Assessing Organizational Image through the College Open House: A Tool for Success

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Abstract

This study evaluates how effective colleges and universities are in presenting an accurate and positive organizational image via their open house events. The Open House Assessment for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) © was developed to determine how institutional characteristics identified by potential members as influential to their decision to affiliate with a school were made relevant through the organizational image presented by the school. Open house events at twenty-four colleges and universities were assessed using the tool. Findings indicate that there are overall modifications to open house events that might benefit all schools, suggesting that the tool can be an effective self-assessment resource. Collective results and recommendations for improvement are discussed.

KEYWORDS: *Organizational image, assessment, higher education, open house*

Higher education institutions (HEI) are at unique time in their history. Enrollment statistics suggest a continued modest upward trend and changing student demographics include higher numbers of female and nontraditional students than have been seen in the past (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Additionally, there has been an explosion of online education options (Allen & Seaman, 2008) and technological advances. These changes are challenging higher education in ways that previously may have been considered inconceivable. As such, the image that they present and the strategies and tactics they use to attract potential members take on added importance.

Among the many efforts undertaken by HEIs to present and enhance their image, in-person visits to schools are instrumental in students' decision making about whether to pursue affiliation with or apply to a school (Aguilar & Gillespie, 2001; Anctil, 2008; Fischbach, 2006; Tucciarone, 2007). Open houses offer excellent opportunities to effectively present an appealing, realistic image to recruit potential members who are a good fit for the school. This could likewise result in increased retention rates, providing an even longer term benefit. To maintain their competitiveness, particularly in the current economic environment, HEIs must identify and portray an organizational image that is both appealing and accurate. Because image has been shown to influence both recruitment and retention, a positive image can help a university succeed over its competition, while a negative image creates an obstacle to achieving this success (Anctil, 2008; Ivy, 2001; Helgesen, 2008).

This research focuses on a specific on-campus event, the open house, and how it can be used to bring to life the institution's elusive yet highly influential image. This is a relevant communication issue for all HEI's because in order to maintain enrollment levels schools often attempt to be something to everyone. Significant resources are expended to create awareness and attract students to campus in the hope of being viewed as "it." However, despite the detailed planning and expenses associated with preparing for an open house, institutions do not always succeed in distinguishing themselves from their peers or adequately presenting their uniqueness.

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This study provides a better understanding of how organizational image influences potential members, and how HEI's can make the most effective use of an often used resource, the open house, to present an appealing, distinctive image .

A difficulty HEIs have in creating a desirable image is rooted in the intangibility of the services they provide (Nguyen & Leblanc, 2002). The nature of their "business" is very different from other types of organizations and they do not function under the same parameters (Cerit, 2006; Lewison & Hawes, 2007; Luque-Martinez & Del Barrio-Garcia, 2009). As such, colleges and universities are more dependent on the public's perceptions than are other types of organizations who are evaluated based primarily on financial performance (Eisenberg, Murphy, & Andrews, 1998). Further, in higher education students are both the customers and the products, with a diploma serving as the only physical proof of the services the institution provided (Anctil, 2008). Image is reflected in an organization's products (Nguyen & Leblanc, 2002) and the "product" in higher education is knowledge. Because knowledge is both subjective and nebulous, however, it is critical for colleges and universities to highlight their tangible characteristics in a way that communicates a more concrete image to nonmembers, particularly potential students. Emphasizing and marketing these tangible factors can help improve perceptions of organizational image for colleges and universities. These factors can include academic ratings, facilities, athletics (Anctil, 2008), evidence of a strong student social life (Anctil, 2008; Arpan, Raney, & Zivnuska, 2003), excellent and available teachers, academic programs, and cost (Canale & Dunlap, 1996). Research also suggests that organizational members who interact with and leave a positive impression on customers (in this case, potential students) can positively influence the overall image of the organization (Nguyen & Leblanc, 2002).

Because schools seek new members on a cyclic basis, there are very practical benefits to identifying those institutional characteristics that most favorably contribute to the image that potential members hold including enrollment, retention, and the potential of generous alumni. To ensure that schools are maximizing their potential to accurately, adequately, and articulately present their image, the Open House Assessment for Higher Education Institutions © was developed to be used as a self-assessment at schools. The purpose of the tool is to identify areas for improvement in meeting the needs of potential students, thereby making the open house more effective. This study examines the value of the tool in assessing open house events as a means to identifying areas for improving image.

This study offers considerable pragmatic value to any school that uses open houses as recruitment tools. Although many HEIs depend heavily on marketing and branding initiatives to promote themselves (Tucciarone, 2007; Vander Schee, 2009), a campus visit is the source that by far most influences a high school student (Zinch, 2009). Many students believe that they will be able to identify the school that is right for them based on a "gut feeling" (Zinch, 2009) or an "it factor" (Pampaloni, 2010) which results solely as the result of an on-campus visit. Because most families are limited to visiting a maximum of four colleges (Zinch, 2009), it is imperative that schools maximize the experience for their visitors.

To begin, an overview of the literature on organizational image relevant to college recruitment is offered, followed by a description of the assessment tool and discussion of the findings of a study using the assessment tool to evaluate twenty-four university open houses. Based on these results, short- and longer-term recommendations for possible general modifications to open house events are offered as a guide for schools that want to maximize the effectiveness of their open houses.

Organizational Image

Organizational image has been defined in various ways (see Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000 for a summary) although there is consistency across definitions in recognizing the influence of external audiences. Image is viewed as the cognitions, beliefs, attitudes, and impressions about the behaviors of an organization (Treadwell & Harrison, 1994; Wan & Schell, 2007), as well as the overall perception of the organization including its products and services, management, and actions (Marken, 1990). Image also is associated with the business name of an organization and the architecture of an organization's setting (Nguyen & Leblanc, 2002). Some researchers consider image as a view held by both internal organizational members and outsiders (Marguiles, 1977; Scott & Jehn, 2003). However, for the purposes of this research, organizational image represents the views of an organization held by those who are not currently affiliated with that organization (Hatch & Shultz, 2002); more specifically, potential first-time students seeking to enroll at a four-year institution and their parents.

The importance of image to HEIs has received increasing interest, beginning with Treadwell and Harrison's (1994) study of a private, religious institution. In that study the authors attempt to differentiate between identity and image; however, because their findings focus exclusively on the perspectives of organizational members (faculty, staff, and students), their study reflects internal perspectives rather than external perspectives. As such, it more accurately reflects organizational identity, the views members hold, rather than image.

More recent studies suggest that a university's image is actually multiple images and cite the strong influence of key institutional factors (e.g., location, programs, facilities) in contributing to that image (Kazoleas, Kim, & Moffitt, 2001). This adds to the challenge faced by schools in developing an overall positive image because audiences might view one factor positively and another negatively. Since these factors are core to the institution they are central to image-building and, as such, reiterate the importance of presenting a positive image.

Factors Contributing to Image Development

Conversations with friends, previous interactions with an organization, prior encounters with an organization's employees, media exposure, and messages designed by the organization can influence the external stakeholders' perceptions of that organization (Moffit, 1994). Overall, the information an individual has about an organization, how it was acquired, and the congruency between new information and previously known information about the organization affects the development of an organization's image (Schuler, 2004). The effect of environmental factors and social contexts in influencing perceptions serves as a reminder that not all image-forming factors can be controlled by an organization as (Moffitt, 1994), as is made clear in crisis situations such as the allegations of sexual abuse experienced by Penn State. Again, this points to the importance of addressing those areas that institutions can regulate.

Among traditional students and their parents, academic and athletic-related factors, and news coverage of the university contribute to perceptions of university image (Arpan, Raney, & Zivnuska, 2003). Further, because students often are more concerned about how outsiders view their university than how they themselves view it (Sung & Yang, 2008), schools could benefit from distinguishing how their audience-specific message might appeal to a wider group. Likewise, because the image of a given school is relative to that of other schools (Ivy, 2001), the perception of image that a potential student holds can be more influential than the actual image. This suggests that certain units, such as a successful athletic department, can improve a university's overall reputation and increase both the quantity and quality of applicants (Anctil,

2008; Letawsky, Schneider, Pedersen, & Palmer, 2003). This is explained by the "halo effect" in which a team's success on the field or court is equated to other aspects of the university's offerings (Anctil, 2008). The connection between athletics and academics could be a positive inclusion in open house events because of the benefits it brings in creating a positive public perception of an institution that may otherwise go unnoticed. Further, it is something tangible to which people can identify.

It is also worth noting that as students' progress from freshman to senior year, they began to hold a less favorable view of the school's image, possibly due to unmet expectations (Cerit, 2006). Although within the boundaries of this study the views of enrolled students reflect organizational identity, Cerit's (2006) findings serve as a caution to HEIs that ongoing monitoring of the perceptions of existing members is critical to ensure a realistic portrayal the institution. Failing to do so might suggest to various stakeholders, including potential students, that the views of current members are being sacrificed in favor of catering to prospective students. This, in turn, could contribute to the new members' perceptions of the institution's image. Recognizing this strong link between identity and image also serves as a reminder of the circular influence between the two concepts and underscores the strong influence of both member and nonmember views to an organization.

In summary, messages about schools, both what they intentionally publish as well as what occurs beyond their control, often reach wider audiences than specifically are targeted. This information is highly influential to students' decision making about whether to affiliate with a specific school. As such, open house events offer multiple occasions to address and influence the needs and concerns of students and their parents. Further, they offer a unique and persuasive opportunity for HEIs to portray themselves accurately and favorably, helping to ensure a positive image to draw new members.

To better identify which aspects of an open house most effectively influence potential members, the Open House Assessment for Higher Education Institutions © was developed. The following research question is posed to determine if the tool is beneficial in identifying areas of strength or weakness at college open house events:

RQ: How can the self-assessment tool be used a useful resource for schools to use to adapt their open houses to be more effective in recruiting potential students?

Methods

The Assessment Tool

The Open House Assessment for Higher Education Institutions © (Appendix A) was created to evaluate college open house events. The included categories are based on previous research by the first author as well as extensive research on image-related factors that influence decision-making by students selecting colleges. The tool, which includes twenty-five open ended questions, several with multiple parts, was developed to be used by various school representatives as a self-assessment with the goal of identifying both strengths and areas of challenge in meeting potential students' needs. In doing so, schools have the opportunity to make their open houses more effective. Questions cover logistical information (e.g., parking, signage, registration), content and quality of information sessions (e.g., academics, extracurricular opportunities), institutional characteristics (e.g., majors/programs offered, reputation, financial issues, athletics, location, etc.), and intangible factors (e.g., the embodiment of the school's image, mission, and values).

The tool is primarily qualitative, with the inclusion of a three-scale quantitative measure to allow for limited statistical analyses, which is intended to complement the overall assessment. It is designed to encourage descriptive feedback from the evaluator. Because responses are highly subjective, this tool does not seek to be valid or reliable; instead, its strength is in the open-ended structure which encourages users to identify specific examples of strengths or challenges in each area being evaluated. As such, it is possible that wide-ranging responses might be received if multiple users assess a single event.

The tool assesses both the characteristics sought by potential students and the overall structure and content of the program, as these factors all contribute to the image that audiences develop of a school. Because it is intended as a self-assessment, it is important for the user to be aware of possible biases and to approach the event as would someone new to the organization.

To ensure that relevant categories were included in the assessment and that the format was reasonably structured, the tool was tested successfully during observations at three schools not included in the results presented here.

Data Collection

An online search was conducted to identify a comprehensive list of four-year colleges that hosted open house events within approximately 70 miles (a 1.5-hour drive) of Philadelphia. In addition, several other schools in New Jersey were added to the list to expand the sample. Schools with open houses that targeted a broad spectrum of potential students were identified; not included were schools with a specific focus on individual academic majors or that offered only tours or information sessions. The open houses identified were typically half- to full-day events and included some combination of presentations on academics, social life, financial aid, athletics, and resident life; information fairs; tours; and often refreshments.

Institutional Review Board approval was obtained for the observations, and an e-mail requesting permission to attend an open house event was sent to forty-two schools across Pennsylvania, Delaware, and New Jersey; a reminder followed approximately three weeks later. One school responded that it did not host open houses, and twenty-eight schools authorized attendance at their events. Upon further review, the events at one school were deemed too narrowly focused so the school was eliminated. Scheduling conflicts eliminated two additional schools, resulting in observations at twenty-five schools. Following an observation at a school, the research assistant reported that a strong religious message was evident throughout the event, and upon further research it was determined that the school self-identified as a fundamentally Christian university. Because the master list of schools was created to reflect institutions that might appeal to a broad range of students, including both public and private, large and small, and liberal arts and research, colleges with a narrow focus (e.g., fundamentally religious, technical, military, etc.) were not considered. As such, this school was also eliminated, leaving a final sample of twenty-four schools.

Either one of the authors or a student research assistant visited each school. A training session was held to review the assessment tool, identify distinctions in the quantitative rankings, and discuss guidelines for the observations, primarily that the research assistants should not interact with school representatives or other guests. The primary author sent a confirmation e-mail to each school prior to the observation and also requested an advance copy of the schedule because typically the observers were not registered for the event and thus unable to pick up a registration packet. If a schedule was not received, the research assistants were instructed to try to obtain one on the day of the event. Because all observers were from the communication

discipline, they were instructed to attend business presentations at schools where academic sessions were presented by major. This allowed for a more realistic experience because they would have no expectations about what should or might be discussed. All observers were directed to formalize their notes immediately following the observation and submit them the first day they were on campus after an observation, typically within 48 hours.

Data Analysis

The purpose of this self-assessment tool is to serve as a resource for university administrators, staff, and faculty to enhance the effectiveness of their open houses, which could result in greater recruiting potential. Its benefit is in its usability by various school representatives, which offers unique perspectives and encourages comparison and contrast of key image-related areas among users. As such, it is possible and beneficial for wide-ranging responses to occur if multiple users assess a single event.

The goal of this study is to determine if the tool is effective in identifying aspects of open houses that schools can address to improve their image among potential members. Although the tool is intended to identify university-specific issues at a school, for the purpose of this study the results were generalized. As such, the analysis of the data focused on identifying areas of strength, areas for improvement, unique features, and recurrent themes that might be indicative of the schools' image. Then, all schools were compared to identify any commonalities in these areas; subsequent recommendations are based on the collective findings.

Qualitative data. A grounded theoretical approach was used to analyze the data. Grounded theory involves the systematic gathering and analysis of data for the purpose of building theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This methodology is appropriate because the goal of this study is to better understand how schools present their image. Due to the abstract nature of the concept of image, this approach offers a more comprehensive understanding of how schools present and make tangible their image. Further, the combination of open and axial coding helps develop a structure for analysis. Creating this type of structure allows for the conceptualization of categories and patterns, as well as recognition of the relationships between and among those categories.

The coders individually evaluated the findings from the completed assessment tools of three sample schools and then collectively discussed the results to determine agreement among their interpretations. When observations were completed for all schools, the authors followed the same process, individually coding the completed forms for each school, noting areas of strengths and weaknesses, unique features, and themes. Open coding of the data was used to identify, label, and compare the emergent themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), and through the process of comparative analysis, these themes were reviewed and combined to highlight areas in which schools successfully and less successfully revealed some sense of their school's image.

Using these themes as a framework, a more deductive analysis was undertaken using axial coding to gain a more precise understanding of how image was created by schools. Axial coding is used to build connections within categories and subcategories to provide depth to the analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As a result of this detailed review, schools were grouped into the following categories by how effectively they addressed key areas: good to very good; adequate to good; average to poor; and poor. Based on these categorizations, short- and longer-term recommendations were developed.

Quantitative data. Each question included a three-point quantitative measure to indicate the observers' view of whether the issue being observed was addressed with poor (1), adequate (2), or superior (3) coverage. A summary of the rankings is included in Appendix B.

Results

Because this tool is designed to highlight issues specific to the school where it is employed during the observation of an open house, its value is in the interpretation of results for that individual school. Still, because most schools follow a similar format to their open houses, both in structure and content, there is a benefit to considering these findings collectively. The research question asked how the self-assessment is a useful resource for schools to adapt their open houses to be more effective in recruiting potential students. To determine that answer, the observations from twenty-four schools were cross-analyzed and rated based on how well the identified categories were addressed. These findings provide the basis for recommendations appropriate to all schools hosting open house events.

Value of the Tool

At each school visited, at least 10% of the categories being evaluated were ranked below average, with two schools having 39% of all categories ranked below average. In addition, there were several categories that were poorly addressed by most schools. In response to the research question, these findings suggest there are several areas in which the tool can be used as a resource and also that there might be adaptations beneficial to all schools. Further, depending on the areas needing improvement, possible resolution could be cost effective and easy to implement, potentially improving recruiting efforts.

Ratings of School Effectiveness in Addressing New Student Concerns

Good to very good. The category most effectively addressed by all schools was in the area of financial aid. This was the only category that was incorporated into every open house and for which no school received a quantitative ranking of one, which indicates below average coverage of the area. On the contrary, many schools addressed financial aid and cost information in multiple venues via information sessions, a table at the information fair, meetings with financial aid representatives, or through some combination of these options. Because cost concerns are a high priority for potential students (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Galotti, 1995), addressing the financial aspects associated with enrollment benefits the school by providing accurate expectations to students and parents. Balanced messages that present accurate representations as well as a positive image are important for organizations seeking to attract new members (Cable, Aiman-Smith, Mulvey, & Edwards, 2000).

Another area in which schools effectively addressed an image-related category was through representation of key roles, namely high-level administrators, faculty, students, and admissions staff. Still, although students played a visible and vital role in the event, there were incidents of "clumping" at several school in which students would congregate and interact with one another instead of initiating contact with guests. Although some students were clearly enthusiastic ambassadors for their schools, others were equally reluctant and seemingly uncomfortable at having to approach strangers. There were also scattered incidents of student representative texting during different events resulting in limited interaction.

Another area that appeared to be well-addressed was campus tours. All schools offered tours, with some schools offering additional department- or building-specific tours. However, due to time and budget constraints, as well as the restriction of not engaging with university

representatives or other guests, the observers participated in tours only when they were incorporated as a mandatory part of the schedule. As such, the tours themselves were not evaluated, which might have resulted in a different evaluation.

Adequate to good. Registration was generally well-handled at schools that required guests to check in. The schools that received lower scores had overcrowding at registration. In a few cases, more staff would have helped to alleviate the problem; however, in several cases the location of the registration tables caused congestion. Some schools were limited by the configuration of their space, but other schools appeared to have had additional options, which raises the question of whether due consideration was given to the increased number of participants several schools indicated they were experiencing, versus simply adhering to an existing process for the convenience of the school over the participants.

The adequacy of directions provided to campus varied widely. Although all schools included directions on their web sites, there were occasions when signs leading to campus were obstructed or missing, or when nearby roadwork affected accessibility. In some cases only a primary entrance was clearly marked, causing problems for guests who may approach using a different route. However, it is reasonable to believe that materials provided to those who pre-registered for the open house might include additional or updated directional information that might not have been available to the research assistants who received no materials beforehand.

Poor to average. While the presence of students as registrants, tour guides, and informational resources was apparent at all schools, representatives of student organizations were limited at several schools, including schools that did and did not host an information fair as part of the day. Among schools with limited student organization representation, it appeared that willingness might be the only criterion for attendance, as there were random and sporadic combinations of academic, social, and external organizations (e.g. R.O.T.C). Of potential damage to image were unoccupied tables with name placards that drew attention to the missing organization possibly leading to questions about professionalism or credibility.

Other areas in which there was a gap in addressing tangible features that research consistently indicates as relevant to potential members included size, location, academic programs, faculty, social life, and athletics. Although most schools addressed several of these characteristics at some point throughout the day, it was often perfunctory, providing the same statistics or information that could be found in viewbooks or online. Additional omissions within this category included minimal representation of alumni and the school mascot, both of which were among the most poorly represented categories across schools.

Poor. Adequate directional signage at virtually all schools consistently was problematic. At many schools the standard appeared to be that guests were well-guided from the parking area to the initial starting point, via signage, volunteers, or a combination of both. Likewise, at schools that included an opening session, an abundance of volunteers generally were present to direct guests to their first session. However, from that point forward the presence of campus guides diminished drastically, causing guests to rely on signage and maps, if provided. In many cases signage was sparse and poorly visible. Some specific issues included limited height, inappropriate construction materials (e.g., foam signs on windy days), printing on only one side, clustering of multiple signs, and colors blending into the background.

The lack of an evaluation process was also noted. While this may have a greater impact on the school than potential students, it is nonetheless an important and valuable component to any event. Only two schools included evaluation forms; another indicated that one would follow

via e-mail. Other schools might likewise follow up electronically, but this was not made clear to participants during the course of the day.

Another area that was deficient was in the manifestation of a unique image. Although some schools addressed specific aspects of their open house in a unique manner, overall, there was a cookie-cutter approach to both the content and structure of the open houses observed. Several schools overtly stated the characteristics that they believed made them a worthwhile choice or that distinguished them from their peers, but these claims were often synonymous with other aspects of the schools, such as size or mission. Further, there was little evidence beyond their brief comments to suggest that schools were voicing a distinct image specific to their institution. Because of continually increasing competition among schools, along with increasing calls for accountability for what a degree can provide to a graduate, this is a critical area of concern for schools.

Discussion and Recommendations

This study was conducted to determine how the open house assessment tool can be a useful resource for schools in adapting their open houses to be more effective in recruiting potential students. Based on the identification of multiple areas for improvement across schools, combined with overwhelming average ratings in most categories, it appears as though all schools in the study could improve in at least one area, with most schools doing well to consider modifications in several categories. A desirable and accurate organizational image is crucial to schools to create an effective match between institution and student. Providing a positive and realistic image and projecting that image effectively and consistently can be advantageous to schools by creating a better fit to ensure both improved enrollment and retention (Anctil, 2008; Helgesen, 2008). As such, it appears that the assessment tool can benefit a variety of school types, both in identifying areas for improvement and also highlighting characteristics that distinguish it from other institutions.

Although the tool is designed for use at individual schools, collective findings from this study reveal several areas for improvement that might benefit any school hosting open houses. This section offers general recommendations, divided into quick fixes and longer-term options, for schools to consider when planning their events.

Quick Fixes

Develop the positives. The categories schools addressed best can be attributed, at least in part, to the comprehensiveness with which they addressed them. As noted, all schools fully addressed issues associated with finances, a key area of concern for students and parents, via multiple platforms. Other areas that are frequently cited as concerns might likewise be considered for further discussion during open houses. For example, safety and security were frequently questioned by potential students and their parents. Although some schools in the study were located in higher-risk areas, minimal attention was given to this topic. Because questions about safety are likely to be asked regardless of a school's location, it would be more appropriate for schools to anticipate the concern. Doing so allows them to frame a clear and comprehensive response, and demonstrate their awareness and actions related to a serious issue.

Address the tangibles. A myriad of research consistently identifies several characteristics across gender, geography, and socioeconomic groups as influencing students' decision making during the college selection process. Included among these are majors/programs offered, reputation, cost and availability of aid, extracurricular/sporting opportunities, location,

and atmosphere (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Galotti, 1994; Henrickson, 2002; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Kelpe Kern, 2000; Letawsky et al., 2003). Given the relevance of these issues to potential students, schools should specifically address each in some way during the open house. For example, assuming that their presence on campus suggests that attendees know all they need to about the location deprives the school of the opportunity to provide an overview of the benefits of such a location. Making connections between local resources (e.g., the city in which the school is located or to which it is adjacent, historical sites nearby, partnering organizations where students intern) paints a clearer picture about the advantages of attending a particular school. Likewise, it provides a frame of reference for extracurricular opportunities (e.g., one hour away from a beach or skiing; two hours by train to a major city) while more comprehensively addressing a key area identified as important to students.

Another way to gauge open house effectiveness is to include an evaluation process. To encourage feedback from all participants, schools might consider offering an incentive such as a school sweatshirt or gift card for the bookstore. Having a clearly defined place to drop off paper-and-pen forms, such as a table at the information fair, would also allow another opportunity for interaction and perhaps informal feedback from attendees. Alternately, sending a follow-up message including a link to an evaluation site and an incentive opportunity, would offer relationship-building opportunities with the potential member.

Maximize available representation. The opportunity to speak to individuals associated with the school allows potential members to seek clarification or question issues otherwise unaddressed. Because public behaviors exhibited by an organization influence the favorability of its reputation (Alessandri, Yang, & Kinsey, 2006; Nguyen & Leblanc, 2002), this more candid dialog could provide additional insights that influence students' decision-making in determining whether or not to affiliate with the school. As noted, there was a clear presence of students across campuses. However, at several schools students spent more time clustering with each other than interacting with the guests. Schools should ensure that the training provided to students teaches them the mission of the school and how it contributes to organizational image (Cochran, 1986), articulates the purpose of the event, and ensures that they are comfortable approaching and engaging people of varying ages. Further, both students and administrators were notably less visible after opening events. A clear plan or schedule should ensure a more equally distributed presence of knowledgeable ambassadors throughout the day.

Within the student population, student athletes have been found to be a draw for potential students (Anctil, 2008). Some schools had panels specifically targeted toward student athletes, while others had a table at student fairs. However, representation was inconsistent. Given the number of athletic teams at many schools and that open houses occur in different seasons, it is reasonable to expect that representatives from various teams could have a role in the day. Further, panels are likely to draw student athletes, but could result in missed opportunities to engage other students who may enjoy being spectators or showing school spirit. Likewise, having the school mascot in attendance promotes spirit and a team-oriented focus, while adding a lighter element to the day.

Another group that can offer a unique perspective to guests is alumni. Although it may be difficult to entice alumni to attend weekend events, the inclusion of even a few representatives at a clearly marked table at a central location such as the registration area or information fair demonstrates their affinity for and commitment to the school. Alumni can offer feedback on the school and programs, as well as insights about how their education has benefitted them.

Parent organizations are another group well-positioned to present a positive and sought perspective on various aspects of the university. As with alumni, the presence of parents is a testimony to the credibility of the school. Parents should be clearly identified; for example, wearing a name tag that says "Proud parent of Anthony, Class of 2012," or some other similar adornment that clearly links them to the school.

Longer-term Options

Signage. Signage was a consistently problematic issue across schools. For many schools, particularly those with large campuses, developing adequate and functional signage could be cost prohibitive. Likewise, construction or expansion could render signage inadequate in short order. Still, directional aid is necessary at open house events to make access to the campus easier for visitors. Several schools included a campus map, although this was typically part of a package handed to the students at registration and was a standard, detailed campus map. As such it did not necessarily highlight areas relevant to the open house. Creating maps with extraneous labeling removed so that only those facilities in use during the event are highlighted could ease confusion for guests and help maintain adherence to the schedule. Also, printing the map on the back of the schedule makes it convenient for visitors to keep track of one piece of paper during the day. Schools could also plan a dry-run of the event, ideally seeking assistance from people unfamiliar with the campus to indicate locations or directions they find confusing. In the absence of clear signage, student representatives should be visible throughout the day to direct people between sessions.

Logistics. Although open houses were generally well-run and efficient, several schools experienced higher than expected attendance resulting in crowding, particularly during registration and opening sessions. The frequency with which this occurred and the comments shared by the schools suggested that it was an increasingly common and desired occurrence. Although many schools may be limited by their facilities, alternatives should be determined beforehand. This might include broadcasting well-attended sessions such as opening comments to different locations or identifying and clearly labeling multiple registration sites. It appeared as though some schools may be adhering to long-used practices for their own convenience, rather than adapting their set-up to make it easier for students and their families to navigate.

Image. Maintaining an image attractive to potential members is critical to HEIs because it influences both recruitment and retention by distinguishing schools from their competition (Anctil, 2008; Helgesen, 2008). Thus, while it is unrealistic to expect that schools can comprehensively address every issue of concern to all potential members, all university open house representatives should be made aware of the tremendous influence of image on the decision-making of potential students to pursue affiliation with a school, and informed that a high percentage of potential students visit the school to which they ultimately enroll (Zinch, 2009). Further, because of the amorphous nature image, the concept can be interpreted differently by various people; indeed, students often indicate that there is some quality about certain schools that draws them, although they have difficulty articulating what that is (Pampaloni, 2010; Zinch, 2009). As such, it is imperative for schools to make the intangibles tangible (Anctil, 2008) and to consider all aspects of the open house and how they might influence potential members so that school administrators can give thoughtful consideration to how different aspects of their institution are presented. Likewise, distinguishing themselves from other schools by incorporating unique, "trademark" elements, such as an outstanding alumnus or

a noteworthy event, throughout their open house would further link a positive image to a specific university.

Limitations

Testing the Open House Assessment for Higher Education Institutions © at multiple schools revealed consistent issues that universities might consider when planning their open houses to more effectively address the concerns of potential students. In planning an open house or in using the tool for assessment, there are some limitations that should be considered.

Although the tool was reviewed with all observers prior to use, limited resources restricted the ability to collectively pre-test it during an actual open house event. As such, there was not a communal assessment to determine uniformity among responses. Because the tool does not seek to be valid or reliable and its benefit is in its ease of use by virtually any observer, however, it is believed that the findings discussed here are reasonable and of value to a wide range of schools.

Also, an effort was made to attend open house events targeted at general populations; however, coordinating open house schedules with observers' availability resulted in attending some events that were specific to high school juniors, seniors, and/or students who had already been accepted for admission. In discussion with the observers, there seemed to be little variance between these events that would indicate the findings from these schools differ notably from the other schools observed.

Finally, the sample schools were all located in a geographically proximate area, which may have influenced the findings. However, because the schools observed represented a variety of school types including small and large, private and public, teaching-focused and research-focused, combined with the individual benefits to be achieved by the assessment, this limitation is considered minor.

Conclusion

Although applicable to virtually any university, this assessment recognizes that no single tool can effectively address every aspect of an event. It is not intended to be a quick-fix or cure-all for the myriad of issues that challenge universities in maintaining enrollments. However, the categories included in this assessment were drawn from extensive research across the fields of education and communication and are specific to characteristics sought by students searching for a college; thus it provides schools with a practical and relevant guide to evaluate their offerings. It is an excellent first step for self-evaluation that might result in direct identification of ways to enhance strong areas or address those areas that are less effective. As such, it is a valuable resource for schools to identify key contribution of their organizational image which may ultimately result in creating a better fit with potential students and ensuring their commitment to the organization.

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Appendix A
Open House Assessment for Higher Education Institutions (HEI)©

School Name: **Date:**

Logistics

- √ +   1.   Were clear and accurate directions provided on the web site or with registration materials?

- √ +   2.   Is visible and accurate signage posted throughout campus (to parking, registration, between venues)?

- √ +   3.   Are volunteers easily identifiable (uniform shirts/name tags) and available? Are they visible at various venues and helpful in guiding visitors between events?

- √ +   4.   Are the start times for registration and events clearly defined? Adhered to?

Registration

- √ +   5.   Is the registration fully staffed and functioning at the posted start time? By whom?

- √ +   6.   Are guests directed to a starting point (e.g. refreshments, tours, next session)?

- √ +   7.   Do registration packets include relevant and useful information (e.g. schedule, campus map, tour schedule, list of participants, follow-up information)?

- √ +   8.   Are refreshments available? If not, how do guests spend their time waiting for the event to begin (e.g. are they visiting information tables, talking to volunteers, waiting on their own)?

- √ +   9.   Is there a "Welcome Session" to start the day? Who is the speaker? What is the focus?

Information Sessions/Events

             10.   Are representatives available from:

- √ +   all schools/majors?

- √ +   financial aid?

- √ +   student organizations?

- √ +   11.   Are there different events simultaneously? Is it possible for a student to attend each event at some point during the day?

- √ +   12.   Do presentations begin/end on time? Is the length of time appropriate?

- √ +   13.   Are speakers informative? Engaging? What are the key presentation points? Do speakers embody the image of the school?

- √ +   14.   Are questions adequately answered?

Tours:

- √ +   15.   Are tours available?

- √ +   16.   Are starting times and locations clear?

- √ +   17.   Are tour guides providing a consistent message?

- √ +   18.   Is there a maximum number per group? How is overflow handled?

Institutional characteristics

How are the following characteristics addressed/represented at the open house?

- √ +   19.   administration (e.g. admissions, president)

- √ +   20.   alumni

- √ +   21.   athletes

- √ +   22.   cost/financial aid

- √ +   23.   facilities (including technology)

- √ +   24.   faculty

- √ +   25.   location

- √ +   26.   mascot

- √ +   27.   programs

- √ +   28.   research

- √ +   29.   security

- √ +   30.   size

- √ +   31.   social life

- √ +   32.   students

Wrap-up:

- √ +   33.   Is there a final event or speaker? (e.g., how do you know when you are done?) Are representatives available to continue discussion?

- √ +   34.   Is a follow-up mechanism identified (e.g., evaluation form, request for more information, contact information)?

Image

- √ +   35.   What is the image of the school? How is image presented?

- √ +   36.   How is the uniqueness of the school represented?

Appendix B

Rankings for Open House Assessment

	size	pub/prv	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10A	10B	10C	11	12	13	14	16	17	18	19	20	21	22A	22B	22C	22D	22E	22F	23A	23B	23C	23D	23E	23F	23G	23H	24	25
A	S	prv	2	1	2	2	2	2	1.5	2	2	2	2	2	3	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2.5	1	2	1	2	2	2	2	1	2	2	1	2	2
B	S	prv	n/a	1	3	1.5	2	2.5	3	3	2	2	3	2	3	2	2.5	2	2	2	n/a	n/a	1.5	1	3	2	3	1	2	1	1.5	1	1	3	1	1	2	1	2	1
C	S	prv	2	2	1	2	2	2	3	3	2	2	2	2	3	2	3	2	2	2	2	2	1	3	2	2	2	1	2	1	3	2	3	3	2	2	2	1	3	3
D	S	prv	1	1	2	2	3	2	2	1.5	2	2	2	1	1	1.5	2	2	2	2.5	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	1	1	1	2	1	1	2	1	2	2
E	L	prv	3	1	2	3	3	2	3	3	3	2	2	2	3	3	1	1	2	2		2	1	2	2	1	1	2	1	2	1	1	2	2	1	2	2	1	3	2
F	M	prv	2	1	3	2	2	2	2	3	2	2	2	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	2	3	1	2	1	1	2	1	2	1	3	1	3	1	1	2	2
G	M	prv	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	2	2	1.5	2	2	2	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	2	2	2	1	2	1	2	2	2	2	1	1	2	n/a	n/a	1
H	M	prv	2	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	2	2	2	2	1	1	1	2	1.5	3	2	2	1	1	1	2	2
I	M	prv	1	2	2	1	3	2	2	2	2	2	3	2	1	1	n/a	n/a	3	3	3	n/a	1		3	2	2	1	2	2	2	1.5	3	3	2	2	1	1	2	2
J	L	pub	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	2	1.5	2	2	3	n/a	n/a	n/a	2	1	3	2	2	1	1	1	2	2	3	3	2	3	2	1	1	1
K	S	prv	2	1	1.5	2	1	2	3	1.5	2	2	2	1	2	1.5	2	2	2	2	2	n/a	1.5	1.5	2.5	2	2	2	1	2	2	2	2.5	2	3	2	2	2	2	2
L	S	prv	2	1	1	2	2	2	2	2	1	2	2	1	2.5	n/a	1	2	2	3	2	3	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	1	2	2	1	3	1	3	2	1	2	1
M	S	prv	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2.5	2.5	2	2	2.5	2.5	2	2	2	n/a	n/a	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	2	1	2	2	2	2	1.5	2	1	1	2	2
N	M	pub	3	2	3	3	3	2	n/a	2	1	2	2	2	3	3	3	2	3	2	2	3	1	2	2	2	2	1	3	3	1	1	1	2	1	1	1	1	2	1
O	M	prv	2	3	3	3	3	3	2	3	1	3	3	2	2	3	2	1.5	2	2	2	3	1	2	2	3	2	1	2	3	3	3	2	2	2	3	2	1	2	2
P	M	prv	1	1	2	1	1	2	2	2	3	2	3	2	2	1	3	3	2	1	1	1	1	2	3	2	2	2	2	1	1	2	2	3	2	3	3	2	2	3
Q	S	prv	2	1	3	2	2	2	3	2	2	2	3	2	2	1	2	3	1	n/a	n/a	1	2	2	2	2	2	1	3	2	3	2	2	3	2	1	3	2	2	2
R	M	pub	2	2	3	2	2	3	n/a	1	2	2	2	1	1	2	2	1	3	2	n/a	n/a	2	1	2	2	2	1	1	1	3	2	2	2	2	2	1	1	3	1
S	M	prv	1	2	1	2	2	2	2.5	2.5	1	2	3	1	2	1.5	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	2	2	1.5	2	1.5	2.5	1	2	2.5	1	2.5	3	2	1	1	2	2
T	M	pub	2	1	2	2	2.5	2	2	2	2	3	2	1	2	2	2	1.5	2	2	2	3	1	1	2	2	2	1	2.5	3	3	3	2.5	3	3	1	1	3	2	2
U	M	pub	1	1	2	2	2	1	2	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	3	3	2	1	1	1	1	1	1	2	2	1	1	1	3	2	3	2	2	1	2	3	2	3
V	L	pub	2	3	3		2	2	2	2	1	1	2	2	2	2	3	3	2	3	2	2	1	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	2	2	2	2	3	2	2	2	2	2
W	L	pub	2	2	3	3	2	2	3	3	1	3	3	1	2	2	3	3	3	3	n/a	n/a	2	3	3	3	2	2	1	1	3	3	2	3	3	2	2	3	3	2
X	M	prv	2	2	2.5	1.5	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	1	1.5	1	2	2	2	n/a	n/a	n/a	2	3	2	2	2	1	1	3	2	3	1	2	2	2	1	1	1	1
MCA N:			1.8	1.6	2.3	2	2.1	2.1	2.2	2.1	1.8	2.1	2.3	1.5	2.1	1.8	2.2	2.1	2.1	2.1	2	2.1	1.4	1.7	2.2	2	1.3	2	1.6	1.4	2.1	2	1.9	2.4	1.8	1.9	1.8	1.3	2.1	1.8