

 LEADING STRATEGIES

Delivering the Right Message for Maximum Impact in the Student Enrollment Journey

By Ashley Miller

Meeting today's prospective college students where they are is key to staying ahead of current enrollment challenges. Understanding which messages resonate with which students and at certain parts of the enrollment funnel helps to ensure institutions are getting the right message, to the right student, at the right time in their journey. By utilizing a MaxDiff approach, one can better understand the impact a particular message has compared to others and which combination of messages will ultimately drive action. The maximum difference scaling (MaxDiff) method provides useful guidance on how enrollment professionals can better segment their communication strategies to their multiple constituents. While affordability messages are most impactful, especially to parents, prestige and employability were well received by already-admitted students. Further differences between key segments emerged from the data, creating a better understanding of how to inform strategic initiatives. The messaging preferences of additional groups, however, remain to be explored, such as graduate students, adult learners, international students, alumni, and other segments that are important for institutions that are building and refining their strategic enrollment plans. This article provides a framework on how institutions can better optimize their messaging to maximize impact in the student enrollment journey.

Imagine being in the shoes of today's prospective college student. How many universities does the average student consider today? Who is influencing the student's decision? What messages does a university give this student that makes them believe it is the right choice for them? These questions, plus many others, are critical in understanding the why behind the reasons prospective students apply to, consider, and ultimately enroll in a particular institution.

With more than 4,000 higher education institutions in the United States (Bouchrika 2022) and an undergraduate market continuing to experience declines (Sedmak 2022), the need for a differentiated and effective messaging strategy in higher education is more important than ever. When a prospective student is trying to decide which college or university may be right for them, there are many factors that go into their decision-making process, including but not limited to: affordability, prestige, balance, safety, and supportive transformation. While the student is weighing multiple enrollment options, their parents/guardians are critical influencers and decision-makers as well (Reid 2023).

The role of an enrollment management professional is wide-ranging. Many roles include everything from knowing how to best recruit and retain students, to creating partnership in the community, and using data to inform decision-making in order to meet enrollment and revenue goals. Today's enrollment management offices are also having to do more with fewer resources than ever before. To better optimize the use of time, money, and resources, having data to understand what resonates with an institution's audience helps everyone on campus be more strategic in the story they tell about their particular campus.

At Purdue University, a land-grant institution in Indiana of nearly 40,000 undergraduate students, there is an ongoing desire to understand the audiences the institution serves through research and insight. Many in higher education can point to 'reasons to believe' (RTBs) as key claims or promises one can make about their institution, department, or program. As one can imagine, there are many messages Purdue University touts

proudly. Being able to employ the use of data and analytics, both quantitatively and qualitatively, helps to set strategic enrollment management (SEM) professionals up for success and provide institutions a competitive advantage (Sigler 2017). In early 2022, Purdue University had the unique opportunity to partner with Sunseed Research to help better understand how its ever-evolving constituents respond to current and proposed RTBs.

Objectives Drive Research Design

Through this partnership, Purdue University wanted to learn whether the RTBs developed over time resonated with the audiences served, how this changed at different points in the decision journey, and how one could best optimize messaging for the future. Multiple approaches were explored to answer these questions. Two approaches commonly used are traditional rating scales and rank-ordered messaging. Traditional rating scales in research can produce results that show all items in the set are viewed equally. This approach didn't provide guidance as to which messages should be emphasized more than others. Rank-order messaging is another alternative. This approach, however, assumes that an item ranked first is equidistant to the next item ranked as second, third, and so on.

To really understand the magnitude of a message, a maximum difference scaling (MaxDiff) approach is the ideal method to answer the university's questions. Using a MaxDiff approach allowed the ability to test 30 different messages that touch upon Purdue University's brand pillars of: accessible prestige, safety and security, supportive transformation, shared drive, thinkers and doers, and balanced life. When utilizing a MaxDiff, it does not involve rating scales, rankings, or require the respondents to enter a value of any kind. It's a simple design that forces choice. A respondent is asked to select the message that does the "best job" of making them want to learn more about Purdue University and which one does the "worst job" out of a set of four messages at a time. A respondent will do this until they complete the necessary amount of combination sets needed for analysis. Based on their responses, the set presented

to each respondent on each screen will differ as the approach is a real-time, iterative process.

The research design provided clarity on the university's overarching goals for the study:

- Which messages do the best job of making respondents want to learn more about Purdue University?
- What mix of messages would provide the greatest reach inside a given segment?
- What messages work best for different sub-segments of the population?
- Does exposure to these messages ultimately increase interest in Purdue University?

Messages were tested with several key audiences as well as multiple points in the funnel:

- **Prospective Students:** Those who were in grades ninth through eleventh and were classified as a prospect or inquiry in the customer relationship management (CRM) system.
- **Admitted Students:** First-year beginner students who were admitted for the fall 2022 semester at Purdue University—West Lafayette campus.
- **Parents:** Defined as adults who indicated they were the parent of guardian of a high school age student interested in pursuing a four-year college education after graduation.

From the audience groups above, a total of 42 different sub-segments were analyzed. These sub-segments included in-state versus out-of-state students, under-represented minority (URMs) students, those who had a legacy connection to the university versus those who did not, gender, area of study, among many other groups. Knowing which messages resonate with specific sub-segments gives Purdue University a strategic advantage. The university could also use these findings to know *when* in the student journey specific messages should be utilized over others. Table 1 (on page 14) shows a student journey map that represents the various stages in the student journey.

Key Insight: Frozen Tuition is Important but it's Not Everything

One of the frequent messages Purdue University has used over the past eleven years at has been its ability to keep tuition frozen, an aspect that has been unique to the institution. While it may come as no surprise that the frozen tuition message resonated across audiences, the research uncovered more nuanced findings. For example, the tuition freeze message had less impact with individuals who lived farther away from Indiana. This was an important finding, as it allowed more opportunity to concentrate on the messages that resonated more with an out-of-state audience such as return-on-investment and the ability for students to work on real-world projects with well-known companies. These distinctions were seen across the different audiences and with students at different points in their journey. Affordability messages were most impactful among parents, while prestige and employability were well received by already-admitted students.

To further understand the mindsets of Purdue University's students, when they went through the exercise online, they were presented with their top two messages based on the MaxDiff scoring. When presented with these two messages, respondents were asked why these messages resonated with them. Here is a sampling of the responses for those who indicated the frozen tuition message was among their top two messages:

I like this because it means there will be no financial surprises each year if I chose to attend Purdue.

—HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT

It demonstrates that Purdue cares about giving a high-quality education instead of just making money.

—HIGH SCHOOL STUDENT

I hate stress and I truly feel that being in debt is one of the worst stresses you can feel in your life. By looking at affordable colleges, I can mitigate this stress while still attending a school that's right for me.

—ADMITTED STUDENT

TABLE 1 ► Student Journey to Enrollment

	Stage						
	Wonder	Research ¹	Evaluate ¹	Apply	Wait ¹	Decide ¹	Enroll
Timeframe	Freshman, sophomore year or earlier	Junior year, varies	Late junior year	Summer before senior year, first semester of senior year	Some of fall, winter break and early spring semester of senior year	Spring of senior year	Around May 1 (standard college decision day)
The Big Question	What do I want from my college experience?	Which colleges should I consider, and which will be the right fit?	Can I get accepted at, thrive at, and afford the schools I'm applying to?	What makes a competitive application, and how do I balance everything?	Will I get in?	How do I know if I'm making the right choice?	What are my next steps?
Goals	Decide if college is for me, start learning more	Determine needs in eight areas ² and find schools that fit	Narrow down list of 5-10 schools, find info on application requirements and continue research	Build and submit strong applications and meet all deadlines	Wait patiently	Receive offers, evaluate packages and make a final decision	Take care of enrollment next steps, battle senioritis and enjoy graduation
Actions	Discuss options with support system, get good grades, get involved in extracurriculars	Visit campuses, attend college events, discuss options with support system	Attend formal visits, meet with recruiters, conduct	Manage requirements and deadlines, write essays; complete fin. aid forms, secure transcripts and letters of rec.	Complete FAFSA and scholarship applications, send updated application materials if required	Visit campuses again; contact admissions staff, college recruiters, faculty and current students to ask questions	Accept enrollment on school site, notify friends via social media, share news with family
Interactions	Websites, social media, ranking lists, summer camps, high school counselors, family and friends	Websites, social media, campus visits, events, mailings, emails, ranking lists, current students	Websites, social media, campus visits, events, mailings, emails, ranking lists, current students	Websites, social media, application portals, college admin staff, high school counselors	College administrative staff, social media	Campus visits, enrollment portal, social media, emails from colleges and university websites	Websites, social media, admitted student pages and group chats
Pain Points	Lack of access to college-connected people in their lives	Researching schools is challenging and time consuming	Finding out which claims and rankings are true	Depending on others for rec. letters, transcripts; understanding the process and differing requirements by school	Feeling of lack of control	Changing course if not accepted into major or dream school	Huge life change is right around the corner

¹ Indicates nonlinearity and student-dependent nature of these stages² Majors, cost/value, career outcomes, reputation, student life, location, size, and private vs. public

While frozen tuition may be viewed as a functional message, the open-end responses shows it also provides an emotional benefit. With nearly three quarters of today's college students reporting some sort of severe stress (Abrams 2022), knowing that frozen tuition can play a role in mitigating stress for the future can help meet student needs. It's also important for Purdue University to understand the meaning frozen tuition carries among this audience so the university can position (or reposition) it appropriately for the future. Marrying the "why" with the "what" allows further development of the messaging strategy to create a differentiated position in the marketplace.

Overall, three main messaging themes performed well across the majority of sub-segments. The three themes included messages around affordability, preparation for the real world, and external recognition from well-known and well-respected sources.

Getting the Right Mix Creates Opportunity

While knowing which message to use is critical, one also needs to know which mix of message(s) would give the greatest likelihood of making a meaningful connection. Using TURF, (Total Unduplicated Reach and Frequency), helps to determine which combination of messages would appeal to the greatest number in each of the audiences with the least overlap. Surprisingly, the frozen tuition message wasn't the one that would universally give Purdue University the best reach. The message that highlights students who can work on real-world projects (along with a few others) would maximize reach, as demonstrated in Table 2 (on page 16).

While there were consistencies between the groups, there were also differences the TURF identified that would have been difficult to discern from the MaxDiff outputs. For admitted students, incorporating rankings related to the graduate program was a message that needed to be included in the mix. For parents, learning more about the 200-plus majors offered at Purdue University showed the greatest incremental increase in reach. These insights provided another opportunity to further tell stories that showcased the depth of disci-

plines that students could study—from mechanical engineering, game design, nursing, marketing, and more.

With more than 2,000 completed surveys, the data could be segmented by region, academic area of interest, and basic demographic characteristics. With the partnership with Sunseed Research, an online simulator allowed for further analysis based on key questions posed after sharing the insights across campus. The online simulator has been instrumental in developing further strategies and tactics. A few additional findings by using the tool have included:

- Messages around diversity and cultural centers score higher among those interested in liberal arts.
- Even with the removal of affordability-based messaging, TURF results remain high across all groups with safety and study-abroad messaging being added to the mix in their place.
- Study abroad opportunities perform higher with female students than with male students.

Actionable Steps to Influence Strategy

Overall, there was a fifteen-percentage point pre to post lift in consideration for Purdue University. This means by simply exposing students and parents to these messages, marketing is moving the needle toward consideration of Purdue University, which will ultimately help in meeting enrollment goals among key audiences. Campus partners continue to learn more about the university messaging using its online simulator and with additional conversations and presentations across campus, and beyond. As other institutions explore similar methods of testing, here are a few key factors to consider:

- **Ensure a variety of messages:** Messages that cover a wide variety of topics and themes can help institutions better understand which content areas to emphasize and others that may need less attention.
- **Length of message matters:** With the variety of messages in mind, be sure that they are also similar in length to minimize bias due to message length.
- **Educate others on the research method first:** Think about the varying levels of expertise in areas of re-

TABLE 2 ► Effectiveness of Messaging

	Overall			
	Prospects	Admits	Parents	URM Students
% Reached	79.8	80.8	84.4	70.8
Audience				
Students can work on real-world projects sponsored by companies like Microsoft and Ford Motor Company contributing to innovative solutions that change industry	✓	✓	✓	✓
Tuition has been frozen for 11 straight years now, making a world-class education attainable for more students than ever before	✓		✓	
Named one of the 10 U.S. colleges that pay off the most with Harvard, Stanford, Princeton and Michigan by <i>CNBC</i>	✓	✓		✓
59% of Boilermakers now graduate debt-free, compared to the national average of 39%	✓	✓		✓
Ranked as one of the top 10 public universities in the U.S. by <i>The Wall Street Journal</i>			✓	
Ranked the #4 best graduate program in engineering in the nation by <i>U. S. News & World Report</i>		✓		
A variety of cultural centers on campus, including the Black Cultural Center, Latino Cultural Center, the LGBTQ Center, and more				✓
Over 200 undergraduate majors allow students to take their next giant leap in disciplines like mechanical engineering, game design, nursing, marketing and more			✓	

search and insights across campus. An initial introductory video can help share findings with teams, so conversation may be spent on developing action items from the data rather than explaining the research method.

- **Everyone learns differently:** When educating on the method, it may be necessary to use multiple mediums (video, lunch and learns, one-page leave-behinds that hit the highlights, etc.). This may seem like extra work but at the end of the day, it allows the message to get across to multiple users so they can carry the story forward to their respective teams.
- **Simulate often:** The online simulator provides an excellent opportunity to be strategic and tactical. With the simulator, one can conduct real-time analysis

without having to continually bring in a partner for additional analysis. Purdue University continues to ask questions regarding students who reside in state versus out of state, first-generation versus non-first-generation, and even by those who fall within a particular attitudinal segmentation mindset, such as those with a social focus or career-minded, over others. Continuing to leverage this tool from Purdue's partners at Sunseed Research has extended the use of the initial research findings, which helps make better decisions overall.

- **Show some quick wins:** At Purdue University, a dedicated webpage¹ shows a variety of inspiring stories

¹ See <stories.purdue.edu>.

about boilermakers. The findings from this research provide a roadmap for some of this content and is a meaningful way to connect research to action.

While the findings from this research provide actionable guidance to best prioritize messages, there are still many unanswered questions to explore in the future. There are other audiences institutions serve in addition to traditional undergraduate students, such as adult learners, graduate students, and others. The messages for these groups can be varied and often program-specific, making a large-scale study difficult and at times, expensive. There are opportunities in these instances to do more in-market or A/B level testing to see what patterns emerge. Another option to explore is qualitative interviews, which offer insight into the

“why” behind a viewpoint and can also happen more quickly than a quantitative study. These additional findings can help add to the collective understanding of what prospective students are looking for in the institutions of tomorrow and, in turn, how institutions can become more student-centric by making data-informed decisions based on feedback directly from their audiences.

Enrollment leaders who have insight into their audiences become more strategic in meeting the goals of universities in an ever-changing and complex environment. This work has allowed Purdue University to create a common understanding as to which messages will ultimately drive the most impact and ensure the institution is meeting its audience where they are in their respective journey.

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