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Colleges Push Paper as Students Head Online

The deepest digital divide in higher education may be between colleges and prospective students. In the three years that Lipman Hearne has conducted the *Web Site Effectiveness Study* to survey prospective students on their preferred sources of college information, college Web sites have consistently outranked college viewbooks and brochures in importance. Prospective students indicate that college Web sites rank second only to a campus visit in importance as a source of information in their college search. Yet colleges are slow to respond, investing far less in their Web sites than in traditional channels, according to another study, Lipman Hearne's *2001 Integrated Marketing Survey*.*

The *Web Site Effectiveness Study (WSES)* is an online survey conducted with prospective students to provide colleges and universities with an assessment of the effectiveness of their Web sites on a number of important measures. The data in this release is drawn from studies of national research/doctoral universities conducted in 1999 and 2001. The 1999 study featured responses from 715 prospective students, and the 2001 study polled 508 respondents.

Lipman Hearne's *2001 Integrated Marketing Survey** of 419 U.S. colleges and universities, conducted in collaboration with the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education, indicates that although some colleges have invested heavily in their Web sites, most institutions have not increased their Web budgets in the past year. The *Integrated Marketing Survey* finds that, on average, the share of marketing dollars devoted to Web sites by colleges and universities has stayed stagnant at 5 percent since 2000. The rationale for a more robust Web presence, however, is well justified by the value prospective students place on college Web sites.

* The *Integrated Marketing Survey* is an annual survey that monitors marketing staffing, allocations, approaches, and impact at U.S. colleges and universities.

“College investments in the Web lag far behind students’ needs,” says Tom Abrahamson, CEO of Lipman Hearne. “We find from the *2001 Integrated Marketing Survey* that colleges invest eight times as much in publications as in Web sites – 40 percent of the average marketing budget is spent on publications, versus only 5 percent on the Web site. Yet students in the past couple of years have consistently rated college Web sites as more important than viewbooks in their search process.”

Online and Impressionable

Visiting college campuses and college Web sites have remained the two top sources of information about colleges for prospective students in the three years that Lipman Hearne has conducted the *Web Site Effectiveness Study*. CD-ROMs, while more highly rated in 2001 than in 1999, still remain at the very bottom of the list of 13 information sources. The ratings of the importance of college viewbooks and guidebooks stayed constant since 1999. (See Table A.)

Students actively use college Web sites to identify and evaluate institutions they might attend. Survey respondents rate college sites as most important when identifying initial college choices and selecting colleges to which they will apply. Web sites were less influential in later stages of the process, as students made final decisions about which college to attend. (See Table B.)

College Web sites generally have a favorable impact on students. The *Web Site Effectiveness Study* indicates that exposure to a college’s Web site increases interest in the institution. While the *WSES* showed diminished interest by students in a few instances, in most cases impressions of the colleges improved and interest in the institutions increased after the Web site visits.

Starting Young and Surfing Faster

Prospective students are beginning their college search online sooner, have faster access, and want more multimedia content than they did in 1999. In that year, only 9 percent of respondents said that they had surfed for college information in the 9th grade or earlier. Today, 24 percent say they began looking for college information in 9th grade or sooner.

In 1999, only 34 percent of students had 56K or faster Internet access. In 2001, 62 percent of prospective students say they surf with 56K or faster access (See Table C). As a result, we note fewer complaints about download speed and a surge of interest in features that require higher bandwidth, such as a virtual campus tour and online application (See Table D).

Students seem to expect more interactive Web content from institutions that claim to be technologically advanced. This expectation was expressed by a survey respondent: “They

need to look at making their Web page more exciting. It seems as if they have an excellent engineering program, and if this information is correct, then they should know what the new technology can do. Today the most exciting pages are interactive.”

Students, however, don't appear much more ready than they were in 1999 for secure fee payment. And prospective students express little interest in student and faculty chat and student home pages, although current students are rated as an influential information source. (See Tables A and D.)

What Students Want in a College Web Site

Prospective students rated school contact information and a contact form the two most important elements on a college Web site, followed by the quality of information and quality of navigation. Factors such as visual appeal, uniqueness, and interactive features were rated lower. Personalization ranked last in the list of nine attributes measured.

Although students rated content as more important than visual appeal, when asked what they liked and disliked about the site, many respondents focused on visual aspects such as layout, color, design, and images. Students notice when college sites resemble a patchwork of independently designed department pages. Said one respondent: “The different sections of the Web site seemed to have designs strikingly different from others. I would like it if all pages were alike in design, rather than feeling like I had transferred to a totally different site.”

Sites Students Like

Students named the College Board the most valuable site for information about colleges. More than 75 percent of respondents named the College Board site as valuable, almost twice as many respondents as those who named *U.S. News* and *FastWeb.com*, the next most-popular sites. (See Table E.)

When asked to name an impressive college Web site, the institution sites that surfaced the most in 2001 were Purdue University, followed by Duke University, Ohio State University, Northwestern University, and Stanford University.

Recommendations

It is clear that prospective students actively use college Web sites and that the sites influence their decisions. Students equate the quality of a college Web site with the quality of the institution itself. A dull Web site suggests a less than dynamic institution, and an inconsistent Web site signals that the college may not be well organized. Testing the site for usability and impact is essential to ensure that this important communications channel meets student needs as well as institutional objectives.

The following are a few “dos” and “don’ts” for college Web sites. These recommendations are based on the *Web Site Effectiveness Study (WSES)*, which has been used to test more than two-dozen college Web sites with more than 15,000 college-bound students.

DO

- Make the admissions and financial aid pages prominent links on the home page. These areas are the primary interest of prospective students, who want to get there in a single click.
- Include the links “About Us” and “Contact Us” (linked to a contact form) in the upper level/global navigation system. Note that contact information is the most important element on a college Web site, according to prospective students.
- Test your navigation system to make sure it is intuitive to prospective students. What seems logical to an adult Web designer who “lives” in the institution may not appear all that obvious to a teenage prospective student.
- Provide an admitted student profile. Prospects want to know how they measure up. A common refrain in the surveys is: “Show statistics of students who have been accepted, such as SATs, ACTs, GPA, class rank.”
- Include a Frequently Asked Questions page. It is an easy way to make sure that students’ core concerns are quickly and directly addressed.

DON’T

- Cram the page full of text – use pictures, subheads, and links to break up and break out the information so that is easier to scan and digest on a computer screen. As one *WSES* respondent noted: “Students hate reading, at least the students I know. I know colleges have to put information on the Web sites, but after a certain point, we just don’t want to read anymore!”
- Make information available only in Acrobat format. Students don’t like to have to download plug-ins to access information. If you do provide Acrobat files, make sure that there is a brief text description that users can read to determine whether they should download the document.
- Use posed pictures of current students – prospective students are adept at picking out

stock art or staged pictures (an overabundance of pictures of students dressed in college logo gear is a dead giveaway).

Charts & Tables

Table A

Importance of Sources of College Information

Sources of Information	1999	2001
Visit to a College Campus	4.77	4.68
Individual College Web Sites	4.07	4.11
High School Admissions Seminar	3.64	4.00
College Guidebooks	3.82	3.89
Brochures from College	3.88	3.88
Current Students	4.21	3.86
Parents	N/A	3.72
Teachers	N/A	3.70
Letters/E-mail from College Counselors	3.57	3.67
Guidance Counselors	N/A	3.65
Friends	N/A	3.57
Alumni	3.61	3.23
CD-ROM	2.78	3.21

Rated on a 5-point scale: 1 = Not at all important. 5 = Very important.

Table B

Rated on a 5-point scale: 1 = Not at all important. 5 = Very important.

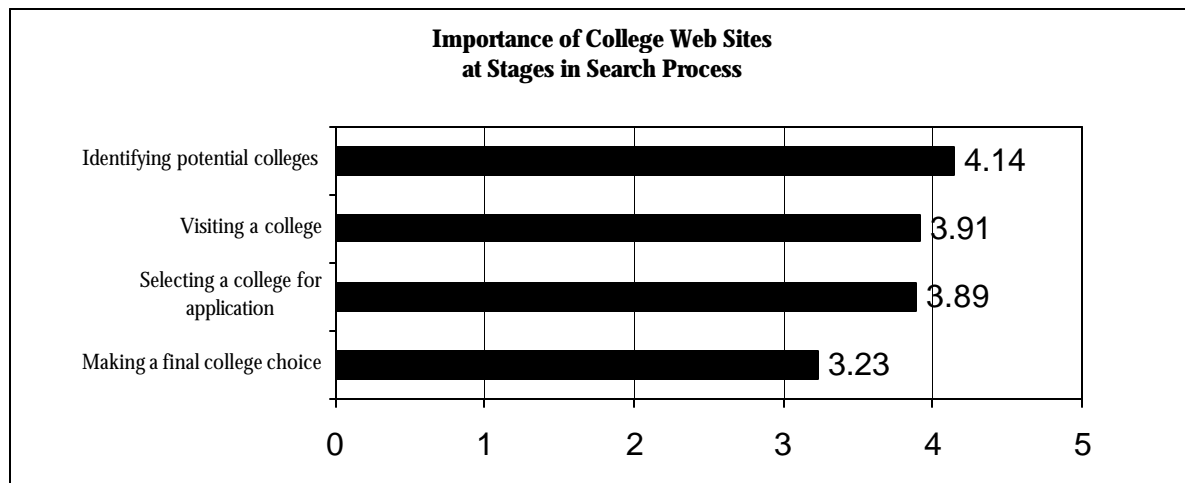


Table C

Internet Access Speed

Access Speed	1999	2001
Less than 56K Modem	35%	11%
56K or Faster	34%	65%
Don't Know	31%	24%

Table D

Most Important Features on College Web Sites

Web Site Features	1999	2001
Online Application	3.43	4.00
Virtual Campus Tour	3.43	3.97
FAQ Page	N/A	3.90
Site Search Engine	N/A	3.66
Enrolled Student Profile	N/A	3.59
Secure Fee Payment	3.40	3.57
Student/Faculty Directory	N/A	3.17
Student Faculty Chat Rooms	3.39	2.88
Student Home Pages	2.71	2.85

Rated on a 5-point scale: 1 = Not at all important. 5 = Very important

Table E

Web Sites Found Valuable in College Search

Site	Percentage citing importance
College Board	72%
FastWEB	36%
Yahoo	35%
US News & World Report	34%
Peterson's	21%
College Net	19%
AOL	15%
MSN	15%
Embark	9%
Netscape	8%
Excite	7%
Other Search Engines	7%