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Admitted Student Publications: A Model Using Focus Group Research to Improve Communication

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In 1999, a mid-sized, public doctoral-intensive university in the Midwest initiated a publication series to help admitted students and their family members better understand the enrollment process and increase the yield of admitted students for the institution. Through focus group research, admitted students and family members provided feedback on the effectiveness of the publications specifically designed for admitted students. This case study presents a model for developing a publications series for admitted students and then using focus group research to refine those publications for greatest effectiveness.

The concept of an integrated approach to enrollment management (Hossler, 1984) has received renewed attention among colleges and universities. Increased competition, a more consumer-focused market, desired student mix achievement, and more sophisticated marketing techniques have caused management to increase their focus on enrollment. Enrollment management strategies have evolved over time from being simplistic to being more scientific, diverse, and statistically and methodologically complex (Johnson, 2000; Orehovec, 2000). Carnevale and Fry (2001) identified several challenges for managing college enrollments in the new millennium, including more diversity on the campus, the growth of the knowledge economy, the search for faster and better ways to educate, the cost of more students, the dilemma of nontraditional students, and the impact of higher tuition on low-income and minority families. Hossler (1998) demonstrated that with the emergence of the Internet, electronic communication including the World Wide Web and e-mail became a strategic tool. How college-bound prospects perceived university websites made a difference in converting prospects into applicants (Poock & Lefone, 2001). Jonas and Popovics (2000) suggested that an enrollment management organization should integrate assessment, planning, and budgeting on an institution-wide basis to achieve enrollment goals. Smith (2000) identified a relationship between institutional enrollment performance and enrollment management effectiveness.

Most enrollment managers understand the importance of building an effective recruiting funnel that moves multiple and diverse prospects from initial contact to matriculation. Sevier (2000) identified four steps to effective recruiting: 1) define the students you want, 2) clarify your recruiting geography, 3) build awareness, and 4) implement your recruiting strategies. Upcraft (1984) conceptualized the importance of

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developing a comprehensive orientation process so that admitted students matriculate and persist.

Converting prospects into enrollees is a critical part of the recruitment funnel as Lind (2001) explained the importance of converting applicants to enrollees. Walker (2001) suggested that contacting admitted students shortly after acceptance was an important yield technique. Using effective publications to help convert prospects to applicants and applicants to matriculates has also been documented (Hite & Yearwood, 2001; Ziegler, 1991).

Case Study

To increase the yield of undergraduate applicants to matriculates at a mid-sized, public, university in the Midwest, a Yield Initiatives Team was formed in 1999. The Carnegie Doctoral Intensive institution was regional in nature, and about one-third of its students were first-generation college students. The goals of the team were to help admitted students and their family members better understand the enrollment process, to increase the yield of admitted students to matriculants, and to increase retention into the sophomore year. The team had two functions: 1) to coordinate and increase communication to admitted students and family members through a planned sequence of messages from admission into the freshman year; and 2) to collaborate on admitted-student and freshman programs. The purpose of this study was to examine, through the use of focus groups, the effectiveness of the publications developed by the team and to recommend improvements in the publications and other aspects of the communication process.

As part of its work, the Yield Initiatives Team audited all publications sent to students from the time of admission through matriculation. They found a lack of consistency and integration of messages and graphic design that they felt compromised the institution's ability to complete the recruitment process by converting admits to matriculants. To remedy this, the team developed a sequential set of mailings including "next steps" brochures and a newsletter series (*Cardinal Tracks*). These items largely replaced a number of uncoordinated mailings from a variety of groups around campus. The messages were carefully planned and the graphic look of the pieces was coordinated.

The efforts of the Yield Initiatives Team dramatically improved the quality of the university's communication with admitted students, and the new publication sequence was followed for two years with minimal changes. However, because student and parent input was not directly sought in developing the new publications, the team decided that focus group research with the intended audiences was essential to determine whether the publications were effective.

Methodology

The primary objective of the research was to evaluate the effectiveness of the publications sent to admitted students and their parents. Focus group research has been identified as a way to obtain rich information from subjects (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996).

Researchers worked to assess effectiveness of communication efforts including comprehension of messages, recognition of messages as relevant, and positive feelings about receiving the communications. Secondly, the focus groups served as a forum to gather information about how students and their parents progressed through the college choice process, how they responded to various types of communications, and how the timing of information affected their perceptions.

A total of nine focus groups, five with students and four with parents, were conducted in the summer of 2001. Fifty-nine students participated, with group sizes ranging from eight to fifteen. Twenty-three parents participated, with group sizes ranging from five to seven. The focus groups were conducted on campus during new student orientation. The students were selected by the moderator to provide good geographic and ethnic representation. Parent groups relied on volunteers responding to a verbal announcement during orientation.

Focus group moderator's guides were designed to elicit information on the following: 1) timing of the students' decision to attend the institution and the trigger for that decision; 2) parents' role in the college decision process; 3) recognition of the institution's materials in the mail; 4) recall of particular communications/publications; 5) needed information that was missing from the communications; 6) which admitted student publications were most important and least important to audience members; 7) reactions to the look and feel of the publications; and 8) reactions to use of the institutional image on publications.

Findings

Family Member Involvement in College Search/Selection

Family members were asked about their involvement in the college search/selection process. While the responses revealed a broad range of levels and types of involvement, several overriding themes emerged. Most parents described a moderate level of involvement focused on helping their children narrow down choices or on setting some kinds of limits (i.e., in state, not above a certain cost, academically acceptable to the parent) on the range of choices the parent would support. Most parents indicated that they allowed their student to make the final choice among the agreed-upon list of acceptable institutions and would have been supportive of whatever decision their children made. Parents often described their role as handling the "business" end of the process by keeping track of deadlines, writing checks, and helping fill out forms. They also were active in accompanying students on college visits.

Timing of Mental Commitment to the Institution

Nearly all the students responding to this question reported making the mental commitment sometime during the senior year. Predictably, making a campus visit of some kind, either for a tour, a program, or an informal visit with a friend or sibling was frequently cited by both parents and students as the trigger for the decision.

Family Reading Patterns for College/University Mail

Parents' responses to the question of who read what college literature in their families were consistent with their comments about overall involvement. Responses ranged from opening and reading all mail for the student before the student looked at it to looking at none of the mail and allowing the student to take full responsibility for bringing items to the parents' attention. Most parents, however, fell somewhere in the middle, reading or skimming with some care many of the communications from schools in which their student had an interest. In some families, there was one primary parental reader, father or mother, and the other parent simply skimmed the material.

Consistent with their role in managing the details for the application and enrollment process, a number of parents indicated that items with deadlines, financial information, or a form to fill out received their highest level of attention. One parent commented, "If it was in an envelope, I knew it was important."

Student comments mirrored the variety of parental response. Some students relied on their parents to screen the mail and only pass along to them what would be of interest or what was deemed important. More commonly, however, students performed this role and passed selected information to parents. Either way, responses indicated that most families were sharing responsibility for managing the information stream and talking together about the information they received from schools of interest. With the exception of residence hall information, students' interest in reviewing information was generally higher before they made the decision about what school to attend. Parents tended to get more involved after the decision was made in order to ensure that all the administrative paperwork was completed.

Ease of Identifying Institutional Materials

Parents and students agreed that it was very easy to identify the materials coming from the university because they used the same "bright" colors, logo, and other graphic elements on nearly all of them. When asked about the housing brochure, which looked quite different from the majority of other admitted student materials the households received, both parents and students indicated that they had been able to recognize it because it came in an envelope clearly marked with the institution's name on it. However, some parents noted that once it became separated from other materials it was hard to identify as a publication from that institution and that this could potentially be a problem if the brochure got mixed in with other schools' materials.

Recall of Publications

The students noted that the admission letter, the "big book" (viewbook), and *Cardinal Tracks* (newsletter series) were the most memorable communications they received. The admission letter was recalled, the viewbook because it provided a lot of information and had many photos, and *Cardinal Tracks* because they "got it all the time" and it was so visually recognizable. Parents also indicated high recall of *Cardinal Tracks*

and the acceptance letter for the same reasons. Parents also mentioned financial aid communications as high-recall items. A magnet included with the parent information packet was also mentioned a few times by both students and parents; it was a high-recall item because it was useful and different from a brochure.

Distinctive vs. Family Look for Publications

When asked to consider the advantages and disadvantages of having different looks for different publications (i.e., housing, yield, and orientation publications), most students thought this was acceptable or even a positive because it made the housing information stand out from other information, but some parents felt that it should conform to a more uniform look. Overall, participants responded very positively to the coordinated design of the yield publications because this made materials from this institution easy to recognize and gave them a “professional” look.

Generally, participants liked the “bright” colors used by the institution on most of its admitted student pieces. The only negative comments were about the yellow, which some felt was too bright and glaring, and when combined with “tiny type,” created some sections of publication that were difficult to read.

“Next Steps” Mailings

While participants liked the format and the idea of the “next steps” brochure, they did not have very distinct responses to it. The concept of outlining next steps was appealing to both students and parents, and while they did not respond negatively to the piece, they did not see it as particularly important or of much interest. One parent summed it up by saying that it is a “good starting point.” A couple of parents suggested that dates be added to let them know when the steps should be completed. Students, too, were neutral. Many said they had read it because of the unique format and because it said “So What’s Next?” on the cover, but most did not think the information it contained was very important.

A number of parents said they had never received the brochure or the magnet. Conversely, some students complained about getting this mailing over and over. Clearly a number of students opened the “For the Family Of” envelope and this mailing often did not make it to parents at all.

Cardinal Tracks

The *Cardinal Tracks* series received mixed reviews. While some students and parents found it appealing and enjoyed receiving it, the majority of participants saw it as unimportant because of its newsletter format and because they misunderstood what it was and for whom it was intended. Many students and parents thought they were receiving copies of an existing on-campus newsletter distributed to current students. Participants viewed sharing an existing publication as a nice gesture, but because of this misperception, did not understand that the publication would have information critical

or relevant to them. This perception alone indicated low readership. Even more problematic, many participants, particularly among the student groups, thought they were receiving the same identical publication over and over. This was extremely problematic as it sent the message that the university did not keep track of what it had sent to whom and therefore did not care about its individual applicants. Another problem was that those who thought they were receiving duplicate mailings were not reading the publications and therefore did not receive the intended messages. However, those who did realize that these were different mailings, even if they did not read them completely, appreciated that the institution was making the effort to stay in touch.

As focus group participants looked over a set of five *Cardinal Tracks*, parents commented that the announcements/dates section and the phone numbers were the most important sections. They suggested putting these in the most prominent locations. They also suggested changing the name and the format of the publication to help indicate that these items were especially for incoming students. Parents thought that while the newsletters were too long and “wordy” for them to read, their students would like them and would read them.

Despite parents’ predictions of high student interest, students themselves indicated that they generally just “glanced” at the *Cardinal Tracks* before putting them aside. Again, this attitude was in part inspired by confusion about what these publications were, but it was also inspired by the newsletter format (participants indicated that important things come in envelopes), the “wordy” nature of the publications, and the lack of inclusion of the topics of most interest and relevance to them. Others thought the information included was too repetitive. The announcements and deadlines section was popular with students’ as it was with parents.

Students suggested significant changes to the *Cardinal Tracks* publications to make them more relevant to their decision-making process. Most suggestions focused on adding information about student life including intramurals, clubs, and student organizations. Some students suggested columns or articles from actual students talking about what college life is like. A number of students suggested adding photos to illustrate student life. One student explained the importance of highlighting student life this way: “Once you’ve decided on a short list of colleges, the organizations start to play more of a role.”

Beneficence

When asked about the use of Beneficence (the campus symbol) on the publications, both students and parents indicated that they had either known that she was a campus symbol or that they had assumed that she was the school logo or mascot. While some admitted they had wondered about her, none saw using her on publications as a negative.

Recommendations

Admitted Student Publications

The “next steps” brochure should be redesigned to coordinate with the current family of admissions publications so that the university’s visual identity is consistent throughout the recruitment process. Develop a checklist of important dates/deadlines to accompany this piece. The “next steps” brochure mailing to parents might be replaced with a new “family members resource guide,” perhaps in a Q&A format.

The *Cardinal Tracks* newsletter series should be replaced with a new series of publications titled to indicate that they are special communication for admitted students and their families. Ensure graphic design of the new publications makes them highly readable. The newsletter format and large blocks of text should be eliminated, and photographs, if possible, or other graphic elements to visually break up text should be included. Bullet points, lists, and other techniques to make the text more approachable should be used, and the content of the new publication series should emphasize student life topics and experiential topics. Text that helps answer the questions, “What is there to do there?” “What will it be like?” and “What do the students there think of their school?” should be developed. Columns from or features about students and their activities at the university should be included, and deadlines and important announcements should be prominently featured.

Replication of Analysis on Other Campuses

The development and use of a special series of communications for admitted students and their family members may be a powerful tool in the recruitment process. Use of such publications may lead to an increased yield of applicants in the orientation program and eventually to enrollment. Periodic assessment of these publications through focus group research provides insights into how admitted students and their family members finalize college choices and how they perceive and respond to communication efforts.

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