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# Why It's Time to Throw Away Your Communication Plan

Transforming Enrollment Marketing Through  
Student-Driven Engagement



## IS THE SKY REALLY FALLING?

Slowing enrollment growth. Vast geographic disparity. A demographically more diverse population. More first-generation students and increasing financial need across the entire student population. The growing enrollment of nontraditional students. Public debate about college affordability and ROI. The dramatically different ways students and their families are approaching the college decision process.

These changes have created an enrollment crunch for colleges and universities, as more campuses compete for fewer students who do not fit the mold of the “traditional” undergraduate. It is more imperative than ever to engage students who are a good fit, because campuses cannot afford to lose students they should be enrolling.

So yes, in some ways the sky is falling, but that’s because these changes pose a challenge to the way things have always been—and the way they’ve always been done. Amending and appending the same strategy is no longer sufficient to address the realities of where we are now. However, there is another change, a sweeping shift that makes meeting these enrollment challenges with a traditional communication plan impossible: today’s students have entirely different expectations.

Your institution’s risk isn’t in these new realities—it’s in how and when you choose to address them.

### CHANGING MARKET = HEIGHTENED COMPETITION



High school graduate numbers **PLATEAU** for most of the next decade



**DOUBLE-DIGIT GROWTH** in the South and West is offset by **STAGNATION** in the Northeast and Midwest

### CHANGING STUDENTS = NEW EXPECTATIONS IN SERVING THEM WELL

#### MORE DIVERSITY



**92% OF TEENS ARE ONLINE DAILY** (1/4 almost constantly)

In 2005, **5%** of Americans used social media

By 2016, nearly **70%** did

Sources: WICHE<sup>1</sup>, Pew<sup>2,3</sup>

## CHANGE AND WIN...OR DON'T—AND LOSE.

The rise of social media, connected communication, and engagement marketing has fundamentally changed how students approach the college search process. Simply realigning your current enrollment strategy and communication plan to your new target populations isn't the answer: it's a surefire way to fail to meet their expectations for an engaging college search. Instead, you need to take an entirely different approach that is grounded in the reality of how students seek information and make decisions today.

### REINFORCING THEIR MISSION

Catholic and Jesuit Marquette University (WI) will seek designation as a Hispanic-serving institution. By increasing their enrollment of Hispanic students 15 percentage points over a decade, they are both responding to the burgeoning population and reinforcing their mission by better serving majority Catholic, majority first-generation students.<sup>4</sup>

## YOUR AUDIENCE HAS CHANGED



### THEIR QUESTIONS ARE DIFFERENT.

They are more diverse, more first-generation, higher-need, and more pragmatic. Expect questions on the process, the college experience, cost, and whether it's worth their investment.



### THEIR DECISION IS MORE OFTEN A FAMILY CONVERSATION.

It's no longer helicopter parents steering—it's now a real discussion about college as a family investment and, for first-generation students and their families, an exploration of the college experience itself.



### THEY SEEK AN EXPERIENCE, NOT A TRANSACTION.

Born into a world where Amazon and Netflix just “get” you and your interests, message merges simply aren't going to cut it. Students expect you to learn about them before sending information.



### THEY CONTROL THE PROCESS.

But don't plan on them waiting for you. Today's students want to get their answers when and how they want. Whether looking to find something specific or to explore, they seek instant response and feedback.

Educated in flipped classrooms, interacting through gamified experiences both online and off, and hashtagging through social media, the students you're recruiting today are driving precisely how, when, and why they engage—with everything from friends, to brands, to colleges.

Most colleges and universities have not adapted to this new reality, and even those that have don't realize how rapidly it continues to change. They have scrambled to “meet students where they are” and become more tech-oriented in pushing out their marketing messages across multiple channels—a form of hybrid “digitized” recruitment marketing that Millennials may have tolerated. But that won't work for today's Generation Z, because Generation Z doesn't care about your marketing plan.

**MOVING AWAY FROM THE “MORE”  
SOLUTION: BUILDING A NICHE**

Clarion University (PA) is addressing its significant enrollment decline by realigning its focus around the three programs that comprise 80 percent of its enrollment. President Karen M. Whitney summed it up: “We’re moving from a broad-based approach of being all things to all people to what I’m going to call a distinctive mission.”<sup>5</sup>

**IF YOU DO EVERYTHING YOU’RE  
DOING TODAY, YOU WILL FAIL**

Is your recruitment strategy actually geared toward this world and these students? As each new bell and whistle in communication technology came along, did you add it to your plan? With each year of research on this generation, or this population, or this challenge, did you add some kind of response? Historically, recruitment marketing has been about “more.” That ends now.

**NO COMMUNICATION PLAN IN THE WORLD CAN BE MADE SOPHISTICATED ENOUGH  
FOR TODAY’S STUDENTS**

That plan—the “master plan” of who gets what, when—is typically the backbone of your strategy, driving everything you do. What once upon a time was a simple document is now likely a much more complex flow chart or spreadsheet. You may have built many options and reminders and custom campaigns to try to personalize the process the way students want. You have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars in support of this plan with an advanced CRM, if you are lucky. But it likely is still falling short because it remains rooted in that old “enrollment funnel” view of the world—and you are wasting money.



*It’s time to stop talking about communication plans and start talking about content.*



**Vickie Alleman**  
Vice President for Enrollment Management  
Dominican University of California  
RNL Advisory Board

**WHAT YOU DO HAS TO CHANGE—COMPLETELY**

Current enrollment management approaches, focused on pushing information out—regardless of how sophisticated—no longer work. What happens next?

Removing any one tactic feels like a risk—as does changing anything that might jeopardize your potential to make projections. Your numbers have real ramifications on jobs, on budgets, rankings, profile, competitiveness—and, in the worst cases, on institutional survival. But the real risk is in not reconsidering your plan in a big way.



## THE PARADIGM IS FAILING: IT'S TIME FOR A NEW ONE

**The only answer? Scrap the concept of the communication plan as your strategic core.** Stop focusing on what you should send and when. Start asking where will students go to discover what students need. Your priority is to build the framework through which students discover and explore your institution in their own fashion, without narrow communication flows that restrict their freedom and dampen their engagement.

### What does that look like, and how is it different?

It might seem you're already doing this with a CRM and a great website—or, if you are fortunate enough, via an automated marketing platform. But we're not talking about using the technology to launch lock-and-load, segment-driven plans that call out links to your website. Just because you have the capability to react in real time, to hyper-customize, and to “personalize” doesn't mean it will resonate with your audience. Today, if the content isn't precisely relevant to that student—delivered the way they seek it out and at the time they want it—there's really no point.

What we're talking about is much bigger: let go. Truly focus on the audience of one. Your job is not to push them along a path. It's to intently listen to each individual student, and then react in an authentic, personal, and engaging way. To provide a unique personal experience along their own self-directed journey.



### #SHAREA COKE

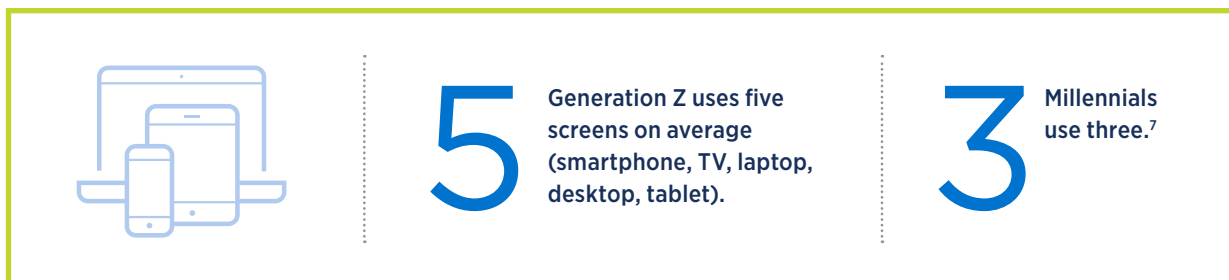
Remember this? Coca-Cola reversed their decade-long slump and increased sales the summer they unveiled personalized bottles. Customers were hunting in stores or designing their personal bottles online, then posting and sharing them on social media. Why did this campaign click, especially with younger consumers?

Coca-Cola North America's senior vice president Stuart Kronauge explained: “For teens and Millennials, personalization is not a fad; it's a way of life. It's about self-expression, individual storytelling and staying connected with friends. ‘Share a Coke’ taps into all of those passions.”<sup>6</sup>

## SO...NOW WHAT? GO BEYOND DIGITAL

What does it look like to not orient around that traditional plan? What's the core now?

It becomes about crafting an experience where each student builds his or her personal “core plan.” The experience they have in doing so—online, on their device, in their home, and on your campus—will make or break their choice to further engage and explore. Daunting, yes: but much more effective—and exciting.



**Consider the concept of micro-moments, as defined by Google:** “...critical touch points within today’s consumer journey, and when added together, they ultimately determine how that journey ends...they’re the moments we turn to a device—often a smartphone—to take action on whatever we need or want right now. These *I-want-to-know*, *I-want-to-go*, *I-want-to-buy*, and *I-want-to-do* moments are loaded with intent, context, and immediacy.”<sup>8</sup>

**How does this translate to recruitment?** Students are already experiencing micro-moments with your institution—the question is, how are they faring? Is the content meeting their specific needs and expectations at each of these particular moments?

To embrace these moments, it’s critical to “be there, be useful, and be quick”—in other words, anticipate needs, provide relevant content, and eliminate unnecessary steps to get to the answer. Further, it requires connecting the dots across their entire experience, not just from one screen or at one point in time, but across those points.<sup>9</sup>

The web is where they live, of course, but your website is just one part of how they experience your institution—and understanding what’s relevant to them requires more than just measuring their website interaction. It demands an understanding of *how* they answer key questions; *what* they click on, open, forward, share; *why* they’re exploring; and *how* you can meet their needs and shape their experience.

**What we’re talking about is much more than building a stellar website or adding digital advertising to your plan.** It’s about enabling a student-driven experience that is fully integrated with your enrollment strategies.

PAST STRATEGY		TODAY'S STRATEGY	
<b>Grouping student communication in "lock and load"</b>	Sending batch information to groups of students, such as academic programs, financial aid, or career services information.	<b>Connecting relevant information directly to their online exploration in real time.</b>	Students drive the information they seek; empower them to have the best experience so they will want to continue to explore what is most relevant—such as specific academic information.
<b>Pushing content on a timeline</b>	Dates drive information that is sent on weekly or monthly schedules with predetermined student groups—such as sending juniors information about application requirements, or parents of seniors how to apply for aid.	<b>Personalized, relevant information is available on demand as students and parents need it.</b>	Students drive the timelines. For example, a student seeking information on financial aid will find the relevant information for them.
<b>Reacting to requests</b>	Sending information to families when they request it, including links to relevant information on the website.	<b>Instantaneous information for families from any device.</b>	The world of requesting information is gone. If they can't find it immediately, there is no point.
<b>Best website experience</b>	Assuring the website navigation experience is premium.	<b>Individualized experiences</b>	Online is not just a place of information seeking any longer. It is about providing a seamless, integrated, personalized experience from any device, across many integration points—web, mobile, on campus—that assures the student remembers, shares, and desires more.
<b>Analyzing data after the fact</b>	Looking at student data, such as source codes, campus visit information, and predictive model scores to predict future behavior.	<b>Real-time analytics and continuous measurement of student engagement</b>	Student engagement is measured continually based on their interaction from any device in any situation—from perusing a website to filling out an evaluation form about their campus visit.



## HOW DO YOU PULL IT OFF?

**Here is the hard truth: meeting these expectations, creating a customized experience, and making an authentic journey of self-discovery for students is tremendously challenging.**

Just like a CRM, an automated marketing platform is not the solution. It is the vehicle by which you can craft memorable, meaningful journeys that translate to enrollment success, but doing so successfully requires an advanced approach so that the experience will be genuine and meaningful to students. There are three key aspects to pulling off this journey for students and their families.

1

### TRANSLATE INSTITUTIONAL GOALS INTO SPECIFIC ENROLLMENT OBJECTIVES

Is your institution seeking to enter new markets, to fill or expand specific academic programs, attract first-generation students, recruit more high-achieving students (or do all at once)? Rather than struggling to accommodate new objectives within an old approach, you will be more effective and successful in shifting to a strategy oriented around the student's journey.

The key is to accurately identify which prospective students you want to invite on this journey, then listen and respond as they tell you what is most important to them every step of the way, from awareness to enrollment.

2

### IDENTIFY THE PERSONA—THEN BUILD THE PATHS

Listening is crucial, because what prospective students tell you reveals their personas. What do they want to be when they graduate? Do they want to stay close to home or journey across the country to a campus? Then, as they reveal these personas, they immediately see dynamic content that seamlessly aligns with their responses, addresses their informational needs, and allows them to continue on their chosen path to enrollment.

3

### ENABLE THE JOURNEYS

All of this means a shift from pushing out information to enabling students to retrieve relevant information through their choices and behavior. This has to be done across all engagement channels—digital, direct mail, social, quizzes, responsive hubs, text, and email—to guide students as they journey and to respond to students' specific behaviors and activities.

#### **Different students have different needs and wants:**

If you don't accommodate that, you dilute their experience with your institution.

#### **Distance, academic ability, finances, family background, and many other factors influence the experience a student seeks—and therefore the specific personas within the populations you seek.**

While a student journey starts within a framework built toward those personas, don't predefine where a student can go from there. As each student interacts, he or she needs to find the experience personally relevant and engaging.

## THE NEW PARADIGM: RNL STUDENT JOURNEY

It is more important than ever to move beyond the traditional communication plan for enrollment marketing. It is completely out of sync with the self-directed journeys students want as they explore their enrollment options.

At the same time, creating those journeys is a complex process. It requires advanced analytics, personalized engagement, industry-leading insights, and automated marketing platforms—all working in harmony.

This is why we have created **RNL Student Journey**. RNL Student Journey moves beyond the communication plan; it cultivates a dynamic, student-driven experience. Students can discover the information they need, have personally relevant interactions with your institution and campus community, and explore your campus how, when, and where they choose.

### RNL STUDENT JOURNEY, DEFINED

RNL Student Journey follows the natural flow of a relationship, deepening bonds between the institution and the individual on the individual's terms. The nature of the journey is shaped by three inputs:



What our advanced research and analytics tell us about the student.



What you know about your most successful and desired students.



Most importantly, how the individual student interacts and engages in the journey.

This experience does not consist of staged events or steps; rather it empowers students to explore and to find the information they want and need so they can make an informed application and enrollment decision.



*We can't continue to blame the consumer: we must change our strategies—and our product!—to motivate them. For Gen Z, it's not about their attention span, but their interest. We need to focus on incremental wins that enable them to 'level up,' very early on, to find and feel the community we're building. Earning their interest doesn't take a lot of money—but it does take stepping forward, unapologetically, and adopting a very different approach.*

—Ellen Treanor, Associate Vice President, Brand Strategy, Southern Utah University





**PERSONA-SPECIFIC**

Each journey becomes a uniquely personal experience for each student. It begins within a core framework based on the particular persona of students you're recruiting and includes content and pathways relevant to that persona. Through this approach, we optimize the student's ability to personalize his or her journey—avoiding “for-the-masses” content.



**OFFER RELEVANT PATHS**

Once a student begins a journey, he or she will choose where to go and how to engage. The pathways we build enable students to explore, experience, and emotionally connect with your institution in areas most relevant to them personally. As we learn more about the student specifically, we provide an increasingly tailored experience. **Every communication is triggered by an action or behavioral shift coming from the student.**



**EDUCATE FAMILIES THROUGH THE PROCESS**

As students craft their experience, discover, explore, and learn, their families are an integral part of their consideration process. That's why we engage parents within their students' own journey.

**RNL STUDENT JOURNEY FEATURES**

Customized and personally relevant for each individual student, RNL Student Journey is a comprehensive, seamless cross-channel experience that is framed by:



**Behavioral engagement scoring**



**Integrated channel outreach**



**Responsive, interactive exploratory “hub” for students**



**Automated campaign triggers and streams**



**Parental engagement**



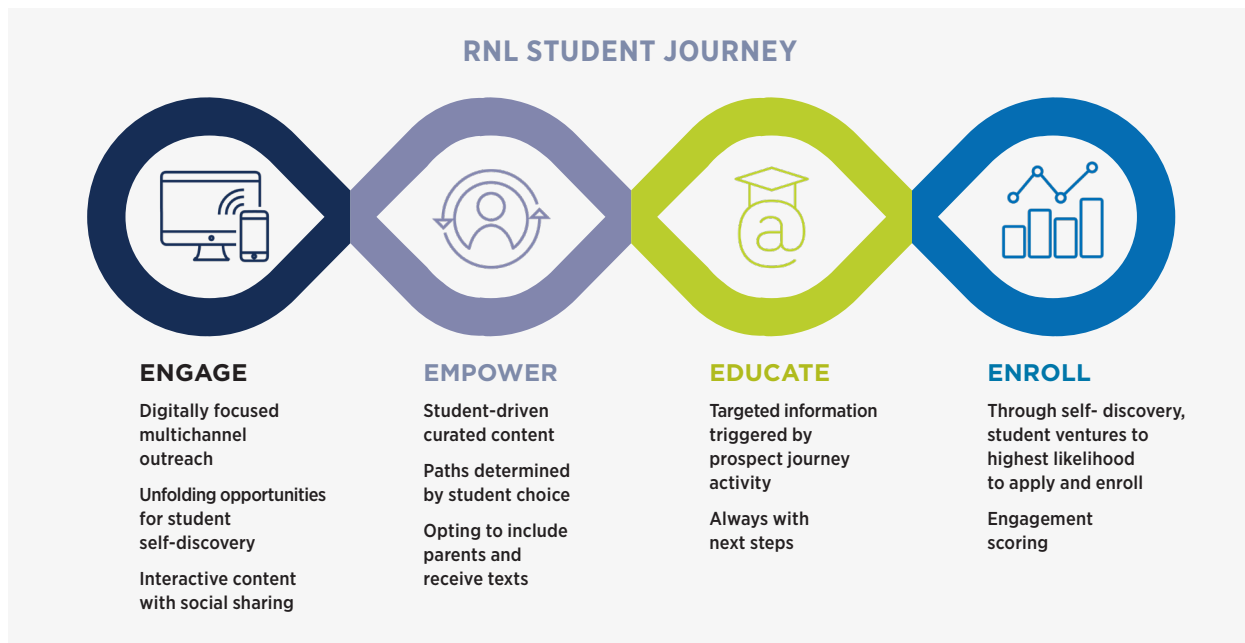
**Individual student insight and personalization**



**Interactive online “fit finder” quizzes**

You encourage students to visit campus because it's a memorable experience for families that brings the facts and figures to life—that lets them consider how it translates to them personally. RNL Student Journey does the same. Just like a campus event, it's highly visual, asks questions and encourages conversation, shares stories, and cultivates a connection—a two-way discussion.

## DRIVING ENROLLMENT RESULTS THROUGH STUDENT EXPLORATION



It is our mission to help you strategically plan for long-term enrollment success—from building your incoming class to engaging with those students as they become successful alumni.

The time has come to finally, once and for all, throw out the traditional outreach concept and build a new strategic paradigm that makes sense for now and for the future. **That future is RNL Student Journey.**

See how RNL Student Journey can help you meet your enrollment goals and fill your classes with students who are the right fit.

Contact us for a guided tour and to discuss how you can use RNL Student Journey to:

- Align your enrollment marketing with student expectations and behavior
- Create a stronger bond with students as they explore what your institution has to offer
- Meet your enrollment goals with students who are a good fit

### FINDING THE OPPORTUNITIES

Where does your institution fit within the new realities of the market, and how will you translate that into effective enrollment strategy?

- ✓ RNL Academic Program Journey
- ✓ RNL New Market Journey
- ✓ RNL Academic Achiever Journey *(coming soon)*
- ✓ RNL First-Generation Journey *(coming soon)*

**Request a free guided tour of RNL Student Journey**

[RuffaloNL.com/StudentJourney](http://RuffaloNL.com/StudentJourney) | [ContactUs@RuffaloNL.com](mailto:ContactUs@RuffaloNL.com) | 800.876.1117

### About Ruffalo Noel Levitz

Ruffalo Noel Levitz is the leading provider of higher education enrollment, student success, and fundraising solutions. More than 1,900 colleges, universities, and nonprofit organizations rely on RNL for advanced analytics, personalized engagement, and industry-leading insights to achieve their missions. The firm is distinguished by its powerful portfolio of solutions focused on the entire lifecycle of enrollment and fundraising, assuring students find the right college or university, graduate on time, secure their first job, and give back to support the next generation. Ruffalo Noel Levitz conferences, research reports, papers, and articles help clients stay on top of current trends.

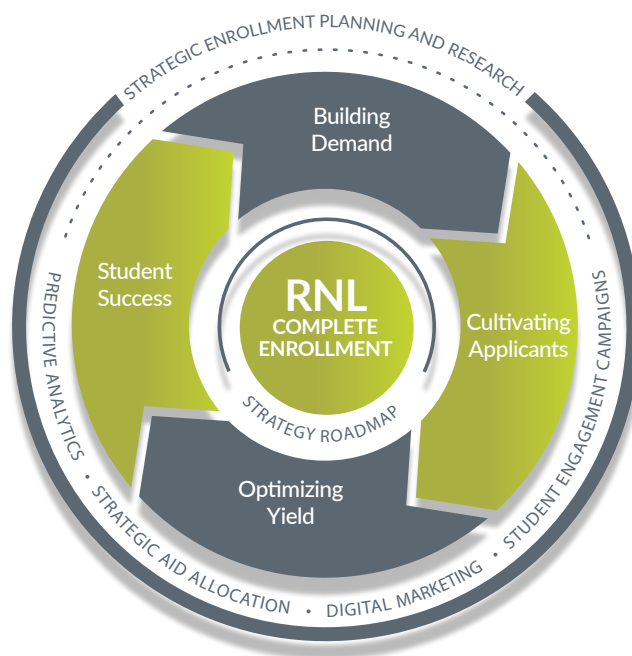
### Learn more and request a free consultation

Our enrollment management solutions cover the full spectrum of student recruitment and retention, including search, application, financial aid, student success, and strategy development. Contact us for a free consultation with our enrollment management experts.

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