amazing your school is

Your institution can even create your own Instagram augmented reality (AR) filter using a free tool called “Spark AR.” For example, you could create an Instagram Stories AR filter showcasing your school’s mascot, by overlaying distinctive features on a student’s photo. Once the filter is created, you upload it into the Spark AR hub. Instagram then reviews it. Once it is approved, it will be available in your Instagram gallery as part of your school’s profile, within stories, and through a sharing link.

Another idea for social media is to create an interactive map with pins, showing locations of incoming students. You can even let students add additional information if they choose, like their favorite food or movie.

LAST THOUGHTS

With the changes in the NACAC rules, some institutions will adapt to cope, while others will adapt to win in their market. The winners will seek to understand better who is at risk. They will create scoring methods and indices to identify the students who are likely to melt and focus attention and resources where it counts. In every cycle of change, opportunity exists. To find it, you cannot stand still. You must move forward deliberately with purpose, to reach your goal.



Michelle Sundstrom, M.Ed., is the Vice President of Operations at enrollmentFUEL. She is a seasoned enrollment leader who has implemented strategies to increase enrollment, and led initiatives to expand diversity, and increase transfers, online, out-of-state, and graduate students. Michelle is known for her ability to work across campus to build relationships and collaborate to meet enrollment and university goals. Contact Michelle at michelle.sundstrom@enrollmentfuel.com.

² Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/zackfriedman/2020/02/03/student-loan-debt-statistics/#54a269a1281f>
³ Retrieved from <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Act-Now-Say-Hello-to/248030>

⁴ Retrieved from <https://www.marketo.com/ebooks/elements-of-engagement-marketing/>

The Up-Your-Game Guide to Decision-Making

By Linda Bishop, MBA



The average adult makes approximately 35,000 decisions in a day, according to a *UNC TV Science* blog post.¹ For enrollment professionals, many choices are prompted by a need for continual readjustment to ever-changing circumstances. The profession demands a stay-ahead-of-the-curve mindset and the ability to look around corners and predict potential outcomes in uncertain times.

Between August and May, the pressure to make critical decisions is always there. *Should you buy more names for Student Search? Should you make a push in a new market? Should you admit a student who visited and applied, but whose grades indicate they will need extra help to graduate? What should you do to get more deposits? What should you do when a territory is underperforming? How do you react when another school attempts to poach students with last-minute offers for better financial aid?*

While decision-making is something we all do (and need to do well), few people have any formal education on the topic. As is true for all job-related skills, there are many ways to up-your-game for better outcomes.

The Big Picture

We base decisions on values, criteria, and preferences. They generally fall into three broad categories:

- Should I, or shouldn't I?
- Choosing among alternatives
- If/then contingency decisions, where you decide in advance what you will do if you face specific circumstances

Experience is a big benefit when we make decisions. Occasionally, we travel into new territory where we don't know what we don't know. In unfamiliar circumstances, without past outcomes to guide us, we may hesitate, or rely too heavily on emotions and intuition.

De-risking the Unknown

What if you find out that your biggest competitor now offers a low-cost online degree option? Your institution has no plans to provide a similar program, and you have not had to face this situation before. Worried that you might lose some of your inquiries, you decided you need a response plan.

When waging combat on unfamiliar circumstances, the first step is to set aside time to think. Whether this is just you-time in your favorite coffee shop or a meeting with your team, start by defining the problem to be solved. Write down all your baseline assumptions, which are the "facts" you believe to be true. Identify the criteria for a successful outcome.

The next step is to generate alternatives. The first few options that quickly pop into your mind reflect the most obvious solutions, derived from

¹ Retrieved from <http://science.uncvtv.org/content/reportersblog/choices>

When facing essential choices, consciously look for ways to improve decision-making skills and, ultimately, outcomes.



past experience, and not deep thinking. For some situations, familiarity drags you down the wrong path. Brainstorming, mind-mapping, and recording ideas on sticky notes are three options to expand alternatives.

Once you have a solid list of possibilities, rate each of them based on your decision-making criteria. Evaluation measures can include:

- Cost
- Speed of implementation
- Internal and external resources
- Potential payoff
- Risk
- The degree of internal support

By rating alternatives, you often discover ways to modify options to improve outcomes. During the evaluation phase, you want to consider implementation. If you need your team on-board for the implementation, it is best to involve them in the decision-making process, establishing ownership in the outcome. When you decide alone, there will be times when you narrow it down to two alternatives. It is often wise to choose the one with higher institutional acceptance, allowing you to focus energy on implementing the decision, instead of the exhausting process of persuading skeptics and nay-sayers.

Beware of Potential Dangers

Defensive reasoning can be a trap. It is easy to believe what we want to believe, disregarding contrary evidence. To avoid this trap, you should take three steps:

- After you decide, record your explanation of the decision, either on paper or as a voice recording
- Wait 24 hours
- Read or listen to your account, and see if you still feel completely comfortable with your conclusions

This “gut-check” strategy where you put time between deciding and implementation, increases clarity and objectivity and reduces the perils of defensive reasoning.

It also helps you avoid “pebble-in-the-shoe” decisions. If you start walking with a pebble in your shoe, you can ignore it for a little while. Over time, annoyance with the discomfort grows. The pebble proves to be so distracting that you find you must stop to deal with it.

Some choices come with obvious negative implications. Though they appear to be small, if you spot a negative, it is best to be clear on why you believe you can ignore it. Consider what you will need to do if you realize you must remove the pebble at a later date. For example, hiring an adequate candidate for an important position could represent the pebble-in-the-shoe analogy. In the beginning, lacking skills or being an awkward fit for a job is overlooked because you felt pressure to fill a slot on your team. As time passes, if the pebble rubs you the wrong way, it will eventually feel like a boulder to be eliminated.

Exploring Possibilities

Sometimes, it is hard to predict how a decision will turn out because you expect the future to vary from the past. In these situations, scenario analysis can improve the outcome.

Like any other decision-making process, scenario analysis starts by defining the problem to be solved. The next step is to create a list of variables. For example, let's say a trustee who runs a consumer marketing advertising agency has suggested running a contest for depositing freshmen where the winner would get free tuition for a year. Though you have never tried this before, experience guides you on variables to consider, such as:

- Whether the contest will motivate students and parents
- If the contest will generate positive or negative publicity for your school
- The winner choosing not to come at the last minute
- Other places where the money could be used to attract students

Best-case/worst-case scenario analysis simplifies outcomes into two opposing views. This can be helpful when there is an opportunity for a big payoff, but it comes with risk. By defining the best and worst case, you gain clarity on both risks and rewards. Assigning a probability to each event provides another layer of guidance for your ultimate choice.

Last Thoughts

No matter what decision you are making, taking steps to define the problem, generate a broad spectrum of alternatives, identify evaluation criteria, and using these measures for assessing options helps you build a logical framework for your choice. When a decision is critically important, one way to test the soundness

of your decision is by explaining it, either on paper or by recording your explanation. Wait 24 hours, and then listen to the explanation. Using a “sleep on it” strategy increases objectivity and helps to identify pebble-in-the-shoe problems, where a negative outcome is initially ignored but gets more annoying over time.

For complex problems without historical precedence, scenario analysis can help de-risk decisions and greenlight new opportunities. Even if you do nothing more than play out the best-case/worst-case scenarios in your head, you gain clarity that allows you to make better choices.

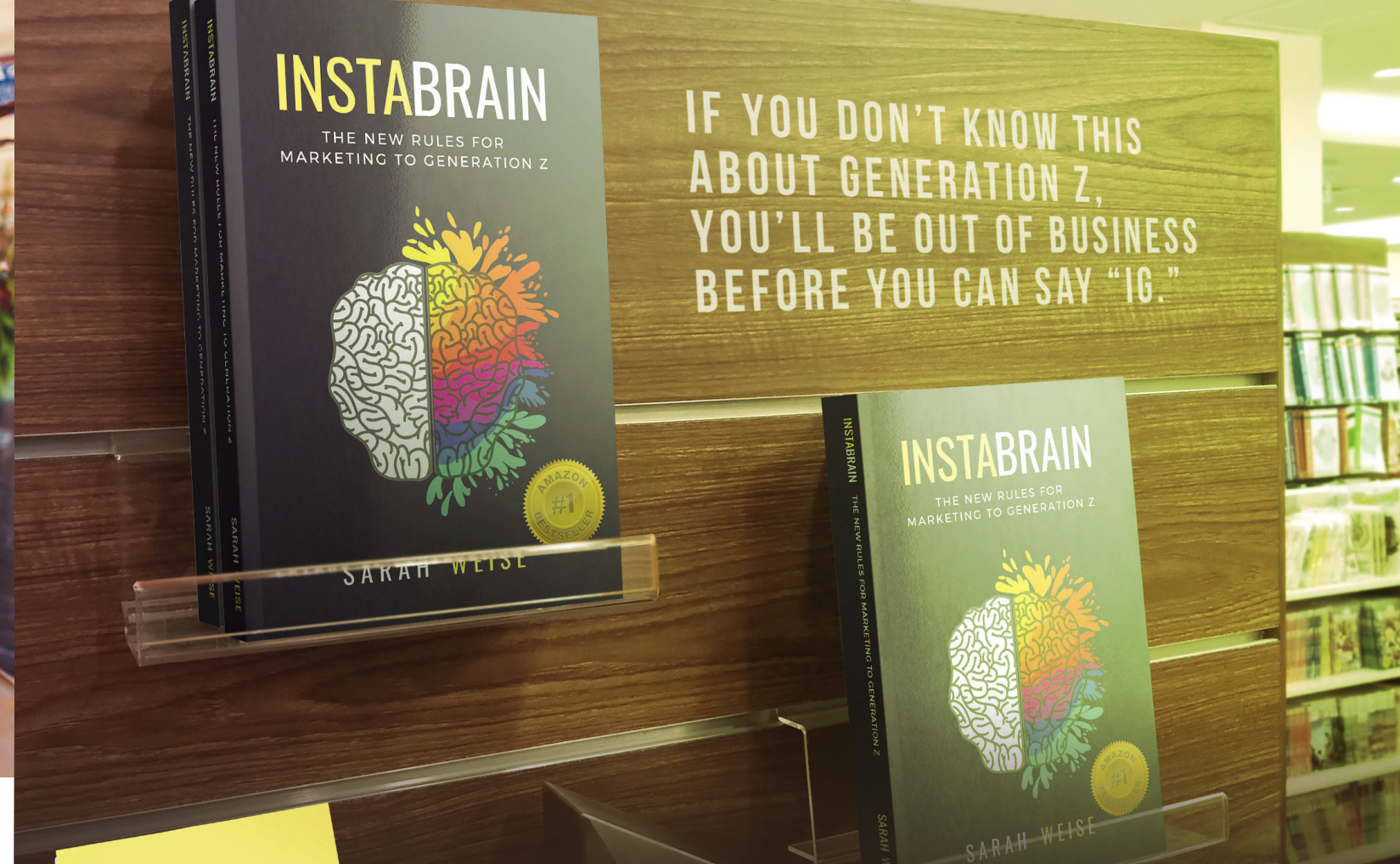
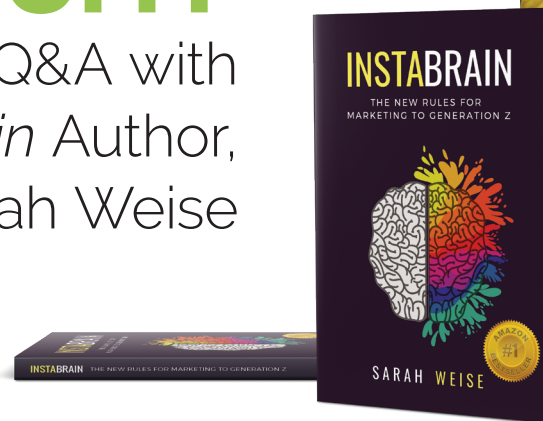
As the old adage goes, the only constant is change. To stay ahead in uncertain times, you must continually assess situations and decide if you need to stay the course or set a new one. When facing essential choices, consciously look for ways to improve decision-making skills and, ultimately, outcomes.



Linda Bishop, MBA, is the Marketing Strategist at enrollmentFUEL. She is a subject matter expert on marketing campaign strategies, content marketing, integrated marketing using both online and offline tactics, data analytics, and marketing automation. Contact her at linda.bishop@enrollmentfuel.com.

FUELING THOUGHT

Q&A with
InstaBrain Author,
Sarah Weise



As you may guess, the enrollmentFUEL team has read a lot of books on Gen Z. Ranking among the best for useful information for Student Search is the best-seller, *InstaBrain: The New Rules for Marketing to Generation Z*, written by Sarah Weise.

Sarah is the founder and CEO of the award-winning marketing research agency, Bixa (bixaresearch.com). Her company has helped hundreds of leading brands, including Google, IBM, Capital One, Mikimoto, and PBS. Working with her team, she unravels the “why” behind customer behavior, helping brands make confident decisions about products and positioning.

Sarah also lectures at Georgetown University's McDonough School of Business on marketing strategy for the next generation and speaks at conferences around the world. She was kind enough to share her thoughts and practical advice for

connecting with a generation unlike any that came before it.

In your book, you write that Generation Z is radically different than Millennials. What led you to research Gen Z and write your book?

I'll never forget the day a new client called to share a huge problem. “Kids aren't searching anymore.” For most companies, this might not seem like a cause for panic. But this client was a major search engine, which made it a major concern.

Though I didn't know it, everything changed in that instant. When I kicked off the project, I had no idea that it would start two-plus years of studying Generation

Z, lead to a bestselling book, and take me around the world researching and speaking.

I also had no idea either that a simple research inquiry would challenge me. For the first time in my fifteen-year career, there were times when I felt lost. I questioned if I would ever figure out not only WHAT Gen Z was doing, but WHY.

But we dug in and kept learning. We did qualitative and quantitative research, including interviews, ethnography, and mobile diary studies. The turning point came when a diary study resulted in 30,000 collected data points.

We printed each one out on a sticky note. We then went through the notes one-by-one, manually grouping and sticking all of them on a wall. Just imagine what that looked like. I call that session the turning point because finally, patterns started to emerge. Patterns that would change everything related to how we

30,000!

engage and connect with this new wave of consumers.

After this study, we did many more studies with many more companies that ran the gamut from eCommerce to fashion to tech to education. The trends we were spotting were fresh and unique to youth – very different from past generations, even when kids were just a few years older.

I saw how these trends would change the way we market to this new wave of consumers, and yet companies were still focusing on Millennial marketing. Even today, not many people realize that Gen Z is the largest living generation,

and that they influence up to 40% of purchases in the U.S. It was clear to me that Gen Z could no longer be ignored, and I had to share the insights I found with other marketers. That's when I wrote *InstaBrain*.

Based on what you uncovered in your research, what can you share about how high school students make their decision to select a college?

Today's high school students are hard-working, persistent, and entrepreneurial.

Financial stability is a key driver for this group. They are not waiting until they graduate to start earning. This generation takes action! Today,

the average age of opening a savings account is 13, and almost all banking for this age group happens on their mobile device.

These kids are saving heavily for college because they have seen their Millennial siblings and friends emerge from college saddled with debt.

In contrast to Millennials, future earning potential is top of mind when Generation Z enters college. They lean toward majors that will increase their chances at a lucrative future, even if that means setting a passion to the side. At colleges and universities across the country, we have seen an uptick in students choosing STEM majors.

65% of Generation Z says it is their goal in life to make it to the top of their profession, compared to 43% of Millennials. Almost 2 out of 3 Gen Z's want to start their own businesses instead of working for

someone else, and many are starting “side gigs” and earning money online while still in high school.

While they may be more entrepreneurial, they are still valuing traditional education—more so than Millennials. When surveyed, 40% of Millennials believed they could have a rewarding career without going to college, while only 25% of Generation Z felt the same way. This younger generation is risk-averse and obsessed with developing contingency plans. Yes, they want to build something themselves. But more than that, they *need* options that will help them navigate an ever-changing job market. It’s more than a choice: it’s a compulsion, bred from fear and uncertainty.

When choosing a college, they lean on their parents’ and even grandparents’ input far more than students in previous generations. That means parents should be

given more attention in marketing strategies when wooing students.

They also value individuality and want to know that their unique talents will be recognized and valued. Make sure your marketing doesn’t seem cookie-cutter and is tailored to them in some way. Showcase a wide array of extracurricular activities, sports, and causes in which they could get involved.

Authenticity is a big deal, too. Make sure your marketing materials don’t seem “braggy.” This generation has an intuitive notion of what’s real and what’s not. They care less about photos of beautiful buildings and want to know more about the things that help them build strong careers later in life, like the network of alumni to help them get jobs and real skills for the work world. They also want to see real students online in authentic settings.

Gen Z loves YouTube and stories. What should schools be doing with those channels?

Prospective students want to see real students online. Videos of real students doing real things in an unscripted way work best. Week-in-my-life videos on YouTube can be extremely influential. Even if the school promotes the content, this content should be authentically and genuinely produced by the student to be effective. These types of videos give snapshots of life on campus, and they could be related to a specific interest. For example, a student week-in-my-life fashion video could show what a college student wears Monday through Friday.



So, let me ask you this. Can you clearly identify who your potential students are? Do you know where they hang out, what they like to do, what they read and watch, and where they are online? If you don’t, you’ve got some research to do.

I haven’t seen this done before, but I would LOVE to see a university sponsor a TikTok hashtag and trending sound of the day. This has worked for many companies to-date, including the recent TurboTax campaign with its “All people are tax people” sound with #W2Step.

Any last thoughts for enrollment professionals who are tasked with recruiting students for their school?

I want to share a story of how a tiny, niche university found a way to stand out in the minds of prospective students. This story comes to me from a good friend, Ann Handley, Chief Content Officer for MarketingProfs. She told me about Hampden-Sydney College, just outside Richmond, Virginia. Despite living just a few hours from where it is located for most of my adult life, I had never heard of this school before Ann told me about it. It’s tiny, surrounded by farmland, and all male.

If you have experienced the university application process, either as a student or a parent, you know that you can feel bombarded by canned brochures that all start to

look the same. Hampden-Sydney College does things differently.¹

They use a personalized approach to stand out and spend time researching potential students. They are looking for people who match a defined persona. When they think there might be a fit, they send potential students a hand-signed letter with a handwritten note! It includes personalized details about what the student might contribute on campus. It turns out that these letters have become quite the tradition, and students save and cherish these letters. This University has found its niche and made its marketing NOT feel like marketing. It’s special. Personalized. Saveable. Frameable even!

If you got a personal letter in the mail, amidst a sea of cookie-cutter brochures, wouldn’t you be more inclined to visit? That’s all they’re aiming for here: enough interest to warrant a visit. Here’s what makes this tactic work:

- It is based on research
- The content is personal
- It is something worth saving
- There is a clear call to action (visit!)
- It is different than what anyone else is doing

¹ Our thanks to Jason Ferguson, Dean of Admissions, at Hampden-Sydney College for reviewing this information, confirming its accuracy, and providing permission to share in Octane.

If you want to make a splash in the marketplace, you have to stand out. You have to research your audience, find your niche, and double down on it. Hampden-Sydney doesn’t operate like other colleges. It doesn’t indiscriminately buy names and mailing addresses. They have a defined student persona and spend time researching individual prospects and learning about what makes them tick. Then, they handwrite notes on letters – a personal touch that lets them better connect with students and their interests.

So, let me ask you this. Can you clearly identify who your potential students are? Do you know where they hang out, what they like to do, what they read and watch, and where they are online? If you don’t, you’ve got some research to do.

Because if you really know your niche, you can create enrollment strategies that resonate on a personal level. That’s the ticket to your success, especially since we’re talking about a generation of teens who are obsessed with individuality.

enrollmentFUEL helps enrollment management professionals grow enrollment. We are a boutique-style Student Search company providing concierge-level services to our client-partners. Here, you will find no templates or canned responses. Regardless of our assignment, we take the best approach to fit your specific needs, because **partnering for your success is always our number one focus.**

Student Search

Customized solutions and compelling campaigns to showcase your institution's distinctive benefits.

microSEARCH™

When you have a specific enrollment goal and a limited budget, microSEARCH is the perfect solution.

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bannerDIRECT™

Comprehensive digital advertising solutions, including IP targeting, retargeting, and social media advertising.

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Identify stealth inquiries to your website through IP address matching.

slateEDUCATE™

Consulting and coaching for all levels of Slate users, including implementation support.

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Expand your messaging options with ringless voicemail messages to mobile phones.

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High impact communication including digital, viewbooks, travel pieces, and direct mail – specializing in die cuts and distinct finishes.

Consulting and Training

Let us help with name buys, financial aid strategies, talent development, and all things SEM.

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