How College Departments Can Use Inbound Digital-Content Marketing to Effectively Recruit Students: Exploratory Research, Preliminary Recommendations, and Unanswered Questions

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ABSTRACT

The internet and social media have profoundly impacted the manner in which students' access information on colleges and universities. Among the most-used resources for higher education information are college websites. While researchers believe students are increasingly looking to university websites to assist them in a variety of college decision-making processes (from which college to attend to which major to pursue), recent reports indicate college websites may not always have what students need (Williams 2017). What kinds of information do students want and need in order to make better-informed college choices? Can the content published by a college on its website be used not only to inform students but to persuade them, i.e. convert browsers (prospects) to buyers (matriculants) to majors?

This research reports the findings of focus group interviews with a sample of business and non-business undergraduate students to determine their opinions of the effectiveness of a college's departmental websites. The focus group results are assessed alongside the results of research on college website content and used to make a number of recommendations concerning the use of a college's departmental websites for the purpose of recruiting majors to business fields. The research specifically seeks to shed light on the student's decision process with regard to choosing a major. The paper integrates the qualitative focus group findings with other empirical research on the college-major decision process and ties it to the consumer decision process. The paper demonstrates how a departmental website can be used to trigger and frame problem recognition as well as develop and refine the student's evoked set of college majors.

College websites have been researched by marketing and mass communication scholars with respect to their use and effectiveness for well over a decade. This research has led to the conclusion that college websites are usually the first structured encounter a student has with a

prospective college or university (Ford 2011). Industry surveys routinely find that near two-thirds of prospective students say their opinions of a school are shaped by its website and that this number is growing (Inside Higher Ed 2018). Despite their outsized influence, very little literature exists on the functional purpose of college websites. Moreover, recent studies show that students find the bulk of information that features prominently on many college websites to be confusing, irrelevant, and unhelpful (Tate 2018; Williams 2017). This research extends these findings to a college's homepage and its departmental websites, in contrast to the focus on university websites in their totality. An important finding is that social image and job availability may be significant factors that impact students' decisions to select a business major. The research also explores the idea that college or departmental website content can differentially impact decided versus undecided students (as to college major) because it provides cogent external information in the alternative evaluation phase of the decision process.

Concerning social media, industry experts and survey researchers believe that, after checking out a college's official website, prospective students turn to social media to see what other students are saying as well as begin looking at the school's official social media accounts (Williams 2017). There is a growing body of research, however, showing that students do not perceive information shared on social media as having the same credibility as the content found on college websites (Hagedorn 2013), making the role of the websites even more influential in the information search and alternative evaluation phases of the students' decision process. Additionally, recent reports (McGorry & McGorry 2017) indicate there is a shift in social media use between millennials and centennials (or Igens) and so use of social media (and websites) by these two groups could be very different. Future research is needed to ascertain whether freshmen access different resources than the current upperclassmen did to develop a perception of an institution and/or select a major.

Findings in this research highlight what students most want from a college website and provide insight into the ways that college and departmental websites can use inbound digital content marketing to assist students with major selection. The findings help marketers better understand how to convert a college website from an informational resource to a recruiting tool for majors.

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