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# Making Content Count: How Content Marketing Can Impact Colleges' Recruitment of Undergraduate Students

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MAKING CONTENT COUNT: HOW CONTENT MARKETING CAN IMPACT  
COLLEGES' RECRUITMENT OF UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctorate of Education.

Hamline University

Saint Paul, Minnesota

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To Mom and Toni, my first teachers, who instilled in me the value of the written word, to Roger for his patience, love, and support, and for putting up with many late nights of writing, and finally to my advisor, my dissertation readers, the Hamline faculty and staff, and the many supporters at Hamline University, I dedicate this work to all of you.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

College can be an exciting, exhilarating, and sometimes, overwhelming world for incoming students. Many are out on their own and away from the sheltering force of their parents and the comfort of a familiar school, surroundings, and students for the first time. It is a leaping off point for a young person to enter college, and colleges attempt to soften students' landings into their new environment in a multitude of ways. As an example, colleges and universities are increasingly embracing content marketing tools, such as social media outreach, video storytelling, and the use of feature web content as a means to first attract and interest students in what they offer. Once the prospective student enrolls, colleges also attempt to use social media and other outreach to encourage that student to engage more deeply and build community with other students, faculty and staff, and the overall campus community.

Colleges have various approaches and a range of investment and support in using these mediums for engagement with prospective and current students. My goal is to examine just how vital and compelling content marketing might be for admission purposes. My research question is therefore "How do liberal arts colleges and universities in the Midwest use content marketing strategy to impact their enrollment goals in the recruitment of undergraduate students?" Two secondary questions are "How do marketing, communications, and admissions departments of these colleges or universities intersect, align, and collaborate in achieving their recruiting goals?" and "How effective is each content marketing tool in impacting the colleges' enrollment goals?" The study

also explores the level of financial and personnel resources used on content marketing efforts and how that correlates with recruitment at the colleges studied.

### My Story

Thinking back to my days as an undergraduate student, some 25 years ago, I struggled to find the right school and also to find my place that first year. My entry into college had been lack luster from the start and was devoid of interaction from anyone at the school aside from a letter of acceptance. I had applied late to colleges, panicked after my first choice didn't pan out, and once accepted by another, I enrolled quickly. If there had been an easy, cost-effective way to learn more about various colleges, other than by wading through an ocean of view books, listening to my high school counselor, and asking the few people I knew who had been to college what they knew about getting into a good school, I would have had a larger window into various other colleges from which to choose. My family did not have money to visit several campuses out of state, as many of my friends were doing, and I had no one close to me who had completed a college degree to help me walk through the steps to find the right school or program for me. Additionally, the Internet did not exist as it does today, so I could not, on my own, as easily research various schools, degree programs, and extra-curricular activities offered, as prospective students can today. Therefore, my decision to choose a school was based on limited information and options.

As a first year student, I discovered I could handle the classes and did well enough to keep pushing forward academically, but I felt lost in a sea of people and saw no clear path to finding my place in the school's community. I felt alone, scared, and increasingly isolated. After a year and a half, I dropped out. With confidence built

through life experience, an established social base grounding me, and the desire to accomplish more with my life than waitressing offered, I headed back to school three years later and finished my degree. I established close friendships with a few students who were also majoring in broadcast journalism, but I never formed a deep connection with the school. I see this as a lost opportunity for that college and for me. I don't think the college did enough to build a relationship with me, support me, or to care if I was successful along the way. Twelve years later, I completed my master's degree at the university where I now work. As I finish my doctorate in education after another five years of school, I look back at my education path, wondering how much different my experiences and opportunities would have been along the way if I had attended a college that had been a better fit, if I had established a sense of community, or if I had formed a deep connection with the school. Would I be in the same field I am now? Would I have accomplished all of this much more quickly and already be on to an exciting new chapter in my life? Would I be even more actively donating to that college, mentoring young people in its mentorship program, and helping, through word of mouth, to recruit new students to its degree programs? With all of the ways that colleges and universities can both recruit and communicate with students now—in an affordable, manageable way, it is likely I would have remained more engaged.

### Content Marketing

After a decade as a journalist, I now work in communications in the higher education field. My team of ten staff members is responsible for helping to determine how the university uses content marketing to recruit, engage, and retain students and how it uses content marketing to build and improve the university's reputation. Content

marketing, for purposes of this research study, is marketing that uses published Content. Examples include features such as website storytelling, social media outreach, or multimedia, such as photos, videos, and podcasts to attract, acquire, and retain consumers, or in this case, attract, acquire, and retain students. Content marketing strategy is a relatively new concept. Chapman and Handley (2012) stated that content marketing as an organized, recognized aspect of marketing, has only emerged in the past few years. While there are a growing number of books that attempt to outline how to use content strategy effectively, none that I have yet to find specify its use on a college campus for retention or recruitment purposes. Articles on how schools are using Content or some aspects of social media and video to succeed, on the other hand, are plentiful, with dozens popping up every day. They articulate specific strategies with admission departments, internship programs that utilize students' talents and skills to showcase a college to prospective students, and video-blogger programs that have resonated with high school students and their parents as the student seeks their college of choice. They do not, however, frame Content as a connected and concerted effort. They break the concept into fragmented parts. I feel there is a way to better understand recruitment success by seeing the entire picture of how liberal arts colleges in the Midwest are building and executing their content marketing strategy.

### Higher Education Recruitment and Retention

Arguably, college admission is a complicated and dynamic field and process, with multiple factors influencing how prospective students and their families choose a school and with proven, established methods, as well as new innovative strategies emerging in how schools recruit students. Prospective students may make decisions about which

school to attend by looking at cost, location, degree programs offered, and extra-curricular programs available at the schools they research. The flexibility of the programs, reputation of the school, family connection to the school, high school counselor recommendations, or the feel of the campus when they visit can all influence selection. Through all of these variables, I believe content marketing has a role to play in attracting and recruiting students and families.

Content can offer an authentic, memorable invitation for prospective students to learn about schools through the eyes and voices of current students and faculty. Prospective students increasingly use stealth tactics, such as searching the Internet, watching a school's videos, visiting its social media sites, reading publications that offer college rankings, and exploring reviews on websites that allow current students to rate their professors. As Kirp (2003) noted, "The market rules, and the Web is a shopping arcade" (p. 16). This is increasingly true for college admissions. Springer, Reider, and Morgan (2013) concluded that by placing compelling, inviting Content online, such as on a school's social sites, website, and on influencers' sites, a school is better able to intercept a prospective student's search and attract that student with engaging Content. As outlined in Chapter Two, admission officials are already using a variety of methods needed to effectively recruit. They may be using purchased lists, building deep relationships with high school counselors, sending recruiters out to territories to recruit regionally, participating in college fairs, and using online vendor college search sites. They often use the method of the funnel, gathering thousands of names of prospective students and narrowing the list through strategies that weed the list down to the recruited class. However, as Scott (2007) explained, if they are not actively using online content as

a component of their recruitment strategy, they are missing an incredible resource that could be helping them to recruit their classes much more easily.

### Content Marketing in the Business Sector

Higher education and nonprofit organizations in general may be slow to move forward with a clear push on content marketing. However, as Odden (2012) concluded, the corporate sector sees the value of driving with Content, and as such, it has been investing an increasing percentage of its resources to content marketing. Arguably, higher education has even more to gain by harnessing and channeling its resources to Content. Chapter Two describes how businesses use it not only to sell products but also to build loyalty. Higher education can use Content not only to recruit and retain students but also to build community, which is always an underlying goal with marketing and communication efforts. Wandel (2008) shared how building community through content marketing could invite and cultivate engagement from the time students become prospectives to the time they are alumni. Odden (2012) believed businesses also appreciate the ease at which content strategy can be measured. With the myriad ways to utilize the analytics generated through multiple media channels, they are able to make more informed decisions about how to spend the remaining marketing dollars not already invested in content strategy—for advertising purposes. Odden also expressed that with the increasing scrutiny on colleges and universities to be good stewards of their resources, investing in Content versus straight advertising would allow for a higher and more in-depth level of measurement in terms of reach and conversion.

### Content Marketing in Higher Education

As a member of a university marketing and communications team and an active

member of several groups in which I interact with peers at other universities and colleges, I have experienced firsthand that marketing and communication departments' knowledge of various aspects of social media and its benefits and pitfalls have grown dramatically over the past five years. Many of us in the field who lead content strategy at our schools have crafted plans and built teams around supporting the various types of Content that can be used for recruitment purposes. They include video, feature web content, blogs, reviews, photos, podcasts, social media engagement, and more. At the university at which I work, for example, we have crafted a strategy for each social media tool, created guidelines for those posting on behalf of the university, and built up our staff to accommodate the increased workload. Some schools have grown further, with great success in their recruitment efforts, by investing heavily in the addition of staff, such as web editors, social media strategists, and videographers/photographers.

In researching how liberal arts colleges and universities in Minnesota use content marketing to impact their enrollment goals in recruiting undergraduate students, the study aimed to explore, determine, and reveal the various aspects of content marketing that are used successfully and how the integration of the various elements drives the desired outcomes. Additionally, the intent of the study was to identify some best practices for building a strategy around content marketing use in higher education. By exploring the levels of financial and personnel resources used on content marketing efforts and how that correlates with recruitment at the colleges studied, this study further framed how schools are successful or wasteful in their use of Content.

The study prescribes to the true meaning of scholarship as defined by Ernest Boyer (1990), former chancellor of the State University of New York, U.S.

Commissioner of Education, and President of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. The study is framed with the beliefs that scholarship of discovery includes original research from which others can learn. It includes the comparison and contrast of information from multiple disciplines and perspectives, and the intention of the study is to share the data so the results can be applied by others.

The research intention was to offer a snapshot of what was working and why in the area of Content, as well as identifying options for modifying current practices. In the upcoming chapters, the study reveals the types of Content that existed and were used for recruitment purposes and how the colleges were using and measuring success of each type. It also explores how Content was planned, executed, and maintained. Additionally, the study examined how colleges chose to staff the areas of marketing, communications, and admission involved in the development and dissemination of Content, how these areas worked together on content marketing strategy for student recruitment, and how they measured success of their efforts.

Colleges have continuous pressure to do more with less. Literature and research review in this area, as outlined in Chapter Two, demonstrate that content marketing can be a powerful approach to achieving more awareness and more engagement with schools' limited resources. This study includes interviews and surveys with marketing, communications, and admission officials at colleges, as well as document analysis to capture how students were engaged through Content at three colleges over a three-month period of time. By gathering information from people associated with private liberal arts colleges and universities in the Midwest, the study aimed to determine whether current approaches with content marketing were effective and whether they were influencing



admission. The intention was to discover the strengths and weaknesses in each college or university's approach and to better understand the challenges they have encountered.

Anticipated outcomes of these challenges included maintaining continuity of content and voice, disruptions with staff turnover, and financial limitations, among others.

### Summary

In the upcoming chapter, the reader is offered a thorough review of the literature that influenced this study. This section entails a summary of traditional undergraduate recruitment strategies, background on the growth of content marketing and how it has been used in the business community with success, and the types of content marketing elements that have been effective in building trust, connection, and community. The chapter explains how marketing, admission, and communication teams at schools have traditionally worked together and how the landscape for their work has evolved in recent years. In Chapter Three, the research paradigm and methods to gather data for this study are outlined. The chapter explains why the approaches were selected, why the instruments were used to evoke information from the research subjects, and why those steps offered the best approach for the research questions. In Chapter Four, the data gathered is disseminated and results of the interviews, surveys, and document analysis gathered are shared. In the final chapter, reflections and conclusions are offered, and there is discussion regarding limitations of the study, as well as advice on recommendations for future study in this area.

The dissertation research showed that content marketing can be applied in ways to be more effective and successful in recruitment efforts. In the end, this research provides insights into best practices for small college and university marketing and communication

departments in their use of Content for recruitment. This study may help others discover ways to align colleges' resources to develop and share content that effectively engages prospective undergraduate students and compels them to apply at a college.

## CHAPTER TWO

### Literature Review

#### Introduction

This chapter contains a summary of the traditional approach to undergraduate recruitment and retention in higher education. It also offers insight into the growth of content marketing in the business sector. Content marketing, for purposes of this study, is marketing that uses published content, such as website storytelling, social media outreach, photos, videos, and podcasts to attract, acquire, and retain consumers, or in this case, attract, acquire, and retain students. Further, the chapter explores various aspects of content marketing that are effective in building trust, connection, and community. This section describes how marketing, admission, and communication teams at colleges and universities have traditionally worked together, and how the landscape for their work has evolved in recent years.

The content of this chapter will provide the foundation necessary to determine how marketing, communication, and admission teams can work together to develop and disseminate Content that may be pivotal in recruitment efforts. It offers insight into what types of Content can be effective and why; it also frames the background to answer the research question “How do liberal arts colleges and universities in the Midwest use content marketing strategy to impact their enrollment goals in the recruitment of undergraduate students?” It will also help address two secondary questions: “How do marketing, communications, and admissions departments of these colleges or universities

intersect, align, and collaborate in achieving their recruiting goals?” and “How effective is each content marketing tool in impacting the colleges’ enrollment goals?”

### An Evolution in College Recruitment

College and university admissions officers and staff members from marketing and communications staff do not, as a collective group, have a long history of collaborating on goals and outcomes. Hayes, Ruschman, and Walker (2009) noted, “In the pre-internet age, college admissions offices held the primary control over communication to potential students via view books (which are thick brochures that offer overviews of colleges), prospect letters, and high school visits” (p. 113). At many schools, the two groups grew up on opposite sides of the organization; admissions personnel were out on their own, or governed by the academic leadership of the school, and marketing and communications staff were positioned squarely on the administrative side. Admission teams often made the majority of decisions regarding which publications were created, how financial resources were spent on marketing materials, and how the university interacted with prospective students and their families. Scully (2010) observed that admissions officials may have felt that in doing so, they were doing the critical work, particularly if their university was tuition-dependent. Scully explained these officials may have felt they were solely responsible for filling classes, bringing in the tuition dollars, “and making the school run. The marketing and communications folks were just the font and logo police” (p. 27). In turn, communications teams may have felt they were the only university representatives looking out for the institutional brand, while admissions officials were only focusing on short-term gains. Scully stated, “The two units often have very different needs, priorities, and ways of conducting business” (p. 28). As deeper research into these

relationships demonstrate in the next several pages, that is no longer entirely the case on either side.

With the advent of multiple interactive information channels and a plethora of content for prospective students to gain information about colleges, from blogs to social media to videos to online reviews, admissions officials and college marketing and communications offices have increasingly found themselves face-to-face in managing communications to prospective students and parents. As Daun-Barnett, Behrend, and Bezek (2014) attested, “It is unlikely that any change in recent history has affected the college admission and the college choice process as significantly as the development of the internet” (p. 131). However, with the onset of this large array of communication vehicles, there are many new conversations to manage, and many schools have yet to determine a strong path through the maze. The above authors explained, “Social media, for example, could fundamentally change how institutions engage prospective students, but most institutions are still trying to figure out how to harness its potential” (p. 134).

Likewise, colleges and universities are struggling to determine how to use online content to better engage and retain their current students. A Lipman Hearne study (2010) on the morphing world of higher education marketing included an interview with Lipman Hearne’s Chief Operations Officer and director of the firm’s research practice, Donna Van De Water. She revealed, “Students tend to say they want to hear the university’s voice. Students know if they are being talked down to or if their own voices are being mimicked” (p. 16). She added, “An institution needs to know what its own voice is, yet also allow students to represent the authentic student voice ... We know there are opportunities to use social media effectively” (p. 16-17). The Retention Practices Report

(2013) by Noel Levitz revealed that using content marketing as a retention tool was not listed among the top ten most effective strategies and tactics reported by four-year private colleges and universities. The study, in fact, listed online social networking used to engage students among the five least used and least effective strategies and tactics, as reported by four-year private colleges and universities. However, as Bacon (2012) explained, social media and other online Content can be critical tools in building community during this age of participation.

By examining the past and current practices and use of Content by college admission professionals, as well as marketing and communications teams, it is possible to identify where the teams have intersected in recruitment and retention practices. Additionally, we can better evaluate where they have opportunities to improve their processes, use their resources, and align their goals and desired outcomes to recruit students.

Undergraduate Enrollment Practices College admissions practices have undergone drastic changes over the past two decades. As social and societal changes have occurred, so too has the face of private colleges changed, with increased focus on money-generating admissions processes. Kirp (2003) said, “The money wars [of colleges] are openly and aggressively waged among striving universities” (p. 21). Economic shifts, demographic shifts, and the evolving goals, missions, and needs of colleges and universities have caused schools to revamp the organization of process and practice of recruitment in their organizations, he explained. Kirp offered, “As a profit center, the admissions office is supposed to raise as much revenue as possible from tuition. That set

of demands has led to new financial aid formulas that resemble the way Priceline.com sells plane tickets” (p. 21).

Such changes have led college admissions to become a complex and ever-evolving machine. Effective college admission departments now increasingly rely on data-driven decisions to steer their process. Enrollment management has become a science of sorts; predictive modeling, financial aid leveraging, net price calculators, and email communications, triggered at precise intervals through admission-specific content management systems guide the way. As the E-Recruiting Practices Report stated, “More than half of four-year private and public institutions—between 52 and 56 percent—are now spending \$50K or more to maintain admissions-specific content and services on their institution’s website, a substantial increase from two years earlier when only 22 percent ... reported spending at that level” (Levitz, 2014, p. 9). Additionally, the study showed, bulk email blasts and other automated communications sent to prospective students also rose for four-year private colleges and universities over previous years.

Enrollment Departments The role for enrollment leadership has also evolved. Often, Chief Enrollment Officers now have a seat on the college’s executive team, and they are critical in determining the admission goals of the organization. Supiano (2013) said “Presidents don’t all have to be enrollment-management experts, but they do need to make sure they have someone who is at their cabinet meetings. That ensures that when the senior team starts pursuing one goal, say increasing revenue, there’s a person at the table to remind team members of how it will affect the achievement of other goals, like enrolling more low-income students” (p. 1). Whether schools set their enrollment goals based on their financial needs, on improving their academic class profile, or on other

primary criteria, the process for goal setting and strategy setting has become much more complicated. The Marketing and Recruitment Practices Rankings Report (Levitz, 2013) noted that 85% of private, four-year colleges and universities reported that their school had a written annual recruitment plan; 72% reported they had a written, long-range, multi-year strategic enrollment plan; and nearly 60% reported having a standing, campus-wide committee that addresses coordinated recruitment planning and implementation across all units.

Admission counselors today rely on lists of names of prospective students, and they are often given a territory or region from which to recruit. These admission officers may send multiple emails, make phone calls, send text messages, mail postcards, and reach out to prospective students at college fairs, high school visits, and through social media. Baworowsky (2013), in an article on enrollment management for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, labeled this approach outdated. He said, "It is not a question of if but when there will be a major shift in the way we think about student recruitment. When will higher education move away from our old ideas of buying names, writing to students, adding respondents to our databases, and then sending paper letters, brochures, and e-mails to them?" (p. 1). Often this process of old school engagement has taken place over a year or more, giving the counselor time to build relationships with the prospective students and families, as well as to find out more about their personal needs, Daun-Barnett, Behrend, and Bezek (2014) said. They went on to state that admission counselors often have hundreds of students, for which they are responsible to recruit, with different needs and questions. The authors explained, "Even with the most accurate and reliable



information, students and their families continue to need [personalized] guidance and support as they make their way through the process” (p. 101).

Increasing the challenge is that each month a new pathway of communication emerges, as social media sites and venues continue to dominate prospective students’ online lives. Qualman (2013) explained, “In the past three years, it [social media] became the most popular activity on the web” (p. 3). In the past year alone, Vine, a short video sharing tool, and Instagram, a photo and caption-sharing tool, have wound their way into young people’s lives to become two of the dominant social media engagement tools. As Lindbeck and Fodrey (2010) described, “The challenge presented to admission personnel is using these technologies to funnel and filter information to prospective students in a manner that is not threatening to what they value, but sustainable enough to be useful and effective in delivering the message they desire” (p. 13).

Enrollment teams also often work closely with academic leadership, coaches, events staff, and financial aid staff to recruit prospective students. From hosting campus visit events to arranging interviews with professors and coaches, or helping incoming students and families navigate through the FAFSA and financial aid questions, admission counselors remain central throughout a prospective student’s journey in determining the right college choice. Baworowsky (2013) said that while these are all valuable aspects of engagement, without the insertion of Content and social media strategy, they are old and outdated approaches. He also stated, “We need to learn how to embrace and use social media to change how we view student relationship-building and recruitment” (p. 1). Enter the marketing and communications staff, with their plans, ideas, and suggestions for how to better engage prospective students through storytelling and other Content; it

can be a recipe for overwhelming admissions and marketing and communications staffs with options and decisions about what to do next and which social media tool to use to engage students. Baworowsky (2013) said, “Social media are new technologies. Therein lies the problem. We can maximize the value of social media as a recruitment tool and better serve students if we are willing to engage students outside the bounds of traditional inquiry communications” (p. 1). Qualman (2013) agreed that, “There is such a thirst and demand for social media, and it is now a driving force in most strategic business decisions” (p. 29).

Enrollment needs of students and parents. Prospective students have many tools at their fingertips to help them make decisions about which college to attend. They have their families, their peers, their school counselors, and their other close connections. Parents are often key to the admission process. According to the Marketing and Recruitment Practices Report (Levitz, 2013), 85% of four-year private colleges and universities surveys reported targeting parents of prospective students in their outreach efforts, and 58% stated this tactic was very effective or somewhat effective in successfully recruiting students. Increasingly colleges and universities create publications and websites specifically geared to answer questions parents may have. Additionally, at campus visit events, there are often sessions just for parents that focus on financial aid, academic and student services support, and safety, among other topics.

College-seeking students typically have print and electronic versions of view books, arriving weekly in their mailboxes and email boxes, and calls, texts and postcards coming at them at regular intervals. College seekers are considering price, location, convenience, majors offered, reputation of school, athletics and extra-curricular

offerings, academic support, and whether the campus feels like a good fit when they visit. Increasingly, these technically-savvy consumers will seek out this information about colleges they are considering on their own. Baworowsky (2013) noted, “All of that [the past two decades of] innovation still exists within the long-held paradigm that building an inquiry pool is the first stage in the recruitment funnel. Are there signs that students are no longer as willing to participate in our existing paradigm? Sure: Consider stealth applicants” (p. 1). Even four years ago, the E-Recruiting Practices Report (Levitz, 2010), revealed, “Secret shoppers [those prospective students who do their research on a school via the web and not by contacting the school first] are becoming more prevalent in higher education, as now fully one-third of students applying to public institutions are waiting until they apply to make themselves known to the institution. In addition, one-quarter of applicants to private institutions are doing so” (p. 1). This practice has only increased over the past four years, and many schools have responded by seeding their websites and other e-communication vehicles with discoverable content, such as videos, photos, and information about majors, student organizations, housing options, and more.

The college search is a competitive process. For many students and parents, cost is a primary driver in selecting the right school. As Kirp (2003) stated, “When higher education is being discussed, whether by parents or politicians, cost is often the topic and grumbling defines the tone” (p. 20). Students and parents want to know the cost of tuition, room and board, fees, what kind of financial aid and scholarships colleges are offering, and what kind of value they will get for their investment. Net price calculators, all the rage over the past few years, now pepper college admission websites. As Daun-Barnett, Behrend, and Bezek (2014) detailed, “Students and parents are not well-

informed about the cost of college ... Report findings from a multi-state study indicate they significantly overestimate the cost of college” (p. 102). Understanding exactly what college costs and then determining the value for that investment is critically important for families, as an increasing number of students are leaving college with high debt. These authors go on to say, “Nationwide, student loan debt has exceeded credit card debt for the first time, climbing to over \$1 trillion. At the same time, the average loan debt per student has surpassed \$25,000” (p. 102).

Traditional undergraduate retention practices. Once a college successfully recruits and enrolls a student, the process of engagement has not ended. In fact, it has just begun, albeit in a new direction. Keeping current students happy, secure, productive, and motivated becomes the new focus. A 2014 Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) white paper on retention and success revealed retention of students is increasingly important for colleges and universities, particularly for schools that are not highly selective. The Retention Indicators Report (Levitz, 2013) explained that colleges and universities that were the most selective about their admits had an up to 15% higher retention rate for first year students between term one and term two than schools that were lowest in selectivity. Retention has a significant impact on the financial picture of most colleges and universities. The study (CASE, 2014) revealed, “There is a key role here for marketing and communication professionals to provide honest, relevant, and explicit information to prospective students about their institution and higher education. This means both before they arrive and during induction” (p. 7). When a school loses a current student, it loses all of the revenue in the form of tuition dollars that student would have contributed throughout the student’s college career. Additionally, college rankings

in influential publications such as *US News & World Report* highlight college and university retention rates, and a drop in the retention rate can send a college's overall ranking down, too. While many colleges do not want to admit how important rankings are to them, rankings are important to their students and parents, as well as alumni, donors, and prospective students. Kirp (2003) said, "These days, the admissions office is expected to recruit students with strong academic credentials in order to help their school move up in the U.S. News sweepstakes" (p. 21). Therefore, a drop in retention that could impact a drop in rankings is something colleges want to avoid at all costs.

Colleges and universities have various practices and processes in communicating with and engaging their current student bases. At many schools, the marketing and communications teams play a strong role in disseminating internal communications through a web portal, regular newsletter or e-newsletter, email updates, and event postings on the school's website and social media sites. Schools may also use text messages, digital signage, postcards, posters, and table tents, signs, and other communications to let students know when there is an important announcement, event, or opportunity. Colleges' student affairs staff may also play a strong part in the communications process with current undergraduate students. Through student activities, career development center, study abroad, athletics, and campus recreation departments, undergraduate students may hear campus news and information from a variety of sources, and all communications can impact recruitment and retention. Academic departments often take the reins in communicating with the students majoring in their programs, using email, social media, and other tools to keep students in the loop on happenings. Alumni

relations may also have a role in engaging students, encouraging them to attend events and asking them to get involved in opportunities to volunteer or donate to the school.

Often there is confusion about communication vehicles, processes, and roles, and students are caught in the middle, receiving a hodge-podge of communications from various departments in the college or university. This can cause frustration, distrust, and anxiety for students, when the goal for the schools should be to provide clarity, support, and helpful information. The Retention Indicators Report (Levitz, 2013) indicated, “Although the first year has been a historic focus of student retention programs, as this is where the greatest loss of students occurs, the findings show that significant losses of students also occur during the second year, so it is important to pay attention to both years. In addition, the data show that attrition continues during the second term of the first and second year, so it is important to provide ongoing and relevant student transition support beyond the first terms” (p. 2). The study shows it is important to consider retention when recruiting students, because when colleges recruit undergraduate students, they are anticipating they will have them for four years.

Higher education marketing & communications practices. While internal communications to current students is one focus area for college and university marketing and communication departments, recruitment-focused Content is increasingly the *primary* focus area. In years past, many schools’ marketing offices spent the majority of their time on developing print publications, creating the school’s alumni magazine, external brand awareness campaigns, and on hosting institutional events, such as Commencement, Kirp (2003) explained. The marketing team often took direction from the admission department on which publications should be developed and what Content

should be highlighted, based on the enrollment team's current needs. Kirp noted that at that time, "Explicitly and unapologetically, enrollment managers regard students as customers and see a college education as a the product students consume. In marketing terms their assignment is to advertise and recruit customers, to set a price for their product and to make sure the product matches the demand" (p. 16). As a result, Kirp said, admissions staff had a strong voice in which materials a college should create and what information prospective students needed to know about the school. Scott (2007) revealed that media relations was also a primary function of the communications team at this time, as was speech-writing for the president and members of the leadership team.

With the onset of the digital age, Kirp said, colleges and universities saw increased needs and opportunities for developing and strategically using web content. Kirp (2003) noted, "The easily modifiable code of Web pages enables institutions to have interactive relationships with prospective students, a considerable marketing advance over one-way communication" (p. 19). He didn't know how right he would be, when a mere four years later, social networking sites entered the scene. At that point, marketing and communications teams experienced significant change. In 2007, when Facebook emerged as a social networking site that allowed brands to create pages, colleges were in a scramble to decide whether and how to pursue the new venue. Scott (2007) announced, "The Web has changed the rules. Today, organizations are communicating directly with buyers" (p. 10). Podcasting, video-hosting sites, and blogs had emerged and stretched already stressed marketing and communications personnel and resources. With the advent of social media, shifts began to happen; marketing and communications teams buckled under the weight of new pressure to explore and populate a host of social sites, while at

the same time drastically increasing their website content. More traditional functions of the teams, such as speech-writing, internal communications, and media relations fell away to some degree; Content emerged as a force. Scott stated, “Great content in all forms helps buyers see that you and your organization ‘get it’. Content drives action” (p. 26).

Print publications and outdoor brand awareness campaigns took a backseat to the new demands. Scott (2007) identified early on that media relations, long a staple of higher education’s reputation building, was beginning to slow, as communications teams launched head-first into the unknown depths of the social media sea. The author also shared that marketing and communications teams focused on testimonials, success stories, video-storytelling, and other storytelling content to fill their growing list of web communications venues. For some schools, this content was embraced by other areas, such as admission, alumni relations, and student affairs, but for most, it remained in a vacuum of front-facing social sites and the university’s website. Content, while engaging, at most schools, is not fully embraced by the departments that could use it most, such as admission. To that point, Scott explained, “To move content to its rightful place in driving a successful marketing and PR strategy, content must be the single most important component. That focus can be tough for many people” (p. 106).

### Market Influence

Not only did the new online content and social media venues provide an opportunity for new engagement, they emerged at a time in which colleges and universities needed additional admissions support most. In 2008, the national economic downturn that would lead to the Great Recession struck. Many colleges were hit hard that



fall and into the following year as students and parents were more cautious with spending. Investing in college was more daunting for families, as parents dealt with losing jobs and with shrinking 401Ks. Long (2013) revealed, “In the face of this recession, families have suffered lost income, greater debt, and more financial insecurity, factors that might negatively impact college outcomes” (p. 11). Long said college enrollment numbers stalled or stayed flat, schools struggled financially; they began looking for creative ways to harness their strengths and focus that muscle on enrollment growth.

Shifting Needs A trend that had been making its way through the private college sector at tuition-driven schools suddenly gained significant ground. Why not align marketing and communications teams directly with the strongest revenue-producing arm of the organization? Scannel (2013) stated, “Since marketing and recruitment are so integrally linked, the admissions office is often the marketing department’s biggest client. Yet, it is common for marketing to be part of a university relations or institutional advancement division where fundraising is the No. 1 objective. This is where tension can bubble up” (p. 1). Colleges began restructuring their divisions, moving the marketing, communications, and admission teams under the same division head. Two sides of the house that had never played well together would suddenly need to get on the same page quickly. It affected team structure, roles, and daily work for the marketing and communications staff, and it moved the focus to new technologies to find ways to tell the college story better, more authentically, and more directly. Pulizzi (2014) summed up the approach to creating and strategically applying good content by stating, “Telling a quality story to the right person at the right time always cuts through the clutter” (p. 15). This is

significant, in examining how admission, marketing, and communications teams intersect, align, and collaborate in achieving their recruiting and retention goals.

There were no clear rules of engagement. In a recent report on nonprofit organizations' content marketing practices from the Content Marketing Institute (2014), it was revealed that 74% of nonprofits surveyed responded that while they were using content marketing to some degree, they did not think they were using it effectively. Now admission teams and marketing and communication teams may be required to forge a tighter, more cohesive relationship or to improve their collaborative processes in the development and execution of content marketing strategy; therefore, determining how to craft and share the Content itself may be still somewhat of a mystery or trial and error, as it appeared to be for three out of four nonprofits surveyed for the CMI study. What resulted for some schools was a disjointed effort; strong Content being developed but not being shared with prospective students; outdated materials were still being circulated to prospects and their parents; and distrust and confusion over the goals and roles of teams and team members were commonplace.

Admissions staff were busy placing increased focus on improving the class profile to bring in more academically strong, low-need students and on lowering the discount rate to help the college financially. Kirp (2003) said, "Many colleges have started increasing the number of merit-based scholarships as bait to attract students they otherwise couldn't hope to enroll" (p. 21). Marketing and communications teams, meantime, were swept up with trying to fill the continually growing demand for Content. Pulizzi and Barrett (2009) claimed, "We're seeing nothing less than a marketing tsunami that is affecting businesses of every size, regardless of what they are selling" (p. 3).

### New Approach and Opportunities in Recruitment Efforts

With new structure brings new opportunity. Rich content, including good storytelling features, compelling videos, and engaging, interactive web content are not new phenomena. Pulizzi (2014) explained these features have long been considered the fluff to round out the edges of a company's story, which make the organization more approachable or likeable. Pulizzi further explained the features have often been viewed as the softer side of marketing, rather than the hard-hitting market research, or the cut and dried advertising message. The author shared that more recently organizations, particularly those in the business sector, are increasingly recognizing the value of Content. Why is this? Content is compelling. Pulizzi (2014) articulated that Content attracts and captures. Further, he said, it holds one's attention in a way that traditional ads don't often do, and increasingly, results can be measured.

The use of it in the business community offers strong insights into how and why liberal arts colleges and universities may use content marketing to recruit and retain students. Vaynerchuck (2013) explained, "People want to be social wherever they consume their media... They [companies] are disseminating content across the mobile social board, making their presence known on all of the most popular networks." (p. 5) Additionally, exploring how staffs work together to accomplish their content marketing goals can also help to inform how marketing, communications, and admissions departments of colleges and universities can intersect, align, and collaborate to achieve their goals. Power (2012) said, "Continually improving performance is what matters, and that can only happen with teamwork across functional and company boundaries" (p. 1). He expanded on that to say, "A company must get its sales, marketing, research and

development, operations, and even customers and suppliers to work together,” (p.1). This can only be achieved, Power contended, by all employees “understanding the entire flow and logic to uncover huge opportunities for improvement. And only by collaborating with other process workers can they implement the changes” (p. 2).

Some companies are helping to engage their workers by teaching them to use the tools that will help them to be more effective in their roles. For example, Power (2012) described how a company called MITRE, “has conducted pioneering work with new social media to build teamwork between its 7,600 employees and a network of academics, former employees, vendors, industry, sponsors, and front-line beneficiaries of its research” (p. 4). The company “deployed a social networking prototype it calls ‘Handshake’, which looks like Facebook with photos of members, profiles, file sharing, blogs, and discussion groups where members discuss concerns, offer comments, and trade ideas across dozens of topics” (p. 4). By modeling tools the company could use to engage with the public, workers are more invested and had more buy-in and understanding of the company’s strategy and overall approach to engagement and marketing.

What colleges can learn from content marketing in the business sector. The business sector is paying close attention to the emerging opportunity of content marketing, as evidenced by a recent report. According to a study by Demand Metric (2013), a renowned advisory firm for marketers, businesses are flocking to content marketing. The 2013 report claimed that 90% of companies market with Content and spend 25 - 50% of their marketing budget to do so. Further, the study showed 78% of Chief Marketing Officers saw content marketing as the wave of the future. It showed that

per dollar spent, content marketing generated about three times as many leads as traditional marketing and cost 62% less. Demand Metric stated that 80% of people surveyed said they enjoyed learning about a company through custom content; 90% found it useful; 60% sought out a product or brand after having read about it; and 70% preferred to learn about a company through an article as opposed to an ad. Pulizzi (2014) compared the use of content marketing to the way most of us use Google daily, stating, “It’s content that solves our problems, makes us laugh, or gives us the idea for our next journey” (p. 19). Gibbs (2012) explained in a mobility poll completed for TIME magazine the pervasive use of technology to stay informed: 84% of 5,000 of cell and smartphone users said they could not go a single day without their cell phones, 50% of Americans slept next to their phones, and 20% checked their phones every 10 minutes.

A benefit of content marketing is that the publishing process of Content is fast. It can be developed in an engaging, fun, and dynamic style or format. It can come from an authentic voice, such as a consumer, and it can be a relatively inexpensive means to share the latest and greatest about a brand. Vaynerchuk (2013) said, “This means you need to fold a social element into all of your creative, including traditional media and into all interactions with your customer... From now on, every platform should be treated as a social networking platform,” (p. 5) Marketers are wooed by the perceptions that on social media there is a huge audience waiting to be tapped. They want to engage with their customers. Content offers a two-way conversation, something the traditional advertising model does not. Pulizzi (2014) said, “Watching your customers interact with your brand makes social media and content marketing fun and exciting” (p. 42). He went on to share

that if businesses feel their efforts aren't getting results, they can change track easily without "a major investment of printing, ad space, and production costs" (p. 42).

Content can drive sales, build loyalty, and cut through the clutter of advertising with wit and agility. Playle (2014) stated that embedding humor into the brand in publications, social media, and other elements for recruitment is one of the greatest tools colleges can use to engage prospective students. Businesses are using blogs to offer quick, insightful, and down-to-earth information about their products. They share coupons on sites such as Groupon, Facebook, and Twitter. They run engaging contests, ask for feedback, and they listen. Gray (2014) explained, "Today's marketers — particularly the marketers you want working for your company — have to be strategists, technologists, content curators, designers, salespeople, and, of course, storytellers" (p. 2).

Content can make a difference. Experts stress that developing and deploying a content marketing strategy does matter. Overmyer (2014) offered a "sneak peek of the 2015 Content Marketing Benchmarks report, in which the Content Marketing Institute revealed that 54 percent of effective content marketers used a documented content strategy" (p. 1). Conversely, 44% of ineffective content marketers said they had no strategy. Overmyer concluded, "The results underscore ... without a strategy, content marketing efforts do not turn into results" (p. 1). Pulizzi (2014) agreed, stating, "To do content marketing successfully, you need: people to do it, roles and responsibilities, a schedule for tasks, and rules and guidelines" (p. 139).

Using content marketing to recruit and retain students. Colleges and university marketing and communication departments have the opportunity to leverage their Content, too. Many are experiencing a time of unique challenges, and some are

responding with a new approach to their recruitment efforts, with Content at the center. As study on the morphing world of marketing in higher education (Lipman Hearne 2010) revealed, “Interactive [marketing] is growing, and so is social media. Between FY08 and FY09, 55% of institutions surveyed allocated more to interactive; and 52% allocated more to social media” (p. 9). The report went on to show the choice to embrace social media and digital engagement in higher education was working, with “Moderate-to-Heavy investors in interactive more likely to report a positive impact on website hits, enrollment yield, and the quality of applicants” (p. 9).

As two studies (Levitz, 2013 and 2014) indicated, there was more competition in the marketplace, with the growth of online colleges and degree programs, there was increased scrutiny on the cost of higher education, and more than anything, there was a push for colleges and universities to prove their value.

Some schools may choose to move in the other direction, responding to that demand with a push to flood the marketplace with ads articulating their unique value. Whether it’s print, radio, television, billboards, or digital ads, Gray (2014) shared, some organizations are increasing what they are willing to invest on traditional marketing to be heard and remain top-of-mind to consumers. Others believe this approach is a mistake and a step backwards. Gray said, “Traditionally, marketing focused on showcasing three things: the problem, the solution, and the brand. These communications were overwhelmingly positive to shield potential buyers from any weaknesses. The new marketer’s job is to make sense of all the information online and simplify the [buyer’s] decision-making process” (p. 2).

Schools stepping away from increasing their paid advertising efforts may feel that, with an increasing amount of information available at consumers' fingertips, it is more difficult to compel prospective students to inquire or apply in response to a traditional ad; they may explore Content as a better way to attract and retain students. Vaynerchuk (2013) explained, "a great marketing story is one that sells stuff. It creates an emotion that makes consumers want to do what you ask them to do" (p. 11). Such stories are often more compelling, more genuine, and more engaging if they do not fall within a paid advertisement, the author stated.

Some educational organizations are investing more heavily in strategies and tactics that best reflect these values and goals, which are seemingly shared by their members and the greater society; they spend less on paid media messages that talk at consumers and not with them. As Scannel (2013) explained, people are looking for value, affordability, transparency, convenience, and authenticity. They want to trust and believe in their college or university. They want to see, hear, comment on, and share what students are achieving, what faculty are teaching, and what the college or universities stands for. Additionally, the researcher stated, they want to do all of that on their timeline and at their convenience.

Students want to engage in the conversation and not simply be spoken at. According to Stoller (2014), they want to see creativity, entertainment, connectivity, and humor where applicable. They want to know what the culture on campus is like and that their college or university has a personality. Content marketing is one way to demonstrate these attributes. As the author described it, "the best practices communications mix are conversations, reciprocity, customer service, community-driven content, and a



commitment to engagement-oriented missives. There is an increasing demand for an authentic view into educational organizations” (p. 1).

Some schools are beginning to provide these windows into their inner-workings through a shift from spending more on traditional marketing to investing in content marketing. As Pulizzi (2013) shared, Content, once un-measurable, now provides detailed metrics and analytics to prove its success. He explained that when done strategically and collaboratively, Content is timely, has purpose, and drives the audience to act and engage. While messages one finds in the mailbox, on the radio, or on television, are still valuable in raising general awareness for an organization, increasingly, it is the content marketing efforts that are becoming a strong influencer and distinguishing point. Why are some schools shifting to a stronger investment in content marketing? Lindbeck and Fodrey (2010) claimed it is an investment in a school’s community members. It is authentic. It is engaging and captivating. It meets prospective students where they are, which is online. These researchers explained, “By making a conscious effort to increase the use of newer technologies and integrating them into the admission process, we have the potential to offer information and features about our institutions in a way that the Millennial student prefers to consume it, making it easier for the student to connect with our institutions” (p. 15).

To accomplish this work, an investment in social media marketing appears to be an indicator of success. According to a study (Lipman Hearne, 2010), colleges and universities who invested heavily in deploying social media tactics, using admission view books, and convening institution-wide marketing committees also saw a positive impact on the quality of their applicants, and those schools also reported the work reflected

positively on the school's brand and positioning. Baworowsky (2013) summed it up in stating, "Should most of our outreach [to prospective students] continue to be focused on encouraging students to inquire through traditional means? The big, scary answer is no. We need to supplement traditional communication and funnel-building approaches with a more innovative approach that uses social media" (p. 1).

### Summary

As Baworowsky (2013), Fodrey and Lindbeck (2010), Pulizzi (2014), Vaynerchuk (2013), and other experts agree; Content builds community. When we look at a college's marketing and communication efforts, they should at their essence be about building community. After all, marketing messages are an invitation to belong to a group with a common mission, purpose, and set of values and goals. Vaynerchuk (2013) captured it well when he encouraged marketers to be sure to story-tell, create, animate, and optimize, but not to forget to listen, too.

The opportunities and successes identified in the business sector, and now emerging in higher education, indicate that further exploration into the use of content marketing is needed. This research will help to inform how and why college and university marketing, communications, and admissions teams should further explore and vet Content for new possibilities to achieve stronger results for their recruitment efforts.

Chapter Three summarizes how the research for this dissertation in the area of content marketing to impact the recruitment of undergraduate students was explored. The chapter outlines the research paradigm and methods, articulates the participant approach and selection, and shares the techniques and tools for gathering data, as well as the types of data collected.

## CHAPTER THREE

### Research Design and Methods

#### Introduction

This study examined how liberal arts colleges and universities in the Midwest used content marketing strategy to impact their enrollment goals in the recruitment of undergraduate students. The study also investigated the various aspects of Content that were used successfully, how the integration of the various elements worked fluidly together, how goals for each Content type were established, and how success in use of Content was measured. Further, the study explored how marketing, communications, and admission teams at liberal arts colleges and universities in the Midwest worked collaboratively to create and share Content effectively and efficiently. This study framed some best practices for colleges to follow in using content marketing to recruit undergraduate students.

#### Design

This is a mixed method study, based on interviews, surveys, and document analysis. The approval to go forward with research for this study, including the methods for gathering data, were approved by Hamline University's Human Subjects Committee. Nine marketing, communications, and admission professionals, one in each area from three private colleges in the Midwest, were the research subjects for this study; each of them agreed to be interviewed and surveyed to elicit their approach, process, and structure in developing and using content marketing to recruit undergraduate students. Document analysis of the three colleges' websites and four social media sites' content

was also used to determine how schools structured and prioritized their Content and how undergraduate students responded to each school's most prominent Content.

The study aimed to answer the following primary research question: "How do liberal arts colleges and universities in the Midwest use content marketing strategy to impact their enrollment goals in the recruitment of undergraduate students?" and the secondary questions: "How do marketing, communications, and admissions departments of these colleges or universities intersect, align, and collaborate in achieving their recruiting goals?" and "How effective is each content marketing tool in impacting the colleges' enrollment goals?"

The study's research included elements of Content and how colleges were currently using and measuring success of each of these Content types. It explored how Content was planned, executed, and maintained. It captured how colleges chose to staff the areas of marketing, communications, and admission with regard to the creation and dissemination of Content, as well as how roles of those personnel were determined in executing content marketing strategy.

The study did not focus specifically on admission numbers or on retention efforts; it was solely interested in how content marketing strategy impacted recruitment, as determined by the colleges selected for the study. The study would have quickly become too large with too many variables if it examined whether students applied, were accepted, and enrolled based on a particular element of Content. Likewise, the study would have grown and shifted significantly if it attempted to assess how content marketing could be used to retain students once they have inquired, applied, been accepted, enrolled, and then began attending college.

## Research Methods

Both qualitative and quantitative data were elicited to most accurately address the primary research question and two secondary research questions. Qualitative research was defined by Maxwell (2013) as a process that “does not begin from a predetermined starting point or proceed through a fixed sequence of steps, but involves interconnection and interaction among the different design components” (p. 3). A qualitative approach seeks the lived experience of participants. Quantitative research, as McMillan and Schumacher (2010) explained, “maximize objectivity by using numbers, statistics, structure, and control” (p. 21). Together, the two designs comprised a mixed method approach to gathering data for this study. McMillan and Schumacher (2010) claimed that using a mixed method research design “provides for a more comprehensive picture of what is being studied, emphasizing quantitative outcomes, as well as the process that influenced the outcomes” (p. 391). This study evaluated data surrounding the use of Content in higher education recruitment to determine whether Content was strategically crafted, organized, effective, and disseminated through collaborative efforts of marketing, communications, and admission departments at small private colleges in the Midwest. An interactive, mixed methods approach provided the opportunity for triangulation of data to confirm where processes and outcomes are aligned. Maxwell (2013) explained interactive approach in that “each of the components has implications for all of the other components rather than the components being in a linear, one-directional relationship with one another” (p. 7).

Interviews. In this study, the qualitative interviews provided the framework for how departments worked together at the various colleges, with personal observations, anecdotal references, and perceived attributes and challenges of each college's efforts in using Content to recruit undergraduate students. The quantitative data was drawn from the surveys and the document analysis. Its intention was to provide a foundation of Content to examine and to allow for connections and correlations between lived experiences by marketing, communications, and admissions professionals in using content marketing and the effectiveness of their Content, in terms of engagement by students. As Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) explained, "The qualitative research interview attempts to understand the world from the subjects' points of view, to unfold the meaning of their experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations" (p. 1). The interviews were approximately 30 minutes long each. They were recorded and transcribed. Coding was then applied to evoke commonalities, correlations, and trends across the three colleges.

Document Analysis. In this study, qualitative document analysis was used to determine effectiveness of content marketing tools, and effectiveness of types of Content used on each tool. Artifacts observed and studied include each college's official website, and four official social media accounts. The websites were examined for their placement and quantity of Content on key pages, as well as for the types of Content most readily shared. The social media sites were examined for type and frequency of Content displayed, as well as for reaction of users, in terms of the number of 'likes', 'shares', and 're-tweets' each garnered.

Surveys. In this study, the quantitative surveys, completed by a marketing, communications, and admission professional at each of the three colleges, informed which content marketing tools each school was using, how often those tools were utilized, and what type of Content was used most often to populate each of the tools. The surveys also helped to demonstrate how effective each tool was, as the interviewees were each asked to identify whether there were goals for engagement for each tool and type of Content and how each has Content type has performed. Additionally, the surveys focused on questions about structure and support within the departments, how efforts were supported through staff and monetary resources, and how teams worked together.

### Setting

Three private liberal arts undergraduate colleges in the Midwest provided the foundation for this study. Focusing on a particular region attempted to eliminate regional bias and preferences, such as cultural norms and differences that may have been present across multiple regions, from contributing to limitations in this study. By focusing on three undergraduate colleges in the Midwest, environmental factors, seasonal influences, and geographical differences were reduced, allowing for more opportunity to find commonalities. The colleges selected were in either the regional Midwestern universities or the regional liberal arts colleges segments of Carnegie classification, each had an undergraduate college, and each had strong similarities in their class profiles.

### Participants

The participants included one marketing professional who worked on efforts to support recruitment of undergraduates, one communications professional actively engaged in Content generation, and one admissions professional who was responsible for

helping to establish strategy. The professionals were selected based on their ability to offer strategic and tactical input, as each participant was required to have deep understanding, investment, and some hands-on experience in the execution of Content, as well as a willingness to participate in this study.

Each of the three colleges was first approached with a phone call, email, or in-person conversation to determine interest in involvement of the study. Administrators were informed there would be at least three but no more than four colleges involved in the study. In each case, the vice president, associate vice president, or person overseeing the marketing function for the college was provided a form to sign, giving consent for their team members and colleagues in the marketing, communications, and admission areas to participate in the study. Participants in the study also signed and returned consent forms. All participants and leadership at the three colleges were assured that their names and the identity of their colleges would not be disclosed in the study.

The colleges were labeled College A, College B, and College C, for purposes of the study to help ensure answers by participants were honest and that there was no fear of either retribution for blunt responses nor of revelation of competitive data that the colleges would not want being seen by their peer institutions. As McMillan and Schumacher (2010) explained, “Researchers have a dual responsibility: to protect the individuals’ confidences from other persons in the setting and to protect the informants from the general reading public” (p. 339).

#### Data Analysis Techniques

Pilot interviews and surveys were developed and tested, and the survey and interview questions were revised prior to data collection and analysis of data used in the



study. Data for the study was collected over the period of four weeks in the spring semester of 2015.

Participants in the quantitative survey aspect of this study answered a 25-question survey that was expected to take about 15 minutes to complete. Survey questions included multiple choice, open-ended, and questions measured on the Likert scale. Each participant was asked the same questions as other participants. Subjects had the ability to fill out the survey just once. Their answers were transcribed and transferred verbatim to Survey Monkey, an online survey tool, where the data cannot be manipulated and therefore offers an undisturbed, unedited view of how subjects responded to questions.

Participants in the interview aspect of the study were approached individually via email with a request for a 30-minute, in-person interview with the researcher. The interviews took place in each participant's place of work in a quiet, private setting, and interviews were recorded. Each participant was asked the same questions as other participants. Hand-written notes were also taken and follow-up clarifying questions were asked, where appropriate, to evoke additional information.

For the document analysis aspect of the study, the researcher examined each of the three colleges' websites, looking for types of Content, frequency and location of Content, and calls-to-action related to each Content type. Calls-to-action indicated instances where the Content suggested the visitor to the website could engage with the Content. An example would be if the Content said "click here to read more" or "click here to view video". The colleges' official websites were examined for their use of Content, demonstrating how testimonials, videos, storytelling, and engagement opportunities, such as sharing stories via social media, were constructed and where and

how they were placed on the sites. The college's social media accounts' basic analytics, such as number of fans, followers, subscribers, shares, likes, and retweets, were also a component of the study. They demonstrated effectiveness in engagement, integration of e-marketing tools, such as multiple social accounts and website together, and use of Content. Each site was reviewed for its depth, amount of Content, use and framing of Content, and visible metrics, such as number of visitors, number of comments by visitors, and responses by colleges to visitor comments.

### Limitations

This study is limited in several ways. Professionals at the three colleges studied were informed that their individual answers and the identity of their schools would be confidential in the study. However, as each school had some differences from the other two schools in size, structure, and use of content marketing, participants may have been hesitant to be too candid about how they felt their school was performing in regard to use of Content, for fear that their school could be identified by some of its characteristics and that they would not be putting their college or their staff in the best light.

Additionally, as much as the researcher strived for neutrality and objective evaluation, since the researcher was a member of the peer set of the colleges studied, and oversaw the content marketing function at her own college, some personal bias as to the weight, importance, or saliency of Content may have been inadvertently inserted into this study.

### Data Process and Results

Chapter Four and Chapter Five describe the implementation of the study, the challenges encountered, the information gathered, and the results the data produced. They

demonstrate the commonalities between the approaches by the three colleges, as well as the differences. They offer insight into the structures and roles of staff, the value of how teams collaborated, and the investment of each school in the production and dissemination of Content. In Chapter Five, the researcher reflects upon the overall study, how it compared to the literature review for the dissertation, and what conclusions were derived from the results. Ultimately, the chapters include data that helps to shape best practices for marketing, communications, and enrollment personnel to follow in the use of Content for recruitment of undergraduate students.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Results

The primary research question compelling this study, based on the examination of marketing practices by three undergraduate colleges in the Midwest, was: “How do liberal arts colleges and universities in the Midwest use content marketing strategy to impact their enrollment goals in the recruitment of undergraduate students?” Two secondary questions that assist in framing this study were: “How do marketing, communications, and admissions departments of these colleges or universities intersect, align, and collaborate in achieving their recruitment goals?” and “How effective is each content marketing tool in impacting the colleges’ enrollment goals?”

The research was approached through three separate data gathering efforts. This included surveys with a total of nine personnel in admission, marketing, and communications who work at three undergraduate colleges in the Midwest, individual interviews with nine personnel in admission, marketing, and communications at the same colleges, and document analysis of the three colleges’ websites and primary social media sites. Using these three approaches for gathering information, Chapter Four reveals the study’s discoveries in relation to the primary question examining content marketing strategy, and the two secondary questions, regarding collaboration between colleagues and effectiveness of content marketing tools. It also offers insight into the commitment of both financial and personnel resources toward content marketing strategy at each school. Chapter Four summarizes the findings and supports the conclusions articulated in Chapter Five.

## Surveys

The first phase of the research was conducted through a 25-question survey, based on feedback from a pilot survey, feedback from a pilot interview, and information elicited from the literature review. Gathering data through this survey offered insight into how three Midwestern undergraduate colleges approached content marketing in the recruitment of undergraduate students; how the colleges invested in Content for recruitment purposes; whether they collaborated; how key decisions were made regarding strategy; how staff defined and measured success; and whether there were underlying frustrations that staff felt impeded their overall efforts of recruitment through Content. The survey questions are available in the Appendix of this study.

Three personnel from each of three colleges—including a marketing, an admission, and a communications staff member—were invited to participate in the survey, and all nine completed it. Of those staff members, four survey respondents were women, and five respondents were men. The colleges that participated in the study were in either the regional Midwestern universities or the regional Midwestern liberal arts colleges segments of Carnegie classification, and each had an undergraduate college. The Colleges are referred to as College A, College B, and College C within this study. Eight of nine personnel at the three colleges described their college as tuition-dependent.

Commonalities. The three colleges were consistent with one another in their reported use of the following Content types for recruitment of undergraduate students: video, web feature stories, social media outreach, testimonials and photos, as shown in Table 1. All surveyed reported their college used YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook for recruitment of undergraduate students. All but one person, of the nine surveyed, reported

their college used Instagram, for this purpose, as well. As Table 2 reveals, when asked which types of Content were used most frequently on their college's official social media sites to engage prospective undergraduate students, six of nine agreed it was photos. One said videos, one said web feature stories, and one said testimonials.

When asked to *define* success of content marketing efforts at their college, eight of nine responded success could be defined as stronger enrollment numbers, seven of nine also agreed increased website traffic was an indicator of success, as seen in Table 3. Five felt success could be defined by the number of videos or social media stories posted by the college, and five said by the number of videos watched or social media posts shared or liked by visitors.

When asked how success was *measured* in content marketing efforts, Table 4 shows that eight of nine said they used metrics embedded in the website to track how Content drives traffic, seven said they used metrics embedded in social media tools to measure results, and six said they used trial and error and then discussed what worked and what did not. Three of nine said they surveyed their incoming class to see what worked. When questioned about whether their college's content marketing efforts contribute directly to inquiry generation of prospective undergraduate students, five of nine said yes that they believe it does but that their tracking is not specific enough to define why that is or in what ways it influences the numbers, as is shown in Table 5.

One hundred percent of respondents reported they felt they had strong collaboration with other departments in deployment of Content to engage and recruit undergraduate students, as shown in Table 6. Seven of nine, as Table 7 shows, believed they had a marketing and communications plan for the same purpose. They also felt they

had verbal understanding across departments of strategy and goals for each e-tool, including social media site and type of content uses, as seen in Table 8. When asked whether marketing, communications, and admissions leadership understands, values, and endorses the college's use of Content, Table 9 shows that 100% strongly agreed or agreed that the communications leadership did; seven of nine strongly agreed or agreed that the marketing leadership did, and five of nine strongly agreed or agreed that the admission leadership did. When asked what type of position they would add to their college to support undergraduate recruitment efforts; five of nine responded they would add a Content creator.

TABLE 1: Content Used to Engage  
What types of Content does your college use to engage prospective undergraduate students?

|           | Admissions Representative   | Marketing Representative  | Communications Representative   |
|-----------|---|---|---|
| College A | Video, Web feature stories, Podcasts, Social media outreach, Photos, Testimonials                                 | Video, Web feature stories, Social media outreach, Photos, Testimonials, Content embedded in paid media           | Video, Web feature stories, Social media outreach, Photos, Testimonials, Content embedded in paid media |
| College B | Video, Web feature stories, Social media outreach, Photos, Testimonials, Content embedded in paid media           | Video, Web feature stories, Social media outreach, Photos, Testimonials   | Video, Web feature stories, Social media outreach, Photos, Testimonials                                 |
| College C | Video, Web feature stories, Podcasts, Social media outreach, Photos, Testimonials, Content embedded in paid media | Video, Web feature stories, Podcasts, Social media outreach, Photos, Testimonials, Content embedded in paid media | Video, Web feature stories, Social media outreach, Photos, Testimonials, Content embedded in paid media |

TABLE 2: Content Used Most on Social Sites

What type of Content is used most often on your college's social media sites to engage prospective undergraduate students?

|           | Admissions Representative | Marketing Representative | Communications Representative |
|-----------|---------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| College A | Testimonials              | Web feature stories      | Photos                        |
| College B | Photos                    | Photos                   | Photos                        |
| College C | Photos                    | Video                    | Photos                        |

TABLE 3: Success Defined

How do you define success in your content marketing efforts at your college?

|           | Admissions Representative                              | Marketing Representative   | Communications Representative   |
|-----------|--|--|---|
| College A | Stronger enrollment numbers                            | Increased website traffic, Stronger enrollment numbers, Number of stories created and shared by college, Number of stories shared, liked or commented on by site users | Increased website traffic, Stronger enrollment numbers, Number of stories created and shared by college, Number of stories shared, liked or commented |
| College B | Increased website traffic, Stronger enrollment numbers | Increased website traffic, Number of stories created and shared by college, Number of stories shared, liked or commented   | Stronger enrollment numbers, Number of stories created and shared by college, Number of stories shared, liked or commented                            |
| College C | Increased website traffic, Stronger enrollment numbers | Increased website traffic, Stronger enrollment numbers, Number of stories shared, liked or commented   | Increased website traffic, Stronger enrollment numbers, Number of stories created and shared by college   |

TABLE 4: Success Measured

How do you measure success in your content marketing efforts at your college?

|           | Admissions Representative | Marketing Representative | Communications Representative |
|-----------|---------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| College A | Use social media          | Use website metrics,     | Use website metrics,          |



|           |   |  |  |
|-----------|---|--|--|
|           | metrics   | Use social media metrics   | Use social media metrics, Trial and error                      |
| College B | Survey incoming class, Use website metrics, Use social media metrics, Trial and error | Use website metrics, Use social media metrics, Trial and error       | Use website metrics, Use social media metrics, Trial and error |
| College C | Survey incoming class, Use website metrics, Trial and error                           | Survey incoming class, Use website metrics, Use social media metrics | Use website metrics, Trial and error                           |

TABLE 5: Content Marketing Impact on Inquiries

Do you college's content marketing efforts contribute directly to inquiry generation of prospective undergraduate students?

|           | Admissions Representative | Marketing Representative | Communications Representative |
|-----------|---------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| College A | Yes                       | Yes                      | Yes                           |
| College B | Yes                       | Yes                      | Yes                           |
| College C | Yes                       | Yes                      | Yes                           |

TABLE 6: Collaboration Across Departments

Do you have strong collaboration with other departments in deployment of Content to engage and recruit undergraduate students?

|           | Admissions Representative | Marketing Representative | Communications Representative |
|-----------|---------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| College A | Yes                       | Yes                      | Yes                           |
| College B | Yes                       | Yes                      | Yes                           |
| College C | Yes                       | Yes                      | Yes                           |

TABLE 7: Marketing Plans

Do you have a marketing plan in place to guide our use of Content to engage and recruit undergraduate students?

|           | Admissions Representative | Marketing Representative | Communications Representative |
|-----------|---------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| College A | No                        | Yes                      | Yes                           |
| College B | No                        | Yes                      | Yes                           |
| College C | Yes                       | Yes                      | Yes                           |

TABLE 8: Verbal Understanding Across Departments

Do you have verbal understanding across departments to guide our use of Content to engage and recruit undergraduate students?

|           | Admissions Representative | Marketing Representative | Communications Representative |
|-----------|---------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| College A | Yes                       | Yes                      | Yes                           |
| College B | Yes                       | Yes                      | Yes                           |
| College C | Yes                       | No                       | Yes                           |

TABLE 9: Leadership Supporting Use of Content

Do you strongly agree, agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree or disagree that your marketing, communication, and admission department leadership understand and endorse the use of content marketing at your college?

|           | Admissions Representative                | Marketing Representative  | Communications Representative   |
|-----------|--|---|---|
| College A | Strongly agree for all three departments | Strongly agree for Communication department, Somewhat agree for Marketing and Admission departments | Strongly agree for Communication department, Somewhat agree for Marketing and Admission departments |
| College B | Agree for all three departments          | Strongly agree for Marketing and Communication departments, Somewhat agree for Admission department | Strongly agree for all three departments  |
| College C | Strongly agree for all three departments | Agree for all three departments   | Strongly agree for Marketing and Communication departments, Somewhat agree for Admission            |

Differences. The three colleges differed somewhat in their reported use of the following Content types for recruitment of undergraduate students: podcasts and Content

embedded in paid advertising. When asked which types of Content were used most frequently on their college's official website to engage prospective undergraduate students, Table 10 shows that just four of nine agreed web feature stories were the most frequently used Content types. Three said it was photos, one said videos, and one said testimonials.

Answers varied significantly by college, and among colleagues at the same school, when addressing the level of financial resources the departments committed to Content development, including the cost of e-tools, systems, programs, and staff time. Table 11 reveals that College A's three responses differed, with the lowest level of financial resources at 21-30% and the highest at 61-70%. College B's three responses included two reports of 21-30% and one of 41-50%. College C's respondents reported 21-30%, 31-40%, and one person responded they did not have that information.

To the question of what percent of the departments' staff time were committed to Content development, the answers again varied significantly by college and were also not answered consistently by those at each individual college. Table 12 shows that College A's three responses included 11-25%, 26-40%, and 51-75%. College B's answers included one response of 11-25% and two of 51-75%. College C's responses were 41-50%, 51-75%, and more than 75%.

To the question of how many hours they would say were spent by marketing, communications, and admissions team members using social media to engage prospective undergraduate students, the answers varied significantly by college, and they were not answered consistently by those at each individual college. Table 13 shows College A's respondents answered 3-5 hours, 6-10 hours, and 26-40 hours. College B's

respondents answered 6-10 hours, 11-25 hours, and 26-40 hours. College C's answers included 3-5 hours, 6-10 hours, and 11-25 hours. The inconsistency within each individual college in the responses regarding financial and personnel resources used for content marketing depict a lack of communication and understanding among colleagues at each college about the level of resources the college invests in content marketing.

TABLE 10: Content Used Most on Website

What type of Content is used most often on your college's official website to engage prospective undergraduate students?

|           | Admissions Representative | Marketing Representative | Communications Representative |
|-----------|---------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| College A | Testimonials              | Web feature stories      | Photos                        |
| College B | Photos                    | Videos                   | Photos                        |
| College C | Web feature stories       | Web feature stories      | Web feature stories           |

TABLE 11: Financial Resources

What percent of your college's financial resources would you say are spent on Content development and execution, including the cost of e-tools, systems, programs, and staff time to engage prospective undergraduate students?

|           | Admissions Representative | Marketing Representative | Communications Representative |
|-----------|---------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| College A | 21-30%                    | 11-20%                   | 31-40%                        |
| College B | 21-30%                    | 41-50%                   | 21-30%                        |
| College C | 21-30%                    | 31-40%                   | I don't have that information |

TABLE 12: Staff Resources

What percent of your college's staff resources, in terms of total staff positions, would you say are spent on content development and execution to engage prospective undergraduate students?

|           | Admissions Representative | Marketing Representative | Communications Representative |
|-----------|---------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| College A | 11-25%                    | 26-40%                   | 51-75%                        |
| College B | 11-25%                    | 51-75%                   | 51-75%                        |
| College C | More than 75%             | 51-75%                   | 41-50%                        |

TABLE 13: Hours Spent Weekly on Content

How many hours each week would you say are spent by marketing, communications, and admissions team members using social media to engage prospective undergraduate students?

|           | Admissions Representative | Marketing Representative | Communications Representative |
|-----------|---------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| College A | 3-5 hours                 | 6-10 hours               | 26-40 hours                   |
| College B | 6-10 hours                | 11-25 hours              | 26-40 hours                   |
| College C | 3-5 hours                 | 11-25 hours              | 6-10 hours                    |

Three of nine strongly agreed there was a clear plan for developing and implementing content marketing strategy to recruit undergraduate students, as shown in Table 14. Three more agreed, two somewhat agreed, and one disagreed. Just two of nine surveyed reported they had written strategies for each e-tool used by their college to guide their use of content marketing to engage and recruit undergraduate students, as shown in Table 15. To the question of whether roles for creating and disseminating Content are clearly defined, Table 16 shows zero of nine respondents strongly agreed that they were clearly defined. Six agreed they are defined, and three somewhat agreed they are defined.

To the question of whether roles and processes for creating and disseminating Content are clearly understood and accepted by all three departments—marketing, communications, and admission—the answers varied considerably, as shown in Table 17. One strongly agreed they are, two agreed they are, three somewhat agreed, and three disagreed. When asked what type of position they would add to their college to support undergraduate recruitment efforts, five said a Content creator, one of nine responded they would add an admission counselor, two said they would add a marketer, and one said

other. Again, the findings revealed there is inconsistency in the understood approach of content marketing, as well as the desired approach and investment in such efforts by those surveyed.

TABLE 14: Clear Plan for Developing and Executing Content

Do you strongly agree, agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree or disagree that at your college you have a clear plan for developing and executing content marketing strategy to engage prospective undergraduate students?

|           | Admissions Representative | Marketing Representative | Communications Representative |
|-----------|---------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| College A | Agree                     | Somewhat agree           | Somewhat agree                |
| College B | Disagree                  | Agree                    | Strongly agree                |
| College C | Strongly agree            | Agree                    | Strongly agree                |

TABLE 15: Written Strategies for Each E-tool

Do you have written strategies for each e-tool, including each social media site and type of Content at your college to guide the use of Content to engage and recruit undergraduate students?

|           | Admissions Representative | Marketing Representative | Communications Representative |
|-----------|---------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| College A | No                        | Yes                      | No                            |
| College B | No                        | No                       | Yes                           |
| College C | No                        | No                       | No                            |

TABLE 16: Roles Defined

Do you strongly agree, agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree or disagree that at your college roles for creating and disseminating content marketing are clearly defined?

|           | Admissions Representative | Marketing Representative | Communications Representative |
|-----------|---------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| College A | Agree                     | Somewhat agree           | Somewhat agree                |
| College B | Agree                     | Agree                    | Agree                         |
| College C | Somewhat agree            | Agree                    | Agree                         |

TABLE 17: Roles and Processes Understood and Accepted

Do you strongly agree, agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree or disagree that at your college roles and processes for creating and disseminating content marketing are clearly understood and accepted by the marketing, admissions, and communications

departments?

|           | Admissions Representative | Marketing Representative | Communications Representative |
|-----------|---------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| College A | Agree                     | Somewhat agree           | Disagree                      |
| College B | Somewhat agree            | Agree                    | Agree                         |
| College C | Strongly agree            | Agree                    | Somewhat agree                |

Surveys Summary. The past section, the survey phase of the study's research, focused on the types of Content used, the ways teams engaged with each other, the plans that guided how colleges use Content, and the financial and staff investment colleges make in using Content for recruitment of undergraduate students. Its findings show that there were common Content types valued most at all colleges, there was incongruence in understanding regarding the time and resources colleges invest in their Content creation and dissemination, and there were challenges across all colleges with role clarity and strategy-setting with regard to Content. The next section focuses more specifically on how teams collaborated and worked together in the use of Content for recruitment, what challenges and successes colleges experienced with regard to their use of Content, and how results were measured.

### Interviews

This phase of the research was conducted through nine individual interviews, with questions based on feedback from pilot interviews, pilot surveys, and information elicited from the literature review. The intent of the interviews was to get a broader understanding of how staff felt about their colleges' content marketing strategy in support of undergraduate recruitment. The questions were intended to evoke information regarding structure, approach, measurement, collaboration, challenge, and success. The

interviews allowed the representatives to define the use of Content in their own terms and to express agreement or frustration with various aspects of their college's content marketing efforts. The interview questions are available in the Appendix of this study.

The same three personnel from each of three colleges—including a marketing, an admission, and a communications staff member—who were invited to participate in surveys, were also invited to participate in the individual interviews, and all accepted and completed interviews for this study. The interviews were conducted on-site in the spring of 2015, at each college, in each staff member's office or workplace. All interviewees were given the same definition of content marketing for purposes of this study, and they were asked the same 19 questions. The interviews were transcribed and coded in the categories of structure, approach, measurement, collaboration, challenge, and success. College A's three team members will be referred to in this document as AA for College A Admissions, AM for College A Marketing, and AC for College A Communications. The same format will be used for College B and College C, with the use of BA, BM, BC, CA, CM, and CC.

Structure. This section addresses questions asked about structure of the departments in relations to content marketing efforts. This includes how teams approached content marketing, how often they met, who set the school's strategy, how Content was determined, whether there were guidelines, and what role student workers played in creation of Content. All interviewees had much to share about *the roles* team members in various departments should play in how Content is determined and shared with prospective undergraduate students and who set the strategy. College A felt that roles were somewhat clear, and all three representatives expressed comfort with the



process of working together; with admissions taking a lead on what should be in the print pieces; marketing and communications staff taking a lead on how to use social, video, and testimonials to support web-based recruitment efforts; the three teams working collaboratively when the mediums needed to combine for particular efforts. College A's three representatives all felt they had a strong, collaborative structure in place for the shared content marketing work that supported undergraduate recruitment.

We have weekly meetings to determine our approach and how to shift it, depending on where we're at with other efforts and where we are in the admissions cycle. We are a great group together. We have a lot of fun, and I think that is key to building trust and to valuing each other's voices. We all have expertise in some areas, and putting all of that together, pooling our talents makes us stronger. We don't always agree, but we tend to go with majority rules, and that has served us well (AA).

College B's marketing and communications representatives talked about the considerable collaboration that occurred between their areas and the admissions team. College B's admission representative felt that while there was collaboration, there were definite challenges.

For understandable reasons and budgets, they [marketing and communications staff] are short-staffed, so I guess we have one or two point people we need to work with on their staff. Also, production timelines are an issue. We have to be really thoughtful about what pieces we want created and what timeline. Like, don't put too many things over there or you're going to get none of them right. Pick the two you want done correctly (BA).

The College B marketing representative said collaboration was the key to the working relationship. “It’s a collaboration between admission and our team. Which side of that equation is skewed more heavily depends on the type of Content, with more push and pull on print pieces” explained BM. The communications representative from College B also felt the collaboration in establishing strategy was strong.

While maybe admissions has the final say on strategy, I guess, they’re not in the Content day to day like we are. So we have significant input in creating Content, but we also don’t just make stuff up that we think might work for admissions. We sit down, and we determine together what Content is needed (BC).

College C’s three representatives revealed a mixed understanding of how Content was determined and shared with prospective students and who set the strategy. Both the admissions and marketing representatives of College C saw strategy building as a collaborative process, and they agreed there should be many people and voices engaged in the process. “Marketing and enrollment management work together to form the strategy, and everyone is engaged. Our teams get together and talk about how everything will be put into action” (CM). However, the college’s communications representative felt it was clear that the admissions team made the decisions and that marketing and communications staff were there to support the admission team and other revenue-generating aspects of the university, such as fundraising.

Our main job is to support the work admissions and advancement do. We are really here to help admissions achieve their goals, especially between March and June when you get the most deposits. If they say jump, you do (CC).

When asked *whether the admissions team created any of its Content*, College A was consistent in stating no and that communications took the lead on creating Content, presently. The College A admissions representative felt admissions had a strong rein on driving which Content should be created, but this representative did not express anything regarding whether the admissions team should be creating the actual Content themselves. The marketing representative from College A felt that admissions would be more successful if it better understood the e-tools at their disposal. “They could do a lot more. I think they are the feet on the ground, and the more they can understand about creating and sharing content, the better results they’ll have” (AM).

The communications representative agreed that the admissions team had a ways to go in deploying Content to support their efforts.

I don’t know they really get how Content can best support them. There is a growing understanding, but they have kind of stuck with how things have been done in the past. Social media is changing the landscape, and we need to evolve with that. We haven’t changed as fast as our primary target audience has (AC). College B’s admissions person said the admission team ran student blogs and emails to prospective students and that they had final say in print pieces, but that’s it for involvement in Content. College B’s marketing person reiterated that point, specifically addressing why the admission department did not run admission-focused social media accounts. “They don’t have Facebook or Twitter. We’ve pushed back on having a separate admissions account. We figure who the heck will follow that. Best not to divide audiences” (BM). The communications representative for that college explained the communication team managed all print, social, video, and testimonial content, and when

admissions needed Content they worked side-by-side with the admissions team to get it done, but communications staff did the work of creating it.

College C's three representatives were in agreement that the college had an admissions-focused Twitter account, Facebook page, and Instagram page, all supported by the admissions team. Web stories, videos, and print pieces were created by the communications staff at College C.

*As for how departments worked together, how often they met, and who led the meetings*, all three colleges had different approaches. At College A, the school's three representatives were in agreement that the marketing person served as the convener of cross-team weekly meetings, set the agenda for those meetings, and managed the collaborative projects in process. They also all mentioned there was a clear and efficient project management database in place to help guide projects through all stages, including review of various versions of projects, and that a project manager kept all projects on track and on budget. All three expressed they were happy with the relationship between the teams, overall, and that they respected and valued each other's voices and ideas.

I think it's great to have the camaraderie, and some of our best and silliest ideas have come out of there, and we realize hey we're on the same page, even if we come at things from different perspectives. It's built a team atmosphere, and I think that keeps things moving forward (AA).

At College B, the meetings were project-based and included those who were critical to get the project done. There was not a standing meeting.

We have account executives in our area, and we serve as an account lead for an area, like admissions. That person then assembles our work team on special projects. That's a shift for us. We used to be more in our specific silos (BM).

The College B communications representative said the leads of admission and communications spoke regularly, but they joined formal meetings with the teams when necessary.

We have an agency model here. It's getting there, and it's still gelling. I would like the team leads meeting more regularly with their clients (in admissions and other areas) and not reacting to something. I want them at the front end.

Sometimes we do it well, and sometimes we do not (BC).

At College C, the marketing lead attended regular meetings with the admissions staff and then carried information regarding trends or shifts in strategy back more broadly to the marketing and communications staff members. College C also had marketing partners for each area, such as admissions. The marketing partner for the admission team met regularly with admission staff to work on the publications and other Content efforts.

*Where exactly Content fit into an overall marketing plan* was unclear for at least one of the three admissions representatives.

Content marketing is important, and I am guessing it's a good chunk of the university's marketing plan, but I've never seen a written plan. As far as inquiry goes, I think a lot of that is still generated by us purchasing lists of names. Of course, once you get the names, you need to work them, and Content plays a role in that. You have to go after students and engage them with Content. It's vitally important (AA).

The College B's admission representative did not mention concern about not seeing or working from a written plan, but rather spoke easily about where Content fit into the overall marketing plan for the school.

The creation of Content is central to our college's marketing efforts. It's central to our admission efforts. We're really responsible for input on generating the stuff [Content] or framing it out so it can be created, for admissions, because we understand the voice. Our marketing and communications staff may create it, but we say who's going to deliver it and who's going to create it (BA).

College C's admissions person also felt there was a clear split in responsibilities between the admissions department and marketing and communications.

It's really just understood that our office handles the 18-year-old recruiting efforts and takes the lead on that planning and the marketing VP handles more institutional marketing. And sometimes we agree and sometimes we disagree, but I think marketing understands Content needs to be more focused on admissions efforts in general, given the demographics (CA).

As to whether each college had *guidelines for using each social media site*, College A's marketing and communication representatives said yes, there was a written list of guidelines. However, College A's admissions representative did not know of any plan and expressed concern that this was absent. College B's marketing person said there was a draft of guidelines in process at present. The communications person said there were generally understood principles, and its admission person said that only a few college staff were allowed to post to social, so there was no need for general guidelines to distribute to other areas.

*Student workers played a strong role* in all three schools' Content development, according to all nine interviewees. College A's admission person said the admission team had students who created a post-card series, sent holiday cards, and posted to the school's admission-focused Twitter and Facebook pages, which were not the college's primary Twitter and Facebook pages (AA). College A's communications person also mentioned the admission team had students who posted Content to social sites (AC) and said students on the communications team posted a great deal of Content, as the team ran the area like a newsroom or "PR machine" (AC). The communications person explained students created videos, shot photos, wrote web stories, and created the posts for social media, although staff actually put up the posts.

It's a great fit to have them storytelling. They know the audience so well, and they are real students telling the stories so the stories are authentic. That means a lot to prospective students (AC).

At College B, the admission person expressed the strongest enthusiasm of the three representatives at that college, for students creating Content, although all three representatives were supportive and pleased with the role students played.

This has been great. I think we're learning to treat it as a pre-professional opportunity—to put them in a position as Content generators responsible to a brand is a great learning experience, and it yields quality Content for us (BA).

Students at College B created social media posts, wrote, designed, and shot photos and videos.

At College C, students were valued greatly as Content contributors; they did a lot of writing, they took photos, and shot videos. Most of the student workers reported to the marketing or communications leaders.

The findings in this area suggest that collaboration was strongly desired by all representatives interviewed, and that more than half felt they still had considerable work to do to improve the relationships between departments and to clarify how and why they are approaching collaboration in their established model and whether some discussion about best practices and making some adjustments with input of all team members might improve their results.

Approach. This section addresses how the schools used Content tools and how value was placed on various aspects of Content. When asked the initial questions of *how their college used content marketing to recruit prospective undergraduate students and which types of Content were effective*, all stated that their college used Content in a variety of ways, with web at the forefront of most efforts. The three admissions representatives, however, were the only ones who also stated that print pieces, including a view book, were also primary ways they reached prospective students through content marketing. “We have a fulfillment line of print pieces including a view book that we send in the mail. We also create pieces leading up to events and for events, such as mailers, event programs, and evaluation cards” explained College A’s admission representative. College B and C’s answers were similar to A’s. “We do an awful lot of print. We still have the big chunky view book. We have core communications program that rolls for students, and it’s almost entirely print” (BA).



*Storytelling.* Storytelling emerged as a response in seven of nine interviews as a key component in their successful efforts to engage students through content marketing, with student-led blogs, videos, and testimonials getting the highest praise. College A's communications representative summed up the school's approach. "We used video, photos with captions, and student and faculty stories. Undergrads believe other students before they'd believe anything we'd say, so we use student voices wherever possible," AC shared. College B's marketing and representative also explained how storytelling was a key way to reach the intended audience.

Undergrads have a short attention span, and in the video world they've grown up in, they want pictures and photos and they're not going to read, so we've worked hard to put together stories, videos, and photos in a way that is engaging for our audience (BM).

College C's communications person summed up the approach at that college for the role storytelling plays in recruitment.

We try to use testimonials to show students and parents a strong return on investment. We also highlight student and faculty collaboration through our storytelling, showing prospective students they will have the opportunity to develop relationships with faculty and engage in research at the undergraduate level (CC).

*Social media.* Social media also ranked highly in the minds of six of those interviewed as an effective means of engaging prospective students. All three representatives at College A listed social media as the most effective way to reach

undergrads, but all listed differing reasons as to why. The admissions representative was focused on general engagement once the student was to the inquiry level.

Most effective in engaging new students is social media. I couldn't say it creates the inquiry. I would assume it doesn't, but we don't have tracking to determine that, really, but once they become an inquiry, the social media definitely keeps them engaging throughout the recruitment process. It meets them where they are at, with the technology they are so savvy at, and it satisfies that instantaneous culture they've been raised in (AA).

The marketing representative from College A spoke about the relevancy of the delivery mode of the Content.

Social media outreach is key. I think anything we do digitally now is engaging students greater than in the past, and going forward I believe that will be a continued trend. The target market is so tied to social and digital. We find it's one of the best ways to get them to engage (AM).

The communications person from College A talked about the ability to engage with the student pre-inquiry and the value of monitoring online traffic.

Social listening is also such an important and effective aspect of our social media approach to engagement. What are people saying about our school? What questions do they have? What information do they need? Showing our school has a small, responsive community shows we are welcoming and they then reach out to ask even more questions. Undergrads have grown up in a time where they are used to having their own presence out there for the world and to having their voices validated. They expect to have their comments and questions

acknowledged and valued. It makes them feel special, like an individual, and it makes them feel as though we think they are important (AC).

Two of the three representatives at College B named social media as one of the most effective tools to engage prospective students. The admissions representative said print remained the strongest engagement tool, far more valuable for the school's target audience than digital content. College B's marketing representative said web features and video on the college website and shared on social media were among the most effective tools for engaging prospective students. The College B communications person said video or anything shared digitally, including via social media, was becoming increasingly important but web testimonials were among the most valued approaches.

College C's representatives were not in agreement on whether social media played a key role as an effective recruitment strategy. The marketing and communications representatives felt it was highly important, and the admissions representative did not list it as most effective. "Social media, particularly the use of video testimonials on social media, has been the most effective. We try to show how students succeed, and this shows the ROI and why our college is a clear choice," said CM. The admissions representative from College C felt the website was the most effective tool. "Websites are clearly the most important. To have academic stories and have them focused for prospective students and parents and to have the navigation clear and easy—you need that first and foremost," said CA.

*Advertising.* With regard to advertising, in particular outdoor advertising, such as billboards, bus stops, and skyway ads, and how the schools invested in this marketing strategy, one did little advertising, one did no advertising, and one did considerable

advertising. Of the two schools that did advertise, only College A representatives felt they used Content in their paid media, or paid advertising, and none of the representatives at that school felt their school did it well. “We’ve done some testimonial-based paid advertising, but it’s not really focused on recruitment. It seems more about brand awareness, with no call to action, really,” AA said. College A’s marketing person echoed that viewpoint.

We don’t mix our Content into advertising much. It’s more of a brand initiative, and links on the ads drive people back to stories of students and grads and how their education helped get them where they are now. They are nice stories, but I’m not sure we’re using them in the most effective way (AM).

College A’s communications person also expressed the challenges that paid media presents.

“We have used content in advertising to a point. It can be problematic, since ads are small and you can only use so many words, so you have to choose [words] carefully,” said AC.

The findings in this section reflect the value colleges placed on storytelling in their content marketing efforts, as well as the focus on digital efforts to best meet the target market where they were—online. The results also suggest there was some disconnect between communications, marketing, and admissions in terms of the value of print collateral and whether it was still as needed as it has been in years past to recruit undergraduate students.

Measurement. How to quantify the investment in content marketing strategy was a strong theme among those interviewed. The value a school placed on the role that

Content played in the recruitment of undergraduate students and how that value was attained was of significant interest and consternation to the majority of the nine representatives.

Six of nine interviewees felt there was no clearly stated *desired goal or outcome for using each individual type of Content*, although all agreed that the general goals of engagement and recruitment were at the heart of their college's content marketing efforts. College A's admissions representative said that while it's clear Content helped prospective students to remain engaged, there were no clear goals by Content type. College A's communications and marketing reps reflected on general goals.

The goal is always to drive enrollment and raise visibility. We want people to engage and respond. We want them to read, react, and ask questions. We don't always have a specific goal or even a specific call to action for our posts and stories, but we inform, invite, and try to get people to engage with us (AC).

For College B, the admission representative said there were no established goals for using each type of Content. Its marketing and communications representatives felt differently.

We've identified what seem to be the strengths of each channel of delivery and which kinds of Content seem to play out best in each space. That's as close as we get to specific goals per content type, I'd say (BM).

At College C, the admission representative also said there were no goals set for each Content type. The marketing and communications representative agreed there were no specific outcomes set per Content type, but that it was by design. "We have a strategic

plan but I'm not sure you could pull goals for each Content type out of that. We want to be nimble enough to bob and weave as we need to," said BC.

The *measurement of Content effectiveness* and how to place value on Content were of some concern to all nine interviewees. College A's three representatives all spoke about tracking within social media and web analytics but also addressed the challenge in how those numbers related to the enrollment of their incoming class.

Anecdotes about how things are working still go a long way right now. We can look at things with built-in tracking on them, such as social media- with likes and shares and comments—but where in the process people make the decision to come to our college and whether a specific post has a direct impact on that (AA).

College A's marketing representative agreed that establishing a value for Content efforts was a challenge.

It's getting easier to track admissions-specific Content through the analytics in our targeted emails and even in our digital ads. We're working to connect all of those systems so we know what brought someone into the website and once they got there, how they found their way to apply. It's harder to explain where interaction outside of that process fits in, although we know continued engagement is important. But where do social media posts and videos not experienced in the admission path from when a prospective student receives a view book or targeted email to when they apply fit in? It's hard to say (AM).

College A's communications representative also spoke about the tracking system in place and how it had its gaps in effectiveness.

Content is measurable, but we don't always have a clean way of assessing a dollar value on how our social and web Content compels inquiries. We track a lot of analytics, but there are a number of reasons people eventually apply. A lot of touch points. It's hard to track a prospective student from a web story to application (AC).

College B's admission representative expressed that while print pieces were not easy to track, they were still probably the elements that had the most impact and that one could reasonably draw conclusions about the effect they had on admission numbers, whereas social media or a video's impact was more elusive. The marketing representative also shared that there were deficiencies in tracking inquiries by Content type.

We're just not that finely tuned. You can measure click-throughs, shares, etc., but we don't have the kind of tracking mechanism that would follow every point of contact and trace whether it resulted in an application or inquiry (BM).

College C's admission representative expressed concern about not having as much access to the Google analytics numbers, which are tracked on the college's website, as would be desirable to make good decisions regarding Content.

We can measure success of some but not all of our content areas. Print pieces are tougher, but they can have QR codes for tracking. Social sites have analytics built in. The website has metrics, which if we drill down could learn a lot more about user traffic and what brings them all the way to application, but access to that information is limited here (CA).

College C's marketing and communications representatives agreed that some aspects of Content were trackable, but some data was not. "Some [Content types] are just

easier to measure and quantify value for than others. We can measure click throughs and traffic pathways but inquiry to enrollment- no,” said CM.

The findings suggest that all representatives desired a system or process for measuring their college’s investment in the use of Content for recruitment and that all felt as though they had access to fragmented information at best, regarding a way to truly assess value of their content marketing efforts. Few solutions were provided by the representatives in how to improve their measurement efforts; none expressed they had the knowledgeable or were offered access to the right information in the area of measurement to improve their current process for placing value on their school’s use of Content.

Collaboration. Strategy setting and teamwork surrounding Content were explored in this section of the study. When asked *who made a decision about whether a new social media site should be explored* for the college, College A’s marketing and communications representatives felt the communications team should and did take the lead.

We don’t jump into anything just to do it. We have limited staff time and while we do generate a lot of Content, it’s time-consuming to share it well across social sites, so we look at number of users on the site, possibility of longevity of the platform, who the main audience is, and whether it’s a site that we are able to maintain. We can’t be effective everywhere with everything (AC).

College A’s admission person stated the admission counselors would have the best insight into whether a new social site has legs.

They are my foot soldiers. They are on the ground and talking to students and they would know best. I think a focus group of students would be a good



approach, too. But, as far as actually launching a new social media site for the school and filling it with Content, we'd do that in partnership with our communications office, because without their support it would not be executed very well (AA).

College B's communications and marketing representatives felt it was team decision, which would involve staff from marketing and communications, though no mention of admissions' input was made.

We have made decisions not to pursue independent admission-focused channels on social media. Do we suggest new channels? It's like the demilitarized zone. We are not in control of the ones we have as a college now. We do have a class page or group on Facebook I guess that is for prospective students, but students control it. We don't. I don't think we trust them [marketing and communications staff] to do the admissions side of Content and they shouldn't trust us to do all of it (BA).

College C's three representatives all agreed that taking on any new social media site would need to be a collaborative decision between all key team members in the areas of marketing, communications, and admission.

The findings reflect some disconnect in understanding the potential value of input from all three areas—marketing, communications, and admissions—when determining social media strategy. Control and decision-making were raised as concerning points.

Challenges. Many *resource challenges* were raised by all nine interviewees. None felt they were properly resourced across all areas—marketing, communications, and admissions—at their college. Two people, one in admissions and one in

communications, both at College B, felt their own areas were well-sourced but that the other teams were not. All others felt their own team was understaffed, underfunded, or could be greatly improved with the addition of a new position to support some aspect of Content creation, marketing support, or with the addition of a liaison to work between departments.

When asked about what they would change if they could about the way their college approached content marketing, the answers varied. College A's admission person expressed the need for more updated digital efforts. "I see great websites and online view books, and I think we'd love to do that, but it's so cost-prohibitive and staff-prohibitive," said AA. College A's communications person wished for a more holistic approach to using Content.

Successful content marketing is very dependent on everyone being engaged and aware of its value. Whether it's finding stories, having everyone participate on social media, or using Content in targeted emails, ads, etc., the machine of Content needs to be continuously fed and then pushed out to be consumed. We need both more understanding from some areas on how to effectively use Content on their own, and more resources to create it—that means more videographers, more writers (AC).

College A's marketing person said clarification was the biggest need. "We need understanding across the teams of how we want to use Content and how we staff and clarify roles for that. That's maybe the toughest thing," said AM. College B's admission representative expressed a desire for better communications between teams. "It would be

great for us to have better relationships between silos. We're missing the ambassador figure. The ones we have are too partisan to one side or the other," said BA.

College B's communications and marketing representatives wished there was budget to spend on experimenting more with social media and content. "The Holy Grail is for something to go viral, but that's very hard to engineer, and you can't do it without risk-taking," said BM.

College C's admission person thought that some of the marketing budget could be refocused rather than being used on traditional marketing efforts. The marketing and communications representatives both expressed desire for more budget and more staff.

You can't tell all the stories you need to tell. You can't please all faculty about every project they do or book they write because you have to prioritize, and it's hard to maintain good relationships on campus because you have to tell them no all the time (CC).

In explaining any *frustrations* they might have had with how things worked with content marketing at their college, College A's answers varied, with the admission person worried about not having an online view book and the school not knowing yet which print pieces should stay and which could be abandoned, and the marketing and communications representatives frustrated with the lack of the use of Content in some areas, particularly in traditional marketing efforts.

There isn't as much value seen in the creation and use of video and social and feature Content as there should be across top leadership. I think it's hard when the academic leadership, the deans, and even our own VP don't truly understand how

we could use content marketing. We spend too much on ads that are brand-based and don't get us very far and not nearly enough on Content (AM).

At College B, the admission person expressed a desire for continued growth in relationship building between admission, marketing, and communication team members.

Relationships are increasingly important between silos. I'd say critical. We can't generate the Content. We don't know the printers, and we don't have designers and writers on staff. They, in turn, can't predict what the kids want, even though they think they can. Just like we think we can tell them what's good design—and we can't. We are cordial and cooperative but sometimes we clash (BA).

College B's marketing person expressed frustration that the academic side of the house was difficult to manage sometimes, as there was not enough time to chase down every request for a story to be written, and that many of those stories requested would not appeal to prospective students, anyway. College B's communications person felt that as the marketing and communications teams have reorganized to better suit the needs and ability to respond to requests from admissions, there was hope that could happen now on the admission side of the college, as well. The desire was for admissions to consider reworking its model and reimagining its print versus digital Content needs.

College C's admissions person was most concerned about metrics and not having good access to website data. "It's important to know what Content prospective students are responding to so we know what's resonating. They [web team members] don't do regular reports for us," said CA. College C's communications and marketing staff members both expressed concern about the lack of personnel resources focused on social media.

The findings revealed that most of the challenges expressed were focused on either a perceived lack of resources for effective content marketing or lack of communication between departments.

Success. This section focuses on how content marketing success was defined and measured by the three schools. When asked about *successful content marketing efforts* at their college, and in particular, the elements present that helped to make those efforts so successful, there were several factors that were repeated across interviewees. Elements that at least one representative from each college mentioned helped to make an effort successful included the following: a clear understanding of the objective or goal, clarification of roles for the project, set timeline for creation and dissemination of the project, a project lead who pushes it forward, having the right resources invested in terms of time and money, taking a risk, and having fun.

College A's three representatives shared success with a social media campaign focused on prospective students at a student visit event and a photo on Instagram that went viral to some degree.

Social media's ability to reach thousands of people in a matter of minutes or seconds is astounding. It's all free. And, students trust each other, so when a friend shares a photo we've posted with another friend, they trust that Content. They trust each other more than they trust us. So getting social media to work for you the right way, which doesn't always happen by sometimes lands just right, is amazing (AA).

College B's representatives were pleased with a creative email they distributed to prospective students that they felt uniquely represented the college and that was received well by prospective students, as well as a refreshed web presence.

College C's representatives were all pleased with one of their online engagement options, which is so unique, it will not be mentioned in this study, as it might unintentionally reveal College C's identity. The online effort has driven an enormous level of prospective students their way. "It's one of the best in the country, and we did it so early that we're way ahead of the game on it" (CA).

Interviews Summary. The past section, the interview phase of the study's research, focused strongly on how teams engaged with each other and how responsibilities were divided. Its findings show the disconnect that can exist between departments in their understanding and approach to using, measuring, and valuing Content in their recruitment of undergraduate students. It also demonstrated where Content use can be strong and valuable and where interviewees perceived that additional resources could be useful in improving content marketing efforts. The next section focuses on the specific ways in which the colleges' most prominent digital tools used Content.

### Document Analysis

The final phase of the research was conducted through the analysis of the three colleges' websites and primary social media sites, including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. The websites were examined for their frequency, placement, and use of Content on pages most focused on undergraduate recruitment, including the websites' main homepage, the about the college section, the undergraduate admission

homepage, and the life at the college section. The social media sites were examined over a three-month period of time in the spring of 2015.

The Facebook sites were examined for the Content subjects of the sites' posts, the percent of posts receiving comments, the average number of post likes, the average number of post shares, and the assumed intent of the post—whether that be recruitment, retention, engagement, or reputation-building. The Twitter sites were examined for their posts' Content subjects, the format of the post, the average number of posts tagged as a favorite by visitors, the average number of re-tweeted post Content, and the assumed intent of the Content posted—including recruitment, retention, engagement, and reputation-building. The Instagram sites were examined for the subject of the Content shared, the type of Content shared, the average number of likes posts received, the average number of comments posts received, and the assumed intent of the post—whether it be recruitment, retention, engagement, or reputation-building. The YouTube channels of the three colleges were reviewed for their Content subjects, number of views, number of favorites, length of video, and assumed intent of each video—including recruitment, retention, engagement, and reputation-building.

Websites. In examining the three schools' websites, the use of Content was prominent on the homepage of each, with more than 50% of the space on the page dedicated to Content. All used photos as the primary Content type on their websites, two of three prioritized testimonials in the form of web feature stories and testimonial videos, and two provided links to their social media sites from their homepage. Two of the three sites had more than 75% of their homepage dedicated to prospective student audience. College A focused Content on the homepage on event listings and on video. College A

and C featured news stories as a prominent feature of the homepage. College C also prioritized alumni news and athletics feature stories. All three colleges used photos of iconic campus locations or images, and two of three used photos of students in their homepage Content.

On the main undergraduate admission page for each of the three sites, photos again dominated space. All three colleges had easy links to learning more about the college through testimonials and photo galleries. Two listed their social sites geared at undergraduate students for easy links, and two used video as a component of this page to engage prospective undergraduate students.

All three schools had a page directly off their homepage that was a snapshot of the college, whether they were labeled ‘About College A’, ‘Why College A’, or something similar. College A’s page contained links to a photo tour, map, fast facts about the college, and testimonial blogs. College B’s page also featured photos, a fast facts section, a history section, and links to photo gallery where there was a host of photos of campus buildings and grounds, a map, and testimonials. College C’s page was heavy with photos of people and campus buildings and grounds.

All three sites had a page that showcased what it might be like to be a student at the school. For at least one, the ‘about’ or ‘why’ page served this purpose. At least one college had a separate page, with testimonial quotes and photos of students, and links to the college’s social media sites.

All three colleges’ websites had a mobile-friendly version of their website that mirrored their desktop websites, demonstrating that all three colleges recognized the value of their mobile audience.



Facebook. All three colleges had active and robust Facebook pages, with close to daily posts and a variety of Content types shared, including photos, videos, text, events, and testimonials. The three schools had roughly the same size audience (number of likes) on their overall Facebook pages, with numbers in the thousands.

For College A, 95% of posts included a photo or video, the average number of likes per post was 121, the average number of comments per post was 1.5, and the average number of shares per post was two. Nearly all posts were focused on a prospective student audience with an assumed intent of recruitment and engagement. Content included testimonials, in the form of photos with captions or videos of successful students and accomplished faculty, iconic images of campus that were easily shared, and questions that asked for opinions of site visitors.

For College B, 92% of posts included a photo, the average number of likes for posts was 96, the average number of comments was less than one, and the average number of shares was one. The majority of the posts appeared focused on the prospective undergraduate audience with the intent of recruitment and engagement. Many were photos of iconic or recognizable locations on campus, easily shared.

For College C, 90% of posts included photos, the average number of likes per post was 80, the average number of comments per post was 1.2, and the average number of shares per post was two. It was unclear who the primary audience was for the college's Facebook page, as posts appeared to be intended for a broad audience, with many focused on brand awareness or general reputation-building, some focused on reconnecting with alumni, and some on prospective undergraduate students.

Twitter. For all three colleges, the social media micro-blogging tool, Twitter, which allows users to post 140-character texts, including links to video or photos, was of greater focus than Facebook in the recruitment of undergraduate students. It reflected nearly double the number of posts the colleges had on Facebook, and most of three colleges' posts on Twitter focused on the prospective student audience. All three colleges had followers numbering in the thousands, and all posted once or multiple times daily.

Sixty-five percent of College A's Twitter posts included a link to a photo or video as well as a link to a full text story. The average number of times a visitor marked a Twitter post as a favorite was two, and the average number of times someone re-tweeted, or shared, a Twitter post of College A's was 1.5. Fifty percent of College A's posts were focused on reputation building, 35% on engagement, and 48% on recruitment, with many posts serving two or more purposes.

Eighty-two percent of College B's posts included a link to a photo or video or a link to a full text story. The average number of times posts received a favorite indicator from a visitor was three, and the average number of times posts were retweeted was one. Sixty-one percent of College B's posts were focused on reputation building, 51% were on recruitment, and 35% were on engagement, again with several posts serving more than one purpose.

Thirty-five percent of College C's Twitter posts included a photo, video, or link to a full story. The average number of times the college's Twitter posts were marked as a favorite was five, and the average number of times they were retweeted was three. Seventy-one percent of College C's posts were focused on reputation-building, 42% on

engagement, and 25% on recruitment, again with some posts serving two or more purposes.

Instagram. The photo and video-sharing social media site Instagram, was a newer tool for all three schools, as all had begun their social sites on Instagram in the past year. Two of the colleges had begun investing considerable time on Instagram, with multiple posts daily and an intended target audience being prospective undergraduate students. One of the three had significantly fewer posts and did not seem to have a direction intended for this e-tool at present, as no key audience appeared to have been targeted by the few posts existing on the site.

College A had a heavy presence on Instagram, garnering an average of 102 likes and 1.4 comments per post. The focus of the posts were 90% on recruitment, 80% on retention, and 8% on reputation-building, as some posts served more than one purpose.

College B's Instagram site averaged 158 likes and less than one comment per post. The focus on the posts were 92% on recruitment, 85% on retention, and 45% on reputation-building, with some posts serving more than one purpose.

YouTube. The three colleges all had very different approaches to using YouTube, a video-sharing site. Although all three had significant viewership of past videos, well over 100,000 apiece, there appeared to be a shift in strategy this spring from the past for at least one of the colleges. One college focused Content posted in the spring of 2015 on the undergraduate audience, garnering an average of more than 200 views per video, and with the length of video averaging four minutes and 15 seconds. Another college focused most of its YouTube content during that time period on events on campus, with the average video more than 45 minutes long. It was unclear who the intended audience was

for these video posts. The third college had few video posts in a three month time period and therefore there was too little data to process.

Document Analysis Summary. The document analysis sought to determine the approach, frequency, and engagement success of the Content posted on the social media sites, to better understand how each college framed its Content. It also sought to determine whether the information extracted from the interviews and surveys aligned with what was found on the colleges' most prominent online marketing tools. The findings suggest that the micro-blogging social media site, Twitter, was the strongest social media tool used to engage prospective undergraduate students at all three colleges, with Instagram a rising second at two of the three colleges. The use of YouTube varied dramatically by college, though the use of video was strong at all three. At two of the colleges, there were some videos used for recruitment, but they were hosted directly on the college's website rather than on YouTube. At the third school, there were more videos, and they were hosted both on the website and on YouTube. The college's websites all prioritized Content, with photos being the primary Content type used to engage prospective students.

### Summary of Results

According to nine college representatives interviewed and surveyed at the schools, Content was heavily invested in and used by representatives in the admission, communication and marketing departments to attract, engage, and recruit undergraduate students at the three Midwestern colleges studied. This was also verified by a document analysis of the colleges' social media sites and websites. This work was done

collaboratively, according to the interviews and surveys, with mixed results; specific examples of those efforts follow.

Structure. The surveys and interviews for this study evoked several data points regarding structure at the three colleges for content marketing strategy. All nine interview and survey respondents offered insights on the following: defining and clarifying roles, improving staffing for content marketing, determining how strategy was set, determining how processes were organized, and establishing how final decisions about Content creation were made.

Role clarity was a key issue raised in the surveys and the interviews. The surveys revealed that none of the nine college representatives strongly agreed that there were clearly defined roles surrounding content marketing strategy; six agreed there were, and three somewhat agreed. The interviews verified this; at least five of the representatives expressed some concern about an aspect of role clarity.

All nine expressed that additional staff would be beneficial to their college's success in the use of content marketing for recruitment of undergraduate students. In the surveys, five of nine responded that the most critical new position to support their content marketing efforts would be a Content contributor, such as a videographer, photographer, or writer. This was consistent in the interviews. Concerns about limited personnel resources, in support of Content use for recruitment, led seven of nine respondents to say they thought their own department needed additional resources to support their Content efforts. The other two stated that another department needed additional support.

Additionally, when asked about frustrations and challenges, at least five of the

representatives mentioned limited budget or staff as a factor in why they weren't using Content as much as they could for recruitment.

One key finding was the inconsistency at each of the three colleges when representatives were surveyed regarding the financial and staff resources dedicated to content marketing efforts. There were also inconsistencies regarding how many hours representatives thought were spent creating and sharing Content.

College A's survey responses to the level of financial resources used for content marketing ranged from 11-20% to 31-40%. College B's survey responses ranged from 21-30% to 41-50%. College C's respondents had three different answers: one stated 21-30%; one said 31-40%; and one said they did not know. Regarding the investment of staff time committed to Content development, the answers varied significantly by college and were also not answered consistently by representatives at any of the schools. College A's three responses ranged from 11-25% to 51-75%. College B's answers included one response of 11-25% and two of 51-75%. College C's responses ranged from 41-40% to more than 75%.

Regarding the number of hours spent by marketing, communications, and admissions team members using social media to engage prospective undergraduate students, the answers varied significantly by college, and they were not answered consistently at any of the schools. College A's answers ranged from 3-5 hours to 26-40 hours. College B's respondents answers ranged from 6-10 hours to 26-40 hours. College C's answers included 3-5 hours, 6-10 hours, and 11-25 hours. This disconnection of understanding was reiterated in the interviews; six of the nine respondents raised

concerns about the miscommunication between departments regarding Content and the lack of agreement about how Content should be valued or used at their college.

Two of the three schools mentioned the benefit of project management systems to help organize the creation and direction of building Content, as well as how projects were tracked and approved; these school representatives believed the systems were helpful to understanding what admission needed to be supported through Content.

Eight of nine surveyed said their college had a marketing plan that included content marketing strategy. Eight of nine also agreed they had a verbal understanding between departments of how to use each of the Content types for recruitment of prospective undergraduate students. When a similar question regarding a marketing plan was asked in the interviews, the respondents verified the survey data, with all but one stating they understood that Content was a key aspect of the college's marketing plan. However, when asked about guidelines for using each Content type, two at College A said there were guidelines, and one said there were not. At College B, one said there were guidelines; another said the guidelines were not formal but they were understood across departments; and one said there was no need for any guidelines, since only a few people created and posted Content.

At College C, two said there were guidelines, and one said there were not any guidelines. Whether there were or were not written guidelines, the document analysis of the three colleges' social media sites indicated there was consistency in the type of Content and frequency of Content posted to the three schools' Facebook and Twitter accounts.

Approaches. Each one of the college representatives expressed in their interviews that they felt they had somewhat of a grasp on the importance of content marketing strategy, and all agreed that their colleges used multi-pronged approaches with Content to recruit students. All expressed in the interviews that they valued website Content as a key recruitment tool, and the three admission representatives equally stressed the critical role that print publications played in recruitment. This directly contradicted the assumptions made in the literature review that printed publications had fallen away as an important recruitment approach. The document analysis showed that all three schools invested in digital content, as well, with a steady stream of videos and photos shared on at least some of their social sites.

All shared in both the surveys and interviews that they felt there was an opportunity to do even more with Content toward their college's recruitment goals; however, during the interviews, one person at each college expressed their college was still finding its way with how to best use Content. This was anticipated in this study's literature review. Not one person at the three colleges expressed in their interviews that they had a full understanding of the process for integrating Content into current recruiting practices by admissions, nor did anyone state that admissions had made Content use an organized part of the recruitment process. The surveys supported this finding, as well, as six of nine respondents explained they made decisions about Content by trial and error. This finding also supported research in the literature review, indicating there was confusion and staff members were overwhelmed in trying to understand where Content fit into the recruitment cycle.



Social media emerged as a valuable, though according to the interviews, somewhat untapped and not fully utilized, tool for recruitment and engagement. Six of nine respondents said social media had been effective for recruitment, but they had various reasons among them, including: it had been used for ongoing engagement with students who have already applied; it was a strong way to monitor online traffic and field questions from would-be prospective students; or it was a direct way to recruit new students. Resources, including staff time, were raised as a negative with regard to social media in the interviews. The respondents stated that it took considerable time and effort to create and post compelling Content; this limited the ability to do as much as the respondents would have liked. Everyone interviewed mentioned social media's value in terms of its reach, its speed, and its ability to meet students where they were in a way that traditional admission or marketing practices did not.

All college representatives expressed in the interviews a slow and steady approach to undertaking new social media sites; all mentioned in their own words that they guarded what they felt were limited staff time and financial resources. At all three colleges, the interviews revealed that stepping into a new social site required collaborative action across departments. In the interviews, all respondents lauded social media as a fast, direct, and engaging way to reach their target audience of prospective undergraduate students. Several respondents expressed that with the right 'voice' established on a social media site, the tool was very effective in keeping students engaged. As evidenced in the document analysis, Twitter emerged as the e-tool of choice, by the three colleges, for engaging prospective undergraduate students; at all three colleges, the most time and energy were invested in Twitter compared to each school's

other social sites, with nearly double the number of posts on Twitter than any schools' other sites. The document analysis also showed that Facebook, while a constant at each college, received considerably less attention at two of the three colleges than Twitter. Instagram was an emerging and rising social tool for at least two of the three schools. According to staff at those colleges, it was the online tool that suited their target markets best. These findings fell contrary to Levitz (2013) assessment that social media was the least used and least effective way to engage students.

Measurement. Another key finding was that measurement of Content's usefulness in the recruitment of undergraduate students had considerable significance according to all those interviewed. At least one representative at each college revealed in the interview that their college had Google analytics set up on their websites so they could track how their web data was being accessed and so they could improve the user experience for prospective students and other audiences. All representatives said they valued social media analytics and the demographics that could be gleaned from the sites' users to help the colleges understand who was viewing their sites and Content. Seven of nine surveyed said they defined success, regarding the use of Content, as increased web traffic; five of nine said they defined it by the number of videos created and shared or the number of posts their college puts up on a social site; and five of nine said they defined it by the number of videos watched or the number of posts shared or liked.

In the survey, eight of nine participants said their college used metrics on their website to measure their content marketing results; seven said they used social media metrics; six said trial and error; and three said they surveyed incoming students to ask them what worked best for engaging them. While one representative expressed it was

easy to measure Content, because of all of the analytics embedded in social media and in Google analytics for the website, the eight others expressed there were complications associated with directly assigning credit to a social media post or a video for recruiting a student. Eight of nine also spoke about the ways prospective students engaged with a school throughout the recruitment process. They explained that while Content was important, it was not everything, and measuring Content's effectiveness was challenging. Another eight of nine interviewed shared that while a college could measure the likes, shares, comments, or followers of a particular site or social media effort, it was much more difficult to understand the role, in the full process of inquiry to application, that particular site or post played.

All nine interviewees expressed their desire to keep learning and to keep trying to understand the best ways to measure value of Content, because they felt Content had a positive impact on recruitment.

Collaboration. All nine surveyed said they had strong collaboration with other departments. However, none 'strongly agreed' that roles and responsibilities were clearly defined in creating and sharing Content. Likewise, in the interviews, all respondents expressed support and respect for their colleagues in other departments, but they also shared their confusion and frustration about the specific roles team members across departments played in the process of using content marketing.

Two representatives expressed there was a great deal of Content generated that was going to waste and not being used for admissions purposes, because of a lack of understanding by leadership and by their admissions team counterparts about the best

ways to use Content. All expressed in their interviews that there was a lack of communication between various teams, with some departments operating as silos.

All nine expressed in their interviews respect and empathy for their colleagues in other departments, in terms of understanding the pressures and challenges facing them; and at times, each one spoke favorably about the collaboration between staff in marketing, communications, and admissions at their colleges. The majority of those interviewed and surveyed felt the responsibility for setting content marketing strategy was not clearly defined at their college, and two of nine expressed that it was a challenge that leadership at their college did not understand the value of content marketing.

Challenges. Resources, or lack thereof, were expressed as an overwhelming concern to all nine subjects interviewed and surveyed. This finding is consistent with what was anticipated in the literature review. The need to create and share Content constantly has left many entities wondering how to resource both the staff and financial requirements for steadily feeding their website and social sites with new Content.

None of the three sets of team members' answers reflected a clear, consistent understanding of the amount of time the three departments at their college dedicated to creating and disseminating Content. Only two of nine, both at the same college, were in agreement about the amount of financial resources and staff resources their college dedicated to building and sharing Content.

Eight of nine interviewed spoke about limited resources in achieving their recruitment goals through Content marketing efforts. Examples of this included not having a liaison between the teams, not having enough Content creators, and not having enough time to properly vet and approve all Content to ensure it would represent the

college well. Of the nine representatives, seven said in the survey they felt it was their area that needed an additional position, with the majority of those positions being Content contributors. Two, however, a communications representative and an admissions representative from the same college, said it was their colleague's department, not their own, that needed additional help.

The surveys revealed there was disagreement at two of the colleges about whether the college had a clear plan for developing Content. Three of the nine surveyed, all at the same college, strongly agreed there was a clear plan. At the other two colleges, three agreed; two somewhat agreed; and one disagreed. Again, roles were raised by all nine as a challenge. Zero of nine surveyed strongly agreed that roles regarding the creation and use of Content for recruitment at their college were clearly defined. Decision-making, lack of access to key data owned by other departments, and control of the use of Content use emerged as divisive issues during the interviews at two of the three schools.

Typos on print and written web pieces and production timelines were raised in the interviews as one of the biggest Content challenges for one of the colleges. Staffing models and recent reorganizations at that college were also concerning points for all three representatives, according to their interviews. At another college, it was shared in the interview that the lack of digital Content assets, such as an online view book, frustrated one of its three representatives.

Successes. Success was defined in varying ways. By eight of nine surveyed, it was defined as the achievement of stronger enrollment numbers, by seven of nine as increased web traffic, by five of nine as a high number of videos or posts created and shared, and by five as a high number of videos watched or posts shared or liked. Success

was defined by two of the nine interviewed as a video or social media post that had gone viral. Elements consistent in the interviews, when representatives spoke about successful Content projects, included the following: having a clear understanding of the objective or goal, having clarification of roles for the project including a project lead to push things forward, knowing the key audience well, having a set timeline for creation and implementation, having adequate staff and financial resources (which could include video and editing equipment), taking a risk, and having fun.

Final thoughts. This study resulted in significant findings to form recommendations regarding the challenges and opportunities for using Content to successfully engage and recruit undergraduate students; thus, these findings have both educational and research purposes, as well as marketing and recruitment purposes. Chapter Five expands on the data shared in this chapter, reflects on the findings, makes connections to the research, discusses the implications, and identifies the limitations of this study. It also offers recommendations, including suggested best practices for using Content to engage and recruit prospective undergraduate students.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Interpretations, Discussion, and Conclusions

This chapter reveals my conclusions and interpretations of data gathered from nine college staff members in the areas of marketing, communications, and admissions regarding their college's approach, structure, investment in, and measurement of the results of content marketing to recruit undergraduate students. The conclusions I drew from the data gathered are discussed within the context of the primary and secondary research questions for this study. Included are implications drawn from the data, limitations of the study, ways the findings will be communicated to various audiences, recommendations for future research, recommendations for best practices in using content marketing strategy in the recruitment of undergraduate students, and my personal reflections on the experience of leading this study.

#### Reflections on Major Findings

The primary question for this research study was “How do liberal arts college and universities in the Midwest use content marketing strategy to impact their enrollment goals in the recruitment of undergraduate students?” The two secondary questions for this study were “How do marketing, communications, and admissions departments of colleges and universities intersect, align, and collaborate in achieving recruitment goals?” and “How effective is each content marketing tool in impacting the colleges' enrollment goals?”

With regard to *how the colleges used content marketing strategy to impact their recruitment of undergraduate students*, several data points emerged to inform my

conclusions for this question. At the colleges studied, the admissions, marketing, and communications departments all recognized Content as a valuable tool in reaching and engaging with prospective undergraduate students. All used a multi-pronged approach with multiple tools used, such as videos, blogs, social media sites, testimonials, and web feature stories to reach prospective students. This is consistent with Bacon's (2012) assessment in the literature review that social media and other online Content are critical tools for engagement. There was a lack of clarity on how the various types of Content could be used together and how they should be inserted into the recruitment process. Most efforts surrounding Content at the three schools were fragmented, done in isolation of other Content efforts, which means there was not an efficient use of the Content developed.

While the study attempted to assess how schools used content marketing strategy, as in, how all of the Content elements were integrated and used together, that wasn't possible, because at all three schools, most of the Content was created and used in fragmented efforts in support of undergraduate admission. There were no clear overall content marketing strategy at any of the three colleges. All representatives interviewed and surveyed felt they could be doing more with Content, and not one representative claimed to have a full understanding of the process for integrating Content into current recruiting practices or making it an organized part of the recruitment process. There was confusion regarding the colleges' marketing and communications plans, where exactly Content fit within those plans, and whether the Content was being used effectively. This supported a point made by Overmyer (2014), who stated that the majority of *effective* content marketers use a documented content strategy.



Most critically, at all three schools there was little understanding of shared goals or intended outcomes regarding how Content strategy was being implemented, if it was, and what results were expected from the use of Content. Without establishing shared goals, it was impossible for team members to agree that their college was achieving its goals. This finding was consistent with a statement by Power (2012) about the need for teamwork across an organization's functional units to improve performance and that only by collaborating could positive strides occur.

Social media was lauded as a cost-effective, efficient, and powerful tool in reaching the target market; however, there was a lack of agreement on its ability to compel students to do little more than to like or share a social media post. This reiterated research from Daun-Barnett, Behrend, and Bezek (2014) revealing that most schools have not yet determined how to harness the potential of social media for recruitment purposes.

Twitter emerged as the e-tool of choice for engaging and interacting with prospective undergraduate students, with Instagram as an emerging and rising social tool, as well, for engagement. However, the medium was not being fully utilized at any of the three colleges, according to the interviews and surveys. There were various reasons it was valued, with some representatives recognizing it could be used for ongoing engagement with students who have already applied, some labeling it as a strong way to monitor online traffic and field questions from would-be prospective students, and some seeing it as a direct way to recruit new students. Regardless of the confusion surrounding the use of social media, the findings disagreed with the assessment of Levitz (2013) that social

networking was among the least used and least effective strategies for student engagement.

Financial and staff resource constraints significantly hampered efforts at all three colleges, as did the lack of understanding at each college regarding the level of financial investment, staff time spent on Content, and hours spent developing and sharing Content. Without a clear understanding across teams of the financial and personnel resource investment in the use of Content, it was more challenging for team members to recognize the value they should place on Content in their recruitment practices. Budgets and staff were stretched tightly in their pursuit of creating and sharing all of the Content needed to reach their enrollment goals. All expressed that additional staff would be beneficial to their college's success in the use of Content for recruitment of undergraduate students. Content creators were the most desired additional roles at all three schools.

All nine respondents offered strong insights which helped me to draw conclusions regarding *how their college's marketing, communications, and admissions departments intersected, aligned, and collaborated in achieving recruitment goals*. Collaboration was lauded by all on the surface, but when a deeper discussion ensued on the topic, all revealed there were challenges to collaborating with their counterparts in marketing, admission, and/or communications.

Role clarity was a confusion point, with most expressing there were gaps in understanding of each departments' pressures, goals, and needs. This finding agreed with what Pulizzi (2014) said, "to do content marketing successfully, you need: people to do it, roles and responsibilities, a schedule for tasks, and rules and guidelines" (p. 139).

There was also a lack of clarity on who set strategy and how decisions about Content creation were made at each school.

The fact that a great deal of the Content generated by schools was not well-used for recruitment emerged as an issue that was divisive for one college's staff, with both marketing and communications representatives raising the concern. This finding was consistent with the Content Marketing Institute (2014) in the literature review; it revealed that nearly 75% of nonprofits surveyed felt that while they were using Content, they were not using it well. Communication and marketing staff members also expressed there was a lack of understanding by leadership and that their admissions team counterparts did not understand or agree with their ideas for the best recruitment uses for Content. This finding reiterated a point made by Scott (2007) who said, "To move Content to the rightful place in driving a successful marketing and PR strategy, Content must be the single most important component. That focus can be tough for many people" (p. 106). Communication gaps were apparent between marketing, communication, and admission functions at all three schools, and several of the staff teams were either admittedly or by their work practices demonstrated that they operated as silos. Respect and empathy were apparent, between departments, which boded well for possible improvements in communications and collaboration at schools.

Through the surveys, interviews, and document analysis, data was gathered to help me determine *how effective each content marketing tool was in impacting the colleges' enrollment goals.*

Photos were the top Content type used by the schools, with web features, videos, testimonials, and social media all ranking high, as well. The micro-blogging site Twitter

emerged as the most heavily used social media type to engage and recruit prospective undergraduate students. The photo-sharing site Instagram was a rising second. Both social media sites offered students quick information and visual stimulus. Most posts on both sites for each college included photos or videos and easy access to engage—by asking questions, posting comments, sharing, liking, or marking a post as a favorite. This finding aligned with a statement from Baworowsky (2013), “We can maximize the value of social media as a recruitment tool and better serve students if we engage students outside the bounds of traditional inquiry communications” (p. 2).

While success in content marketing was defined by the representatives as achieving stronger enrollment numbers, increasing web traffic, and by counting the number of videos watched or posts shared or liked, it was not clear how each tool had performed at the schools. It was also unclear whether the tools impacted enrollment goals in any measureable way.

Measurement of engagement and user traffic on social sites and websites to determine how users navigated the sites and how Content impacted enrollment was of considerable significance and concern to all interviewed. While social media analytics and Google analytics on college websites were named as ways to measure how Content is performing, most said they either did not have access to all of the information they needed or did not know how to connect the data points to determine directly how each Content type or piece was impacting enrollment. This finding disagreed with Pulizzi (2014) who shared that one of the greatest strengths of Content is that it could be easily measured, and if a particular Content strategy is not working, it could be easily changed and measured again for success. Complications were raised in how to best assign credit to

a social media post or a video for recruiting a student. It was unclear how staff could understand which interactions were most impactful when recruiting prospective students and how to separate one engagement with Content from the many other engagements prospective students had with their college before applying and enrolling.

There were six elements consistently mentioned by representatives regarding successful Content projects. They were: a clear understanding of the project objective or goal, clarification of roles for the project, a clear understanding of the key audience and its needs and preferences, a set timeline for creation and implementation of the project, adequate staff and financial resources, the flexibility to take a risk, and the concept of having fun while working on the project. These findings align directly with Power (2012) who stated collaboration is the key to improving performance and experiencing success and that this can only be achieved by all employees understanding common goals, establishing clear roles, and enjoying their work together to achieve strong results.

### Implications

Higher education organizations could benefit from this study by considering how they invest in financial and personnel resources to support Content generation and implementation for undergraduate student recruitment. They may decide to increase their use of Content, and thus their investment in its production and dissemination, to better achieve their goals. The study could be used to help colleges realign their marketing, communications, and admissions staffing model and role responsibilities to better meet the needs of their prospective students. Further, it may help colleges to determine which social media tools to select for best results with limited resources.

These educational organizations can also learn from the three colleges studied that developing better communication, establishing clear goals across departments, meeting with other departments regularly, sharing goals and resource investment, and gaining support from leadership across areas will help them achieve the best results for their content marketing efforts. Stakeholders who will benefit from this study include college staff members in the area of marketing, communications, and admission, as well as leadership in higher education, more generally.

### Limitations

This study was limited in several ways. First, as mentioned in Chapter One, the nine college representatives who participated in the surveys and interviews were informed that their names and their school's identities would not be disclosed in this study. However, the participants may have tempered some of their answers in the interviews and survey for fear of exposing themselves or the identity of their schools.

The study is also limited in that its findings are based on data gathered from three private Midwestern colleges. This means the data cannot necessarily be broadly applied to undergraduate colleges throughout the country or world; however, for this study it was necessary to focus on a particular region to eliminate regional bias or preference that might be present across multiple regions.

With regard to confidentiality, the researcher was limited in what could be shared in the study results, as some of the data gathered in the interviews revealed details that could have disclosed a college's identity. This was particularly evident when college representatives discussed department and staff structures, as well as when representatives shared what they felt were their best success stories for use of Content.

Finally, the study may be limited due to personal bias. In as much as the researcher aimed for neutrality and objective evaluation, since the researcher was a member of the peer set of the Midwestern colleges studied, some personal bias as to the weight, importance, or saliency of Content may have been inadvertently inserted into the results

#### Recommendations for Future Research

It is suggested that future research in the area of content marketing for recruitment purposes at undergraduate colleges include surveys with undergraduate college students. It would be valuable to hear from students about the types of engagement they feel helped them to make the decision to attend a particular school and whether Content played a strong role in their decision.

It would also be helpful to determine how the successful Content types were specifically used for engagement and recruitment. For example, it would be useful to know whether a school's content marketing efforts in support of recruitment were successful by using Twitter to ask questions, respond to queries, monitor social traffic, and listen for problems and opportunities to engage, or whether it was successful by merely posting engaging photos and videos, and then waiting for responses and interaction. It would also be helpful to approach schools willing to share copies of both their marketing plans, if they have written plans, and their admission team's communications plans to allow for additional comparison in how each team approached the use of Content within their own department practices.

It would be valuable to expand the existing study to a larger group of colleges, to get a better sense of trends in Content use. This might also provide a better understanding

of what is widely working in the areas of Content for recruitment, according to college representatives. It would be helpful to establish a dollar value on the financial and personnel resources schools invest in, and it would be easier to get at this data if the survey was distributed to several colleges and could be answered anonymously; most colleges do not wish to share specific dollar amounts and have those amounts directly linked to their schools.

A variation of this study could also be applied to graduate student recruitment to better understand whether the use of Content is effective in recruiting students to graduate programs. Future study in this area could also focus on how retention is affected by the use of Content and whether Content can be used for dual purposes of both recruitment and retention.

### Communication of Results

The results of this study will be published in Digital Commons, a web-based library of published scholarly works used by Hamline University. It will also be shared with the representatives interviewed and surveyed for this study. The best practices evoked from the data of this study will be shared with the researchers' colleagues in an effort to improve the use of Content at her college for undergraduate student recruitment.

Based on the findings in this study, there are seven best practices recommended for using content marketing strategy for recruitment of prospective undergraduate students at colleges in the Midwest. They are as follows:

- 1) Know your goals. Together, the three areas should establish intended outcomes; the goals should be created through a discussion with all team members, particularly those who work most closely with Content.



- 2) Know who's who and what's what. Together, clarify roles and responsibilities of all team members involved in Content creation and dissemination and select which Content types you're willing to try.
- 3) Know your cost. Marketing, communications, and admissions departments should collaboratively determine the financial and staff resources to dedicate to content marketing for purposes of recruitment.
- 4) Know what's working. Together, determine how results of content marketing efforts will be assessed, measured, valued, and quantified, and also determine a timeline for doing so.
- 5) Know each other. Set and hold frequent cross-department meetings and establish clear communication channels among team members.
- 6) Know that you don't know everything. Set some time and resources aside to take some risks. With all of the tools at staff members' fingertips, including video, graphics, photos, features, testimonials, and more ... mix it up and see what resonates with your intended audience.
- 7) And finally, know how to have some fun! The best Content is Content that engages, so make sure your team members are engaged with it, too.

### Personal Reflections

This study has been a challenging, yet eye-opening journey for me over the past year. When this study began, I believed there would be a clear way to assess various Content types and their uses together that form a college's content marketing strategy upon conclusion of the study; my assumption was that I could share my findings with college staff to help them make better decisions about which particular aspects of Content

to invest in. While I cannot say that has been achieved, I do feel that I accomplished my objectives of better understanding how individual Content types and efforts were and could be used separately to influence recruitment of undergraduates at Midwestern colleges. I also feel the study revealed how marketing, communication, and admission departments and team members could and have come together in the use of Content for recruitment and what seemed to work best in the approach of setting strategy for content marketing.

I am grateful to the nine individuals who allowed me to interview and survey them and who shared their successes, challenges, opportunities, and fears with me in an effort to help me evoke the essence of what makes Content work for them and their colleges and what could help to improve their approach to content marketing strategy. I look forward to taking what I have learned from this study and applying the best practices to my college's approach to the use of Content for undergraduate recruitment.

## APPENDIX *A*: Interview Questions

## APPENDIX A: Interview Questions

1. Q: What is your title and role at your college, and how long have you been in that role?
2. Q: Can you please describe to me your understanding of content marketing?
3. Q: For purposes of this study, content marketing is defined as marketing that uses published content (examples) to attract, acquire and retain students. How does your college use content marketing to recruit prospective undergraduate students?
4. Q: Which content type have you experienced is the most effective in engaging prospective undergraduate students and why do you think that's so effective?
5. Q: Does your college use content in its paid media (paid advertising)? If so, please describe how it is used.
6. Q: Describe how content is determined and shared with prospective undergraduate students. Who is involved in that effort? Who sets the strategy?
7. Q: Tell me how your college approaches using a new content type or strategy, such as a new social media site? How do you make the decisions?
8. Q: Describe how content marketing fits into your overall marketing plan at your college.
9. Q: Individual strategy and goal for each type of content?
10. Q: Are goals measurable? If so, please explain.
11. Q: Do you have guidelines for each site?
12. Q: Does admissions do any of their content?
13. Q: If you could change something your college does for content marketing purposes, what would you change?
14. Q: Do you feel there are sufficient staff and operational resources dedicated to content marketing, and if not, where would you add a position?
15. Q: Tell me how the departments work together? Meet often? Who sets agenda? If there's a new concept, who brings that to the table?

16. Q: Can you tell me about the role student workers play in content marketing?
17. Q: Does your school rely on admission to make a budget?
18. Q: If you could call out one content piece you think has been well received and successful, what was it and what elements were present in making it successful?
19. Q: Any frustrations with how things work with content marketing you have not expressed?

APPENDIX *B*: Survey Questions

## APPENDIX B: Survey Questions

1. What is your staff position at your college? Please choose the letter that is most clearly aligned with your role.
  - a. Marketing
  - b. Admissions
  - c. Communications
  
2. Please choose the letter that completes the sentence accurately. My gender is:
  - a. Male
  - b. Female
  - c. Transgender
  - d. Other
  - e. Prefer not to answer
  
3. Please choose the letter that completes the sentence accurately. My race is:
  - a. African American
  - b. Asian/Pacific Islander
  - c. Hispanic
  - d. Caucasian
  - e. Other
  - f. Prefer not to answer
  
4. For purposes of this study, content marketing is marketing that uses published content, such as website feature stories, testimonials, social media outreach, and multimedia, such as photos, videos, and podcasts, all of which could be used to attract, acquire, and retain students. What types of Content does your college use to engage prospective undergraduate students? Please select all that apply.
  - a. Video
  - b. Web feature stories
  - c. Podcasts
  - d. Social media outreach
  - e. Photos
  - f. Testimonials
  - g. Content embedded in paid media
  
5. Which social media tools does your college use to engage prospective undergraduate students? Please select all that apply.
  - a. Instagram
  - b. Facebook
  - c. Twitter

- d. YouTube
- e. Vine
- f. LinkedIn
- g. Tumblr
- h. Other

6. What percent of your college's financial resources would you say are spent on Content development and execution, including the cost of e-tools, systems, programs, and staff time to engage prospective undergraduate students? Please select one answer.

- a. Less than 10%
- b. 11-20%
- c. 21-30%
- d. 31-40%
- e. 41-50%
- f. 51-60%
- g. 61-70%
- h. 71% or more
- i. I don't have that information
- j. I choose not to share that information

7. What percent of your college's staff resources, in terms of total staff positions, would you say are spent on content development and execution to engage prospective undergraduate students? Please select on answer.

- a. Less than 10%
- b. 11-25%
- c. 26-40%
- d. 41-50%
- e. 51-75%
- f. More than 75%
- g. I don't have that information
- h. I choose not to share that information

8. At my college, I believe we have the following in place to guide our use of Content to engage and recruit undergraduate students. Please check all that apply:

- a. Marketing plan
- b. Written strategies for each e-tool, including each social media site and type of Content uses
- c. Verbal understanding across our department of strategy and goals for each e-tool, including each social media site and type of Content uses
- d. Strong collaboration with other departments in deployment of Content



9. How many hours each week would you say are spent by marketing, communications, and admissions team members using social media to engage prospective undergraduate students? Please select one answer.

- a. Less than two hours
- b. 3-5 hours
- c. 6-10 hours
- d. 11-25 hours
- e. 26-40 hours
- f. 41-65 hours
- g. 66-85 hours
- h. 86 or more hours
- i. I don't have that information
- j. I choose not to share that information

10. If you could add one new position to your college to support undergraduate recruitment efforts, what role would you add?

- a. Admission counselor
- b. Content creator
- c. Marketer
- d. Other

11. What type of Content is used most often **on your college's official website** to engage prospective undergraduate students? Please check one item.

- a. Video
- b. Web feature stories
- c. Podcasts
- d. Testimonials
- e. Photos

12. What type of Content is used most often **on your college's social media sites** to engage prospective undergraduate students? Please check one item.

- a. Video
- b. Web feature stories
- c. Podcasts
- d. Testimonials
- e. Photos

13. How do you **define** success in your content marketing efforts at your college? Please select all that apply.

- a. Increased website traffic
- b. Stronger enrollment numbers

- c. Stronger retention numbers
- d. By the number of videos and/or web stories we created and we shared
- e. By the number of videos and/or web stories that were liked, favorited, or shared by others

14. How do you **measure** success in your content marketing efforts at your college? Please select all that apply.

- a. We survey our incoming class to determine whether Content engaged them
- b. We use metrics embedded in each tool to measure results
- c. We use metrics embedded in our website to track how Content drives traffic
- d. We use trial and error and discuss what we think worked
- e. I do not know if we have a process for defining success in our content marketing efforts

15. Do you college's content marketing efforts contribute directly to inquiry generation of prospective undergraduate students?

- a. Yes. We track content marketing efforts, and they are significant contributors to our inquiry generation
- b. Yes. We believe content marketing contributes to our inquiry generation, though we do not specifically track content marketing efforts in any measureable way
- c. Content marketing appears to have some contribution to our inquiry generation, but nothing significant
- d. No. We track or have tracked content marketing efforts and they are or were **not** significant contributors to inquiry generation
- e. No. We do not believe content marketing contributes to our inquiry generation, though we do not specifically track content marketing efforts in any measureable way
- f. I don't know

16. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? "At my college, we have a clear plan for developing and executing content marketing strategy to engage prospective undergraduate students."

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree
- c. Somewhat agree
- d. Disagree
- e. Strongly disagree

17. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? "At my college, my **marketing department leadership** understands and endorses our use of content marketing" Please select one of the answers below.

- a. Strongly agree

- b. Agree
- c. Somewhat agree
- d. Disagree
- e. Strongly disagree

18. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? “At my college, my **communications department leadership** understands and endorses our use of content marketing” Please select one of the answers below.

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree
- c. Somewhat agree
- d. Disagree
- e. Strongly disagree

19. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? “At my college, my **admissions department leadership** understands and endorses our use of content marketing” Please select one of the answers below.

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree
- c. Somewhat agree
- d. Disagree
- e. Strongly disagree

20. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? “At my college, roles for creating and disseminating content marketing are clearly defined.” Please select one answer below.

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree
- c. Somewhat agree
- d. Disagree
- e. Strongly disagree

21. Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? “At my college, roles and processes for creating and disseminating content marketing are clearly understood and accepted by the marketing, admissions, and communications departments.” Please select one of the answers below.

- a. Strongly agree
- b. Agree
- c. Somewhat agree
- d. Disagree
- e. Strongly disagree

22. What content marketing strategies work best to recruit prospective undergraduate students? How do you determine this? Please explain in your own words.
23. How could your college improve its use of Content to recruit prospective undergraduate students? Please explain in your own words.
24. What barriers exist to producing and executing stronger content marketing efforts? Please explain in your own words.
25. Please share any other thoughts you would like to express regarding your college's use of Content for recruitment of undergraduate students

APPENDIX C: Email Request to Colleges for Participation in the Study

## APPENDIX C: Email Request to Colleges for Participation in the Study

Dear NAME,

My name is JacQui Getty. I am completing an education doctorate at Hamline University, in Saint Paul, MN. My dissertation examines the use of content marketing in higher education, and specifically, I'm looking at colleges and universities in the Midwest. Full disclosure- I am also an AVP of strategic communications for Hamline University, and if you chose to participate in this study, I will not disclose the participation of you, your staff, or your school to anyone at Hamline or elsewhere, aside from the chair of my dissertation committee, who is bound by confidentiality, per her role.

I am requesting your college's marketing, admission, and communications departments' participation in interviews and surveys for my dissertation research. Your college is one of three colleges that I am approaching for inclusion in this study, and your school will be referred to always as College A, College B, or College C within the study.

If you give consent, I will complete an interview and survey with three members of your staff, comprised of one member of your marketing, communications, and admission teams to better understand the use of content marketing in recruitment of undergraduate students. The survey is 25 questions and will take 15 minutes or less to complete. The interview questions are open-ended. The 30-minute, audio-taped interviews with your marketing, communications, and admissions staff will take place at a time and location of your or their choosing.

There is little to no risk involved in participating in this study. If you agree that your staff can be surveyed and interviewed, your college's identity will be protected. Neither your staff members' names nor identifying characteristics about your college will appear in the transcript of the interviews or in the report nor will your school's participation be revealed to anyone other than the researcher (me), the dissertation chair, Kimberly Hartung, and Hamline's Human Subjects Committee. We will all hold this information confidential and not share it with anyone else. Results of this study will be posted in Hamline's digital archives, but no mention of your school name or of staff interviewed or surveyed will be included. Your school will be referred to as College A, College B, or College C. The interview tape will be destroyed after completion of my dissertation in spring of 2015. You and the members of your staff may decide not to participate at any time without negative consequences.

If you are willing to have your college participate in the study, please return the attached consent forms and provide me with names of the three representatives I will interview and survey at your college. I will then send each of them a waiver to sign for their involvement in the study.

Thank you very much for your time and for considering this request.

JacQui Getty

APPENDIX *D*: Email Request for Individuals' Participation in the Study

APPENDIX D: Email Request for Individuals' Participation in the Study

Dear NAME,

This is a confidential and time-sensitive request. Please do not discuss it with others. I have contacted NAME AND TITLE at your college, and I have received HIS/HER permission for your school and you to participate in this study.

**STUDY DETAILS:**

I am completing an education doctorate at Hamline University. My dissertation examines the use of content marketing in higher education. Specifically, I'm looking at how colleges and universities in the Midwest use content marketing strategy to impact their enrollment of undergraduate students. I'm hoping to use the data to determine some best practices for use of content in recruitment.

I am requesting your participation in an interview and survey for my dissertation research. Your college is one of three that I am approaching for inclusion in this study, and your school will be referred to always as either College A, College B, or College C within this study, and you will be known as College A, B, or C's "Marketing Professional" or a similar pseudonym to protect your confidentiality.

If you give consent, I will complete an interview with you regarding the use of content marketing in recruitment of undergraduate students. I will also administer an online survey to you, which is 25 questions and will take about 15 minutes to complete. The interview questions are open-ended. The 30-minute, audio-taped interview will take place at a time and location of your choosing.

There is little to no risk involved in participating in this study. If you agree to be surveyed and interviewed, you and your school's identity will be protected. Neither your name nor identifying characteristics about your college will appear in the transcript of the interview or in the report nor will your school's participation be revealed to anyone other than the researcher, JacQueline Getty, the dissertation chair, Kimberly Hartung, and members of the Human Subjects Committee, and we will hold this information confidential and not share it with anyone else. Further, the transcript, audio files, and any copies of the completed survey will be housed in a locked file in my home office and will be destroyed once the study is complete, which is now anticipated to be in the summer of 2015.

There is no cost to you or your school. I will share the results with you, and, upon request, I will share the transcription of your interview with you. The research is public scholarship, and the final product will be cataloged in Hamline's Bush Library Digital Commons, the university's searchable, electronic repository. It may also be published or used in other ways. However, no mention of you or your school surveyed will be included. Your school will be referred to as College A, College B, or College C. You may decide not to participate at any time without negative consequences.



To help ensure confidentiality for your school, please do not share you or your school's involvement in this study with others.

**TIMELINE:**

If you are willing to participate, please print off the attached letter, sign the consent form, and return it to me as soon as possible. You can scan and email it to me, or you can snail mail it to me (address is listed below and on the consent form itself).

I hope to schedule the interview and administer the survey in the next few weeks.

If you need additional information at any time, please contact me.

Thank you very much!

Sincerely,

JacQueline Getty, Doctoral Candidate  
Hamline University  
[Jgetty01@hamline.edu](mailto:Jgetty01@hamline.edu) 651-325-1175  
5640 Longfellow Avenue S, Minneapolis, MN 55417

APPENDIX *E*: Letter of Informed Consent to Colleges

## APPENDIX E: Letter of Informed Consent to Colleges

DATE, 2014

Dear NAME,

I am completing an education doctorate at Hamline University, in Saint Paul, MN. My dissertation examines the use of content marketing in higher education.

I am requesting your college's marketing, admission, and communications departments' participation in interviews and surveys for my dissertation research. Your college is one of three that I am approaching for inclusion in this study, and your school will be referred to always as either College A, College B, or College C within this study.

If you give consent, I will complete an interview and a survey with three members of your staff, comprised of one member of your marketing, communications, and admission teams to determine the use of content marketing in recruitment of undergraduate students. The survey is 25 questions and will take 15 minutes or less to complete. The interview questions are open-ended. The 30-minute, audio-taped interviews with your marketing, communications, and admissions staff will take place at a time and location of your or their choosing.

There is little to no risk involved in participating in this study. If you agree that your staff can be surveyed and interviewed, your college's identity will be protected. Neither your staff members' names nor identifying characteristics about your college will appear in the transcript of the interviews or in the report nor will your school's participation be revealed to anyone other than the researcher, JacQueline Getty, and the dissertation chair, Kimberly Hartung, and the Human Subjects Committee, and we will hold this information confidential and not share it with anyone else. Results of this study will be posted in Hamline's digital archives, but no mention of your school of staff interviewed or surveyed will be included. Your school will be referred to as College A, College B, or College C. The interview tape will be destroyed after completion of my dissertation in spring of 2015. You and the members of your staff may decide not to participate at any time without negative consequences.

If you need additional information please contact me.

Sincerely,  
JacQueline Getty  
Doctoral Candidate, Hamline University  
[Jgetty01@hamline.edu](mailto:Jgetty01@hamline.edu) 651-325-1175

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Informed Consent to Participate in Study  
(Keep this form for your records.)

I have received your letter about my staff participating in a 30-minute, audio-taped qualitative interview and completing a 25 question survey. I agree to allow my staff to participate in the survey and in the interview at a time and place of my or their choosing. I understand there is little to no risk involved in participating in the study, that my confidentiality and that of my staff and college will be protected, and that I may withdraw from the project at any time without penalty or consequence.

---

Participant Signature

---

Date

Informed Consent to Participate in Study  
Please scan and email this form to JacQueline Getty by DATE, 2014.

I have received your letter about my staff participating in a 30-minute, audio-taped qualitative interview and completing a 25 question survey. I agree to allow my staff to participate in the survey and in the interview at a time and place of my or their choosing. I understand there is little to no risk involved in participating in the study, that my confidentiality and that of my staff and college will be protected, and that I may withdraw from the project at any time without penalty or consequence.

---

Participant Signature

---

Date

APPENDIX *F*: Letter of Informed Consent for Interview and Survey Participation

## APPENDIX F: Letter of Informed Consent for Interview and Survey Participation

DATE, 2015

Dear NAME,

I am completing an education doctorate at Hamline University, in Saint Paul, MN. My dissertation examines the use of content marketing in higher education. Specifically, I'm looking at how colleges and universities in the Midwest use content marketing strategy to impact their enrollment of undergraduate students. I'm hoping to use the data to determine some best practices for use of content in recruitment.

I have contacted NAME AND TITLE, and have received HIS/HER permission for your school to participate in this study. I am requesting your participation in an interview and survey for my dissertation research. Your college is one of three that I am approaching for inclusion in this study, and your school will be referred to always as either College A, College B, or College C within this study, and those interviewed and surveyed for this study will be known as College A, B, or C "Marketing Professional", "Communications Professional", or "Admissions Professional" or similar pseudonyms to protect your confidentiality.

If you give consent, I will complete an interview with you regarding the use of content marketing in recruitment of undergraduate students. I will also administer a survey to you, which is 25 questions and will take about 15 minutes to complete. The interview questions are open-ended. The 30-minute, audio-taped interview will take place at a time and location of your choosing.

There is little to no risk involved in participating in this study. If you agree to be surveyed and interviewed, you and your school's identity will be protected. Neither your name nor identifying characteristics about your college will appear in the transcript of the interview or in the report nor will your school's participation be revealed to anyone other than the researcher, JacQueline Getty, the dissertation chair, Kimberly Hartung, and members of the Human Subjects Committee, and we will hold this information confidential and not share it with anyone else. Further, the transcript, audio files, and any copies of the completed survey will be housed in a locked file in my home office and will be destroyed once the study is complete, which is anticipated to be in the summer of 2015.

There is no cost to you or your school. I will share the results with you, and, upon request, I will share the transcription of your interview with you. The research is public scholarship, and the final product will be cataloged in Hamline's Bush Library Digital Commons, the university's searchable, electronic repository. It may also be published or used in other ways. However, no mention of you or your school will be included. Your school will be referred to as College A, College B, or College C. You may decide not to participate at any time without negative consequences.

To help ensure confidentiality for your school, please do not share you or your school's participation in this study with others.

If you need additional information at any time, please contact me.

Sincerely,

JacQueline Getty, Doctoral Candidate, Hamline University  
[Jgetty01@hamline.edu](mailto:Jgetty01@hamline.edu) 651-325-1175  
5640 Longfellow Avenue S, Minneapolis, MN 55417

Informed Consent to Participate in Interview and Survey  
(Keep this half of the form for your records.)

I have received your letter about participating in a 30-minute, audio-taped qualitative interview and the 25 question survey to meet requirements for dissertation.

(Please place a check on the lines below to indicate your agreement).

\_\_\_\_ I agree to participate in the interview for this study.

\_\_\_\_ I agree to participate in the survey for this study.

I understand there is little to no risk involved in participating in the interview, that my confidentiality will be protected, and that I may withdraw from the project at any time without penalty or consequence.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date



### Informed Consent to Participate in Interview and Survey

Please sign, scan, and send this half of the form to JacQui Getty  
[jgetty01@hamline.edu](mailto:jgetty01@hamline.edu) at your earliest convenience or snail mail it to JacQui Getty,  
5640 Longfellow Avenue S., Minneapolis, MN 55417.

I have received your letter about participating in a 30-minute, audio-taped qualitative interview and the 25 question survey to meet requirements for dissertation.

(Please place a check on the lines below to indicate your agreement).

I agree to participate in the interview for this study.

I agree to participate in the survey for this study.

I understand there is little to no risk involved in participating in the interview, that my confidentiality will be protected, and that I may withdraw from the project at any time without penalty or consequence.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

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