

studentPOLL

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While produced and interpersonal communications are used with equal frequency by prospective students, the latter have the greatest impact on college choice and provide the greatest potential for improving recruitment results.

PUBLISHER'S NOTE

With nearly two decades behind me as a marketing and communications consultant to higher education, I have seen admissions communications undergo dramatic changes. Two concern me most of all. First, the emergence of mass marketing tools, principally through the use of Student Search, has resulted in a mind-numbing proliferation of direct mail, much of which looks like junk mail rather than communications intended to illuminate the purposes and benefits of higher learning. Second, the establishment of the formulaic "viewbook" as the principal means of communication with prospective students has reduced the rich and interesting character and complexity of our nation's colleges and universities to little more than a generic collection of pretty pictures, banal slogans, and dubious claims. Rather than differentiate (a primary purpose of effective marketing), many of these materials obfuscate, blurring the differences and distinctions that set institutions apart from each

other. To my way of thinking, some of these communications debase higher education and contribute to the erosion of public confidence in it.

The findings reported in this issue of *studentPOLL* are enough to restore my faith in the wisdom of the market. The data clearly indicate that content matters. For example, catalogs, which many institutions no longer bother to send to prospective students, appear to have more value in college choice than viewbooks. And personal sources of information and advice — discussions with parents and current college students, meetings with admissions representatives — have a decisive impact.

Collectively, the findings reported in this issue suggest that many institutions might benefit from undertaking an exhaustive, no-holds-barred review of all their admissions communications.

My experience with my own son, who will be going to college next fall, confirms such a need. He ignored most of the unsolicited mail he received from colleges. The few things that captured his attention emphasized approaches to teaching and learning that appeared exciting or innovative. Gimmicky designs or themes, while at

first catching his eye, never succeeded in winning his interest.

From this parent's point of view the communications left a huge void. Although the colleges to which my son applied surely must have known that parents have considerable influence over college choice, before the letters of admission arrived, my wife and I received not a single communication from any institution, except for a mailing or two about financial aid. Had any of the institutions to which he applied addressed our interests and concerns as parents, we might have favored them when he asked us for advice about his final choices.

I suggest that our readers study the findings reported here carefully. Recruitment communications consume a major fraction of a typical admissions office budget. Our findings suggest that some major rethinking of admissions communications tactics may very well be in order.

Richard A. Hesel
Publisher

1. Interpersonal communications such as discussions with parents and college admissions officers have greater value in the choice of a college than produced communications such as viewbooks and videos.

Table 1.
Use of major produced communications in college choice

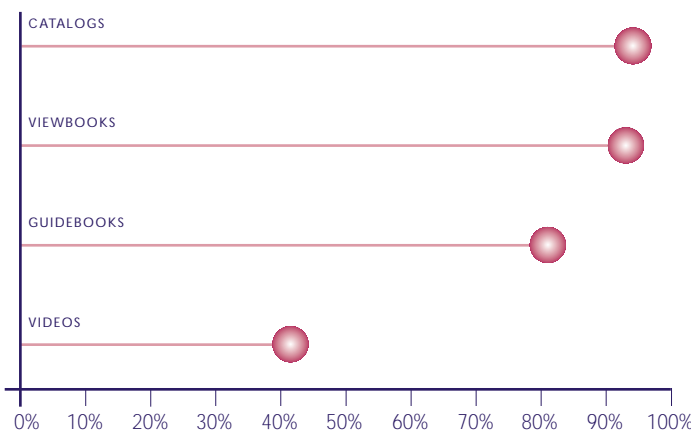
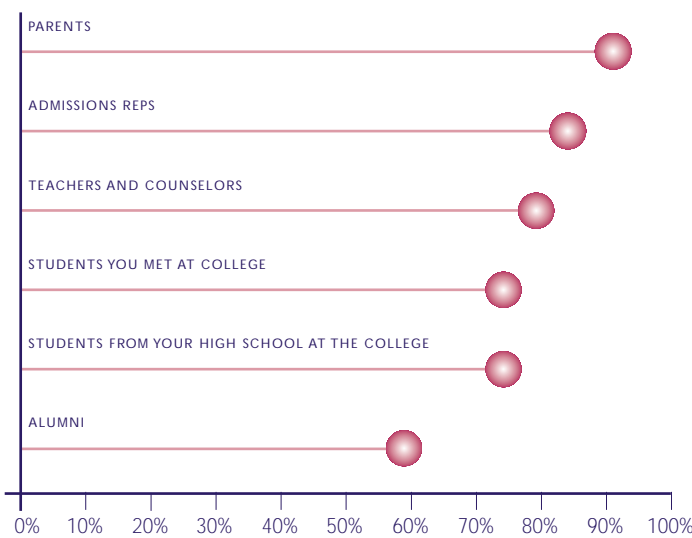


Table 2.
Use of major interpersonal communications in college choice



Use of all the information sources about colleges that we measured was relatively high, with only videos used by less than half of the high school seniors we interviewed. Of the “produced” communications (catalogs, viewbooks, guidebooks, and videos), catalogs and viewbooks were most frequently used (Table 1). Among interpersonal communications, discussions with parents occurred most often (Table 2). When averaged across all the communications sources in each of the categories, use is about the same for both. However, the value of interpersonal communications is far higher (Table 3).

A D V I S O R Y

FOCUS MORE OF YOUR EFFORTS ON PERSONAL CONTACTS WITH PROSPECTS.

Use admissions staff, students and faculty on campus, and other college representatives in campus tours, high school visits, and other recruitment events to personalize the admissions process. Make sure, to the fullest extent possible, that these individuals know the overarching themes that distinguish your institution.

When we calculated average impact ratings for each of the two categories, interpersonal ranked significantly higher. To measure impact, we created an index that combines ratings for frequency of use and value (Table 4). The index uses a simple formula:

$$(\text{Frequency of Use}) \times 2(\text{Value in Choice})$$

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IN THE NEXT ISSUE

studentPOLL will examine attitudes and behavior affecting financial aid policies. We will examine such issues as price resistance, willingness to borrow, and discount awareness.

Table 3.
Value of interpersonal and produced communications

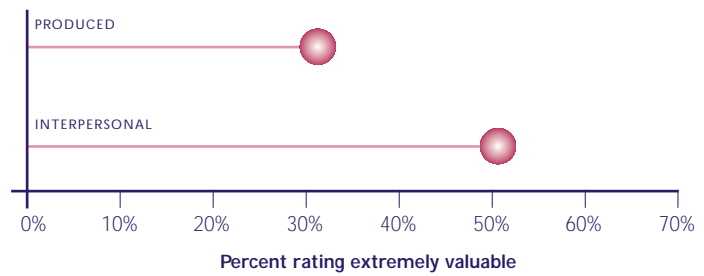
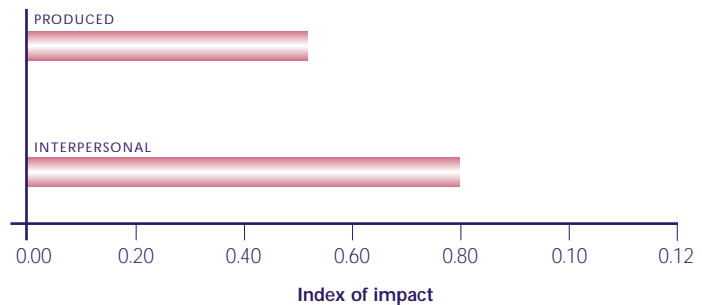


Table 4.
Impact of interpersonal and produced communications on college choice



ABOUT *studentPOLL*

studentPOLL is an authoritative national survey that measures the opinions, perceptions, and behavior of higher-ability, college-bound high school students and their parents. Available only by subscription, it is published quarterly by Art & Science Group, Inc., marketing consultants to higher education and the non-profit sector. The National Advisory Board suggests topics to be studied in *studentPOLL* and reviews survey instruments. Board members serve in a voluntary capacity as individuals, not as representatives of their institutions.

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SURVEY METHODOLOGY

The findings reported in this issue of *studentPOLL* are based on in-depth telephone interviews with a scientific national sample of 500 high school seniors who were about to enroll in four-year colleges in the fall of 1995. To qualify, respondents must have achieved a combined SAT score of 1000 or higher (before recentering). The sample was drawn to represent five broad areas of intended college study: engineering, science, and computer science; social sciences; humanities and arts; business; and education and allied health professions. Other analytical variables taken into account in the study design and sample included geography and family income. Questions about survey methods or findings, should be addressed to Art & Science Group, Inc., see page 6.

2. Among interpersonal sources of information, discussions with parents have the greatest impact on college choice. Discussions with high school counselors and teachers and college alumni have far less impact.

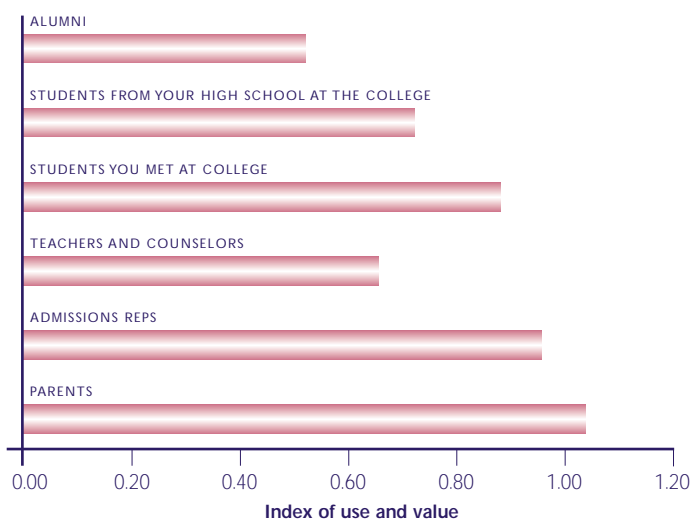
When we focused our analysis on personal sources of information, parents emerged as the most important (Table 2, page 2). As

noted above, discussions with parents about college occur more frequently than other forms of personal information and, when measured by our index, have the greatest impact on choice (Table 5).

High school counselors and teachers, along with college alumni, ranked as the least valuable sources of information and have the least impact on college choice.

Consistent with findings reported in many other studies, students from lower income families were slightly more inclined to utilize guidance counselors and teachers than students from more affluent families.

Table 5.
Impact of major interpersonal communications on college choice



A D V I S O R Y

Make sure your institution's recruitment marketing program includes communications specifically tailored for parents.

Letters, brochures, special discussion groups, and events at key stages of the admissions cycle, not just when admissions offers are made, should be part of your communications sequence for parents. And don't limit these communications to financial aid. Cover mission, commitments, purposes, academic focus, and other characteristics and distinctions that differentiate your institution.

A N O T E O N V I D E O S

We have had many inquiries from subscribers and others about the relatively low impact of videos on college choice. Without an exhaustive survey on this topic, we can only speculate about why videos are used less frequently and have lower value than other produced communications. Several explanations seem plausible. First, videos are not as widely distributed as printed materials. Second, many college videos are, in our view, little

more than exercises in animated hyperbole — glowing testimonials set to music and pictures. Students may see such videos as a form of explicit advertising, which they may not trust.

We would not condemn videos on the basis of our survey. Carefully done, they can help viewers meet "real" students, as if they were on campus. And they can provide a sense of character and place. In our judgment, well-produced videos in a documentary style are likely to be the most effective.

3. Of the major produced sources of information about colleges, catalogs have the greatest impact on choice.

Years ago many institutions convinced themselves that the generation of prospective students raised on MTV, television sound bites, and news entertainment would not pay any attention to the text-heavy content of the typical college catalog. As a result, some stopped sending their catalogs to prospects. Our findings suggest that may have been a mistake. Nearly all of the 500 students we interviewed indicated utilizing college catalogs in their decision about where to apply or attend college (Table 1, page 2). The most highly qualified students (those with SAT scores of 1300-plus) were most inclined to have utilized college catalogs.

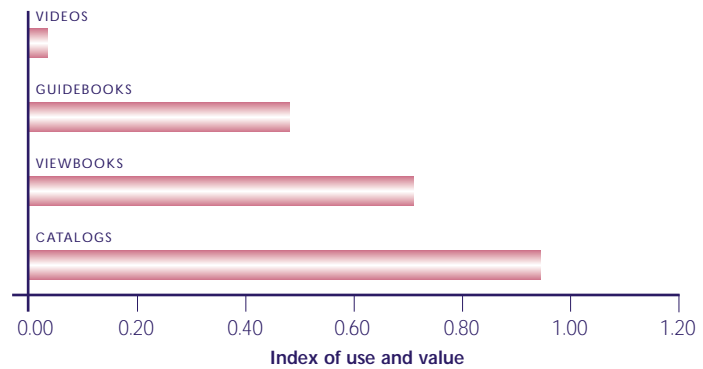
While catalogs and viewbooks were used with near-equal frequency, catalogs were assigned considerably greater value, with 50 percent of the respondents citing them as

“extremely valuable” compared to only 39 percent for viewbooks. Guidebooks and videos trailed by a substantial margin. Measured by our index of impact on choice, catalogs again surpass viewbooks (Table 6).

On the assumption that our respondents might confuse the two,

we took great care in the survey questionnaire to define the difference between catalogs and viewbooks with precision. We are confident that our findings reflect an understanding of the difference by prospective students.

Table 6.
Impact of major produced communications on college choice



A D V I S O R Y

CONSIDER USING CATALOGS EARLIER IN THE ADMISSIONS PROCESS OR WITH TARGETED GROUPS.

Provide information about your institution's academic programs and courses as early in the decision-making process as possible. Make sure your catalog is part of your marketing initiatives. Make it accessible, easy to understand, and attractive (but don't make it another viewbook).

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4. *Discussions with parents, with college admissions representatives and with students met at college visits are among the most influential sources of information in college choice.*

Discussions with students met during college visits were assigned the highest value of all the personal sources of information measured, with more than 60 percent of these students rating this information source as extremely valuable, just above the ratings for parents and admissions representatives.

However, because contacts with college students occur less frequently, their overall impact on choice is lower than that of parents and admissions representatives (Table 5, page 4).

Eighty-four percent of the sample had discussions with admissions and other college representatives in deciding where to apply and attend

college, with higher frequency of contact occurring among those students planning to attend private compared to public institutions (91 percent versus 78 percent). Students with 1300-plus SATs and those from families with incomes of over \$100,000 also were more likely to have had contact with college representatives. More than three-quarters of the sample reported having met

with students at colleges of interest to them. Of those students reporting contact with admissions and other college representatives, 58 percent rated them as an extremely valuable source of information — on a par with the value assigned to discussions with parents.

A D V I S O R Y

DON'T EXPECT GUIDANCE COUNSELORS TO HAVE A DRAMATIC INFLUENCE, PARTICULARLY ON THE MORE HIGHLY QUALIFIED STUDENTS.

You may know individual counselors who can deliver, but it is generally not advisable to build a strategy on counselors.

A B O U T A R T & S C I E N C E G R O U P

*student*POLL is published by Art & Science Group, Inc., a national leader in marketing and communications consulting to higher education and the non-profit sector. The firm provides consulting services in the following areas:

- Student recruitment marketing and enrollment management
- Planning and communications for capital campaigns, other large fundraising efforts, and alumni relations programs
- Financial aid and net tuition revenue management
- Overall institutional advancement and marketing

Within these broad areas, the firm provides a number of supporting services:

- Strategic marketing and communications planning
- Quantitative and qualitative market research
- Econometric analysis of financial aid awards
- Predictive mathematical modeling of student and prospect behavior
- Operations assessment and re-engineering
- Creation of print and electronic communications tools

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5. Among many possible communications initiatives, increasing opportunities for discussions with college students during the campus visit appears to offer institutions the greatest opportunity to improve admission results.

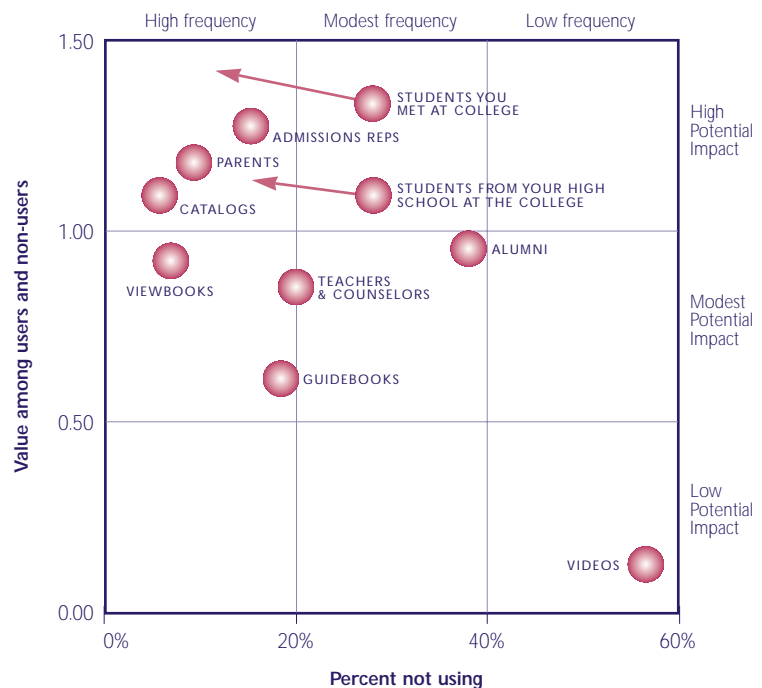
The data collected for value and frequency of use of various communications sources clearly indicate that contact with current students during campus visits provides the greatest opportunity to strengthen the effectiveness of recruitment communications. As noted above, while this form of communication is assigned the greatest value in college choice, it now occurs less frequently than the other major forms of personal and print contact we tested.

To evaluate this conclusion further, we examined the attitudes of respondents about the forms of communication they had not used in the college admission process. Table 7 maps the frequency of use and the value of the communications tested to both users and non-users. The map is divided into nine sections, scaled to frequency of use and potential impact. It

shows, as suggested by the arrows, that increasing the frequency of use of two of the most valuable communications sources, discussions with students enrolled at the college and admissions representatives, have the greatest potential to improve admis-

sions results. Of course, interactions between prospective and current students — whatever form they take — should not be left to chance; they should be managed carefully to ensure the highest possible quality and value.

Table 7.
Impact potential of underutilized information sources



A D V I S O R Y

INVEST YOUR COMMUNICATIONS RESOURCES IN DEVELOPING VIEWBOOKS, CATALOGS, AND OTHER MATERIALS THAT DISTINGUISH YOUR INSTITUTION FROM YOUR COMPETITORS.

Highly qualified students, in particular, are seeking substantive information about your institution's academic environment.

SPECIAL REPORT

ALTHOUGH ONLY A FRACTION OF STUDENTS IS PREPARED TO USE ON-LINE COMPUTER TECHNOLOGIES TO COMMUNICATE WITH COLLEGES, SIZABLE AND IMPORTANT MARKET SEGMENTS WOULD PREFER TO FILE THEIR COLLEGE APPLICATIONS ELECTRONICALLY.

Even though a growing number of institutions now accept the Common Application or have taken the initiative to develop an application on computer disk to mail to interested students, many colleges and universities still require students to submit applications that can only be completed by hand or on a typewriter (which presumably must be rescued from the cobwebs in the basement or attic). Our survey indicates that sizable proportions of some key market segments prefer to file college

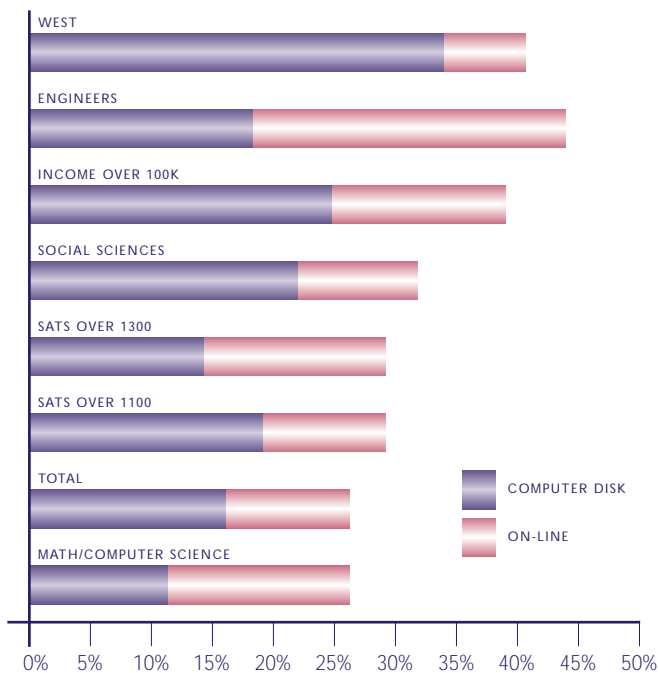
applications electronically, either on-line or via computer diskette.

Overall, more than 25 percent of the student sample indicated a preference for filing a college application using computer-based electronic means. Specifically, some 16 percent stated a preference for using a computer disk that could be mailed to a college, while 10 percent preferred using an on-line computer information network such as the Internet to file electronically. These proportions leap to 44 percent for prospective

engineers, 39 percent for students from households with incomes over \$100,000, 39 percent for those with combined SATs over 1300, and 41 percent for students from the West. Of the two methods of filing tested, use of a computer disk was preferred over on-line filing (Table 8).

While interest in computer-based filing of applications outpaces the limited use of computer technologies in admissions communications reported in the Winter issue of *student*POLL, we believe it reflects a simple practical concern — using the familiar word-processing capabilities of computer technology to simplify an unnecessarily complicated process.

Table 8.
Preferred method of filing application



ADVISORY

PLAN TO DEVELOP AN ELECTRONIC APPLICATION IN THE NEAR FUTURE — EITHER A DISK MAILED TO STUDENTS, THE COMMON APPLICATION, OR ANOTHER ON-LINE VERSION AVAILABLE ON YOUR WEB SITE.

Student interest in and use of on-line applications is likely to increase rapidly over the next several years, and institutions should anticipate this demand in the marketplace. It's also the considerate thing to do — an example of good service.