

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF CAMPUS VISITATIONS TO COLLEGE CHOICE AND STRATEGIC ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT

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The reasons a student may choose a particular institution when seeking a postsecondary education are many. However, campus visitation—more specifically, the campus tour—is frequently cited as the most important aspect of the college recruitment process. Correspondingly, in a hypercompetitive and fiscally afflicted higher education market, admissions officers are under immense pressure to attract new students and increase financial yield. As a result, marketers of higher education admissions have turned their attention to prioritizing the pivotal nature of a campus visit, and the overwhelming effect it has on both prospective students and higher education administrators. This article explores influences that affect a student's college choice and explains why campus visitation is the most important part of the recruitment process. Additionally, it reviews approaches and implications pertaining to campus visits and offers example-based suggestions on how enrollment managers can make visitations to their institutions fortuitous.

Introduction

One of the biggest challenges institutions of higher education face is their ability to recruit new students, thereby increasing enrollment numbers accordingly. This task is inherently both daunting and complex, yet fundamentally necessary. With consistently changing technological and economic climates—and

the processes of recruitment and enrollment being cyclical—administrators must perpetually devote adequate resources (i.e., time and money) to the examination and application of strategies requisite for successful enrollment management. Marketing and admissions for higher education is big business, and in today's competitive market fraught with deteriorating

endowments and acute budget cutting, the stakes are higher than ever for institutions to not only reach out to the greatest number of students possible but also to “seal the deal” in a proficient and cost-effective manner. From initial contact through registering for classes, every step counts. As a result, many institutions are seeing the need to reorient their respective enrollment strategies and admissions practices in attempts to stay viable or remain a pacesetter among peers. For most, rejuvenation begins locally with the courting of high school seniors and revolves around one central component of the recruitment process: the campus visit—as campus visitation is often the most influential reason for specified college choice.

Influences on College Choice in a Digital Age

Effectively communicating to prospective students the benefits of enrolling at a specific institution is perhaps the greatest charge of a higher education marketer (Johnston, 2010). Gone are the days of mailings, brochures, college fairs, and periodical advertising. As we live in a “digital age” where information is easily disseminated and obtained with just the click of a mouse or a tap on a phone, “high-tech” tools such as interactive multimedia and virtual realities, web-based forums, and social media platforms (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, etc.) are changing how people communicate and receive information. For example, in a 2010 study prepared by the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth (UMASSD), researchers found that 100% of university and college admissions offices were utilizing at least one form of social media in the recruitment process (Barnes & Lescault, 2011). As such, marketers of higher education are not only altering their communication efforts with potential students; they are also targeting the precise factors that most heavily influence a prospective student’s decision on college choice. These influences can—and do—cover a broad spectrum, ranging from that of printed materials to social media platforms, to websites, to interpersonal communications with friends and family, to interactions with current and former students, to campus visits, and even cold-calls and text messages from admissions personnel (Hesel, 2004; Johnston, 2010; Noel-Levitz, 2017; Smith, 2005).

For many students, college choice is a multifarious venture filled with a dose of emotions, rational and irrational thoughts, and conjecture from family members, friends, and other outside voices (counselors, teachers, web sources, etc.) (Hoover, 2010; Johnston, 2010; Smith, 2005). Conjointly, prospective students are regularly inundated with a bevy of facts, figures, anecdotes, opinions, and other assorted forms of stimuli from which they base their decisions—decisions that often come with lifelong consequences and a hefty price tag (Hoover, 2010). Therefore, students, parents, and admissions officers alike must carefully evaluate each element of the decision process, prioritizing importance over preference.

Despite the prominent roles social media and the internet play in everyday life, people still conduct themselves in a physical world (Fleming & Grace, 2015). And while many of the previously mentioned factors do influence the decision process, “high-touch” experiences such as the campus visit tend to bear more weight than their “high-tech” counterparts. Accordingly, the campus visit—be it a tour, an open house, a fly-in, an overnight stay, or some other student-oriented event—is overwhelmingly the single most influential source of information for students in their decision on college choice (Brown, 2010; Hesel, 2004; Okerson, 2016). Chimes and Gordon (2008) avow:

Web sites, view books, conversations with alumni, guidebooks and admission reps all provide important clues about a school, but a campus visit is the best way to see if a school is right for you (p. 27).

Why the Campus Visit Is Crucial

Campus visitations are equally important to students—and their families—as they are to enrollment managers. From a student perspective, the campus visit provides a highly personalized and “real” way to make a satisfactory college decision based on psychosocial factors and serves a decisive test for how students perceive they will fit in once enrolled (Nora, 2004; Okerson, 2016). In other words, the visit is a brief trial run at what life might look like at that institution. Consequently, the campus visit serves as a powerful stratagem in the decision-making process. In a study performed by Okerson (2016), participants indicated that campus visitations

were “a glimpse into their potential future,” and interactions met while visiting made the prospect more “real” (p. 48). Similarly, Fleming and Grace (2015) performed a study in Australia wherein students that spent a day visiting the University of Canberra (UC) stated they could envision themselves as university students having experienced what their lives might be like if enrolled there.

Comparable studies further support a correlative relationship between campus visitation and enrollment. For instance, a three-year longitudinal study performed at Midwestern State University (MSU)—with a sample of 23,187 students—concluded that students who visit campus are twice as likely to matriculate as students who do not (Brown, 2010). Likewise, California State University Northridge (CSUN) hosted an open house event for prospective students wherein they incorporated a participant-satisfaction survey to assess the effectiveness of their event in relation to acceptance rates at CSUN. More than 80% of the survey respondents confirmed that the open house event contributed to their desire to attend CSUN (Fischbach, 2006). Further still, a more recent study administered by Noel-Levitz (2017) found campus visitations (e.g., open house events, overnight stays, and weekend visits) to be at least 90% effective when used as a marketing and recruitment practice. Finally, a survey conducted by StudentPoll and the Art & Science Group endorses the value of a campus visit, as 65% of polled students indicated that over all other influential factors, the campus visit was most important (Hesel, 2004). From the poll’s findings Hesel (2004) propounds:

What we learned is that nearly all students—of every academic ability and income level—are visiting college campuses (and most reported visiting their first and second-choice schools). The findings point out that the hospitable nature of the community and the friendliness of the people students encountered during these visits had a significant positive impact on their interest in a school. Moreover, seeing facilities of interest to them, talking to professors, and attending classes made students more interested in the institution that ultimately became their first-choice school. (para. 4)

From an administrative perspective, research suggests that yield often increases markedly as students who

visit campuses are more likely to enroll. For example, in 2013, after hosting 1,300 accepted students to an overnight campus experience event, Dartmouth University saw yield for the class of 2018 rise to 52%—making them the only Ivy League institution to see an increase that year (Baskin, 2015). Similarly, in a more comprehensive study conducted in 2014, Ramapo College (New Jersey) hosted an array of campus visitation events (campus tours, open houses, admitted student days, and dean’s receptions) for prospective students—and the results were staggering. After taking part in campus tours, 87% of potential students said they were “highly or very interested” in enrolling at Ramapo (Hope, 2015, p. 4). Likewise, 88% of students who attended one of the several open houses indicated that they planned to apply. Further still, 74% of students who attended an “admitted student day” followed through with enrollment. Finally, 78% of students who attended a dean’s reception enrolled at Ramapo. Hope (2015) contends, “Some dean’s receptions saw a yield as high as 90.5 percent” (p. 5). Overall, one yield visit at Ramapo College in 2014 equaled a 66% yield return.

These outcomes and statistical conclusions are of great import to enrollment managers, as both purvey ample, credible evidence that above all else campus visitations truly are “make or break” events for those deciding on college choice. Recognizing this, many administrators are beginning to reconsider and retool their admissions processes. More specifically, administrators are keying in on one particular aspect of the admissions process that is part-and-parcel with the campus visit: the campus tour.

The Campus Tour: What Works and What Does Not

As formerly intimated, a campus visit is essentially a sales and marketing device for prospective students and serves as a powerful stratagem influencing the student’s decision-making process. The campus tour—also referred to as “the golden walk” or “the golden mile”—has long been synonymous with campus visitations, often serving as the quintessential means of promotion for most institutions. The campus tour is a ritual unto itself, providing prospective students the opportunity to engage with the campus environment at

large. According to Kuh (2009), the campus environment encompasses everything physical on campus—buildings, equipment, furniture, signage, people, and landscape—which serves as a set of symbols larger than the individual items themselves (Okerson, 2016). Therefore, as students partake in a campus tour, they are intrinsically connecting openly with the ecology, climate, and culture of the institution. Resultantly, students are able to both evaluate and react to campus aesthetics and the community within. In this regard, an individual's connection to a specific environment directly affects their response to the campus visit and tour experience, in turn influencing their attitude toward college choice (Kuh, 2009; Okerson, 2016). Simply put, “the tour is the blind date of the admissions process. Looks matter a lot to the beholder, and first impressions do much to shape future actions” (Hoover, 2010, p. 37). This sentiment is fatefully important for admissions officers, as the campus tour does not simply start and finish on campus. Rather, the tour actually begins and ends at home, with every facet of the recruitment process being critical to the outcome.

SCHEDULING

In today's technologically savvy world, one would expect that most prospective students—and their parents—have probably done a great deal of research and formulated opinions long before they step foot on a college campus (Hoover, 2010). Therefore, every aspect of the campus visit is crucial to not only prospective students but also the institutional enrollment managers charged with bringing these students onboard. For many, the campus tour—as well as the impression-building process—commences at home, typically with scheduling of the big day. Institutions with user-friendly websites, straightforward registration, and flexible visitation schedules are liable to appear well organized, thus forming a positive impression in the minds of the visiting student and their parents. Moreover, an institution that takes time to send follow-up messages—perhaps including information such as scheduling confirmations, maps, directions, parking details, links to local attractions, and clear contact information—will likely solidify their appearance as caring and professional (Mass, 2016). Conversely, institutions that make the

process difficult, and do not offer any assistance, risk coming across as unorganized and indifferent, thus forming a negative impression—perhaps even turning the student off from visiting at all (Mass, 2016).

COMING TO CAMPUS

The pretour impression-building process resumes as students and parents must successfully navigate their way to the tour meeting place. Much like the tour scheduling procedure, institutions that furnish guests with information about their destinations are likely to impress, thus leaving their guests with favorable opinions of the institution. For example, way-finding systems designed strictly for the initial campus visit—such as clear signage and/or maps related to parking and campus buildings, courteous and helpful security guards, and current students enlisted to help personally guide visitors to their destinations—provide effective ways to help alleviate stress and curb anxieties (Hoover, 2009; Mass, 2016). Likewise, they also aid in creating an efficient, fluid, and professional experience. In contrast, institutions with ineffective or nonexistent way-finding systems only compound things by making stressful situations even more so (Mass, 2016).

CHECK-IN AND PRESENTATION

Once on campus, students and parents inevitably wind up gathering in a designated location that serves as a “holding room” or “staging area” designed to welcome them to campus. This welcoming area holds significant leverage in the visitation process, as it is presumably the first interior space the guests will see (Mass, 2016). For that reason, it is vital that institutions strive to make the welcoming area as appealing and inviting as possible. For instance, the waiting area should contain ample seating and be clean and comfortable, situated near restrooms, and well stocked with a healthy variety of literature about the institution (Mass, 2016). Offering complimentary snacks and beverages, as well as opportunities for invitees to engage with current students and/or others on the tour, will also easily impress (Hoover, 2010; Mass, 2016). Additionally, “high-touch meets high-tech” interactive components such as touch-screen computers and video presentations offer effectual ways for institutions to both educate visitors and market themselves so (Head, Dunagan, & Hughes,

2010; Mass, 2016). The aim is to present a space that represents the institution, evokes a fun and collegiate feel, and predisposes guests to think optimistically and favorably about the institution and the upcoming tour (Head et al., 2010; Mass, 2016).

Before the excursion around campus, most institutions typically host a formal presentation or “information session” presided over by someone from the admissions staff (Chimes & Gordon, p. 27; Mass, 2016). More often than not, these presentations characteristically contain some form of an itemized “facts and figures” lecture, a throng of PowerPoint slides, and a Q&A session (Chimes & Gordon, 2008; Hoover, 2010; Mass, 2016). The intention is to tell guests what makes that particular institution “unparalleled and extraordinary.” However, there is seldom a discernible unique or “special” distinction that sets one institution apart from another as these presentations are often rote and routine in both subject and delivery.

As discussed previously, today’s consumers are knowledgeable, “tech-savvy,” smart shoppers who have likely done their research. Therefore, there is no need to rehash information one may already know and/or can acquire by browsing the institution’s website. By keeping presentations short, concise, and casual, institutions will have an improved chance of breaking through the muddle—or better, circumventing it all together.

THE GOLDEN WALK (BUILDINGS, PERSONAL INTERACTIONS, AND TOUR GUIDES)

The physical walk around campus is undoubtedly the highlight of the campus visit. It is also the most influential part of the process, as what unfolds on the walk is likely to serve as the driving force in a student’s final decision. As previously discussed, the walk itself provides students and parents the opportunity to engage with the overall campus environment—the ecology, climate, and culture of the institution. This is meaningful, as research suggests that campus aesthetics, personal interactions, and a strong sense of community often play the leading role in determining a student’s connection to a particular institution (Barrett, 2014; Hesel, 2004; Noel-Levitz, 2016; Okerson, 2016; Schreiner, 2009; Spoon, 2006).

According to a survey conducted by StudentPoll and the Art & Science Group, 90% of polled students reported that seeing facilities of interest to them was the most important aspect of the campus visit (Hesel, 2004). The focal point of this finding, mind you, is the phrasing “of interest to them.” On campus tours, institutions typically like to boast their “latest, greatest, and most notable” facilities and amenities. These tend to include movie theaters, high-tech resource rooms, fitness centers, athletic venues, cafeterias, and even parking structures. However, Mass (2016) asserts, “Although impressive on the tour and clearly institutional points of pride, these structures are unlikely to be the tipping point that convinces a student to attend one school over another” (p. 56). Selingo (as cited in Stockwell, 2014) concurs, declaring:

On campus tours, colleges emphasize the bells and whistles. ... Don’t let them distract you. Smart students should focus their attention on the quality of teaching, the portability of their credits, and the value a degree or other credential will provide them in the job market. (para. 11)

In light of this, some experts recommend that institutions demonstrate hesitation when emphasizing their facilities, even if it means skipping common locales like the library (Hoover, 2010). While not as extreme, Mass (2016) offers a more amenable solution suggesting that institutions:

Balance the desire to show off new construction and student amenities with an equal focus on those things that most parents are interested in: academic venues, sustainability efforts, and sound financial management as demonstrated through renovated/repurposed structures. (p. 57)

Perhaps the most indispensable part of the campus tour is the tour guide. According to a survey conducted by StudentPoll and the Art & Science Group, 76% of polled students indicated that having a formal tour conducted by a student guide made an impact on their final decision (Hesel, 2004). In many respects, student tour guides are the most important people in the admissions process, as they are predominantly in the driver’s seat for the most momentous part of the campus visit

(Hoover, 2009). What they say, what they do, how they carry themselves, and how they engage with the tour group largely determines whether prospective students and their parents leave campus with favorable or unfavorable memories. The tour guide's main objective is to "be a master storyteller," helping prospective students and their parents to "feel the spirit" of the institution (Head et al., 2010, p. 53; Hoover, 2009, 2010). In this regard, successful tour guides are conversant, friendly, genuine, and able to easily relate to both students and parents alike (Hoover, 2010, Mass, 2016). Inversely, ineffective tour guides may gloss over questions asked, speak inappropriately, and be prone to highlight institutional weaknesses (Chimes & Gordon, 2008; Mass, 2016). On this detail, *how* the tour guide speaks is often more important than *what* they are speaking about (Okerson, 2016). Stressing the significance of tour guides to a campus visit, Mass (2016) proclaims:

For visitors, they become the face of your institution, for better or worse. It cannot be emphasized enough: the tour guide can, himself or herself alone, lead a student to decide that your institution is not an option. (p. 55)

THE FOLLOW-UP

As mentioned before, the campus tour does not just simply take place at the physical campus. Rather, it begins and ends at home—where families research, discuss, and make decisions together. Institutions that extend communication efforts beyond the campus visit often stand out from their competitors. For example, an institution in search of feedback about the tour experience that takes time to follow up with tour participants is liable to be more favorably considered over those who cease all communication once the student leaves campus (Mass, 2016). More so, institutions that include a personal message—perhaps a handwritten note, or an anecdote specific to the day, tour, or student—leave a more lasting impression than those that do not (Mass, 2016).

SUMMARY

The inference is that every detail in accordance to a campus visit matters. Every aspect of the campus tour plays an essential role in how students make their

final decision, and in what institution they eventually choose. As formerly suggested, personal interactions before, during, and after the campus visit have a profound impact on prospective students. Interactions before the visit create an initial idea of the campus; interactions during the visit stir ideas and perceptions of the campus community; and interactions after the visit affect the lasting impression of the visit on a whole (Okerson, 2016). Equally, even minutiae such as the day's weather, the campus location, and the attitudes of other tour participants are likely to influence one's impressions and overall opinions of an institution (Mass, 2016; Okerson, 2016).

While some details, such as the weather, are out of an institution's control, there is still much they can do to mitigate the negative effects these details may present. Needless to say, enrollment managers face a tough assignment when addressing how to satiate otherwise deal-breaking criteria. To accomplish this, many institutions are now looking to outside sources for assistance with recruitment efforts.

Current Methodologies for Improvement

As stated earlier, both higher education marketing and student recruitment are vital to institutional sustainability—and therefore are big business. To such an extent, many institutions—such as Hendrix College in Conway, Arkansas—heavily invest considerable portions of their annual budgets toward recruitment endeavors. In 2009, Hendrix College expended approximately \$1.5 million—roughly 4% of its annual operating budget—on marketing and recruitment alone (Steinberg, 2009). With much at stake, many institutions are seeking aid and advice from experts who specialize in helping organizations identify ways to increase yield and give customers a positive experience.

To stay ahead of the curve—and ahead of competition—any college or university can hire consultants to help overhaul their admissions process and redesign their campus tours. These firms can "audit" the current campus tour and then provide feedback on changes and improvements necessary for improved marketability (Hoover, 2009, 2010; Miller, 2012; Steinberg, 2009). The idea is to produce campus tours that are

positive and memorable, as institutions seek to deliver a more organic, spontaneous, and engaging experience for their guests (Steinberg, 2009).

For as long as institutions of higher learning have existed, they have always billed themselves as exciting venues “anchored in education, entertainment, aesthetic and escape”—as places with everything for everyone (Hoover, 2009, 2010, p. 38). Unfortunately, though, for most institutions, this is not the case. All too often campus tours are boring, formulaic, and predictable. Tour guides follow the same paths and spout the same historical and statistical jargon at every turn. Worst of all, they are deceiving. According to Head et al. (2010), “Authenticity is what consumers demand ... institutions are too obsessed either with what they want to be or with being like an admired institution up the road or across the state” (p. 52). As such, consultants recommend that institutions clearly express to their visitors what *they* are—and what they are not (Hoover, 2009). The best way to achieve this is with tour guides.

As remarked earlier, tour guides are essentially ambassadors for the institution, and their engagement with tour groups is more often than not the most pivotal part of the process (Hoover, 2009). For this reason, consultants encourage tour guides to stray from facts, figures, and data. Rather, guides should lean more toward personal, “authentic” stories. Personal stories are more identifiable to prospective students, as guests are not likely to remember facts and/or figures—particularly when pertaining to physical structures (i.e., buildings). What people will remember, though, is an interesting anecdote or tidbit about someone else’s personal experiences. Prospective students are looking for people just like them, and they want to know that any institution would be lucky to have them (Hoover, 2009; Okerson, 2016).

In order to impress in an age where competition is plenty and people demand instant results and gratification, it is imperative to stand out from the crowd. Accordingly, many institutions are taking a cue from Disney and are using their tours to sell memories (Hoover, 2009, 2010). Tours today have become events. Guests expect both a “wow factor” and something tangible to ponder. Events must engage guests from beginning to end, and all members of the campus community should present a “Disneyland mentality”

for a truly efficacious tour (Hope, 2015, p. 5). Many institutions are capitalizing on this by creating “signature moments” or “takeaways” as a part of the tour (Hoover, 2010, p. 39). For instance, at the University of Louisville, guests should have their cameras ready, as they may spot one of the rare white squirrels that live on campus. Students and parents who snap photographs of the squirrels get a free T-shirt that says, “I spotted the white squirrel” (Hoover, 2010, p. 39). The notion behind takeaways such as this resembles that of personal storytelling. They sell memories and allow students to feel comfortable with the institution (Hoover, 2010).

According to Okerson (2016), the most influential part of the campus visit occurs on an “individualized level” (p. 158). Therefore, forged emotional connections to an institution become exceedingly important. For example, at Hendrix College, the emotional connection begins when guests pull into the parking lot and discover a space with a sign that says, “Reserved for [student’s name].” The connection continues as visitors receive a personalized program along with a backpack and notebook as they head off to attend a class of their choice and eat in the school’s dining hall. Students may also consult with an admissions counselor and a faculty member, where they can ask pertinent questions and get to know their potential professors. Finally, if students head to the mailroom before leaving campus, they will find a package waiting for them, the contents of which is a tie-dyed T-shirt cleverly bearing the slogan “Are You Experienced?” (Hoover, 2010, p. 40). Due to this experience—and despite all the fanfare embedded in the tour—one student who ultimately wound up enrolling at Hendrix College acknowledged the openness and honesty of his campus visit, stating:

Hendrix never lied to me—they said this is who we are and we aren’t for everyone. At a lot of other schools, it felt like everyone was pushing the school on you, like cheerleaders. I felt like they were the ones deceiving me. (Hoover, 2010, p. 40)

Conclusion

As institutions of higher education annually face the challenge of maintaining and increasing their enrollment rates, research shows that beyond all other

means of attraction for prospective students nothing is more persuasive than a campus visit. Prospective students and their families bring certain expectations to their campus visits (Head et al., 2010). As such, enrollment managers, admissions counselors, and administrators alike must make every effort to impress when recruiting a new crop of fresh faces to their institutions. At a minimum, they should furnish students with a positive and lasting first impression by making them feel welcomed, accepted, and safe when on campus (Nora, 2004).

While it is difficult to control all the circumstances one may encounter when visiting a college campus, admissions officers can at least take steps toward ensuring that campus visits provide the information, insights, and experiences necessary to engage visiting students and parents, while compellingly communicating the true character and distinctions of their respective institutions (Hesel, 2004). However, as economic concerns and technological advances continue to evolve, the higher education landscape more rapidly and dramatically transforms. With that in mind, one cannot help but wonder what comes next, as current recruitment methodologies are likely to become antiquated. A new future trend in higher education marketing is surely forthcoming, as even “the happiest place on earth”—Disney—regularly reinvents itself to remain both prescient and tenable.

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