

No Longer the New Kid on the Block: College Search Social Media Sites Come of Age

When George Hill was drafted by the San Antonio Spurs in the 2008 NBA draft, it was big news in his hometown of Indianapolis, as well as the Texas city where he would soon play pro ball. For Bobby Bell, Assistant Director of Undergraduate Admissions at Hill's alma mater, Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis (IUPUI), Hill's achievement also represented a unique opportunity to leverage the basketball star's success to reach out to a pool of high-priority, non-resident students in a region where IUPUI wasn't particularly well-known.

To reach those out-of-state students, he turned to college search social media sites, a rapidly growing category of recruitment tools that combine the function of college search websites with the interactive, dynamic communications of mainstream social media networks. Working with companies like Cappex.com, Bell was able to send out a message to Texas students while news of Hill signing with the Spurs was still fresh, noting that Hill got his start at IUPUI. Within 24 hours he had an instant response as his San Antonio prospect pool quadrupled.

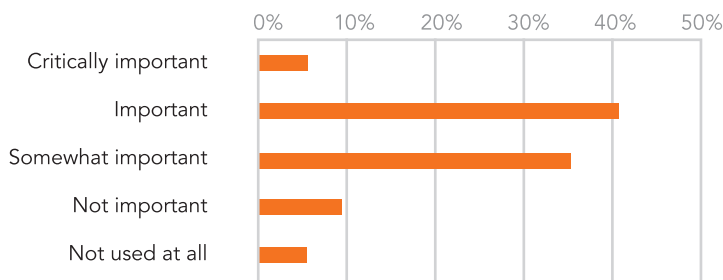
Bell's experience is just one example of the flexibility and creativity – not to mention efficiency and productivity – college search social media tools have given admissions professionals since they emerged in the college recruitment world just three years ago. These tools are changing the

game in terms of how colleges target their ideal candidates, oftentimes allowing admissions professionals to minimize or even eliminate their reliance on more traditional search methods. And Bell is hardly alone in recognizing their power. In a recent online poll of 92 college admissions officers by Cappex.com, 47 percent of schools said college search social media sites are important or critically important to their recruitment strategy.

relationship with those students.

The benefit for colleges is that rather than starting with a broad list of students to target with a generic direct mail campaign, they can make a real connection with the students they are most likely to be interested in. Likewise, these sites allow students to catch the attention of schools based on their personal interests, extracurricular achievements, and academic strengths – not just their GPA and test scores.

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Question 1: How important are College Search Social Media Sites to your recruiting strategy?

Expanding the Recruitment Toolbox

So how do college search social media tools work? The formula varies from site to site, but in general, college search social media sites help colleges identify prospective students based on very specific criteria, and then provide a platform for building a

For example, on Cappex.com, college-bound students start by completing a detailed profile that highlights their personal as well as academic accomplishments and interests. Based on those factors, Cappex.com matches them with the colleges that best fit their priorities and also are likely to accept them. Students receive messages from those colleges, inviting them to learn more about the school. From there, students can request

more information, ask questions, send a message to an admissions professional, view the college's website or Facebook page, or even watch a video about the school.

"The process is designed to let colleges and students engage on a more direct level," said Chris Long, president of Cappex.com. "It starts a conversation where both sides can share the information that's most important to them. And there's an authenticity to that conversation that schools can't necessarily communicate through more static methods like viewbooks, direct mail, and advertisements."

Typically, college search social media sites also have other social elements that not only foster more interaction between students and colleges, but also make each site a dynamic resource – and a repeat destination – in a student's college search. For instance, students visit Cappex.com regularly to check out monthly scholarship promotions, student reviews that give an authentic picture of college life, and the "What Are My Chances" Calculator that lets students see how likely they are to be accepted to a particular college based on the experiences of other applicants. Other players in the category, such as Zinch.com and CollegeWeekLive, engage students through real-time chats with fellow students or admissions professionals, live streaming video presentations, and virtual college booths and tours.

"This is social media with a purpose," Long said. "Students get the same kind of interaction they enjoy on social sites like Facebook, but with the very real goal of finding their ideal college."

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Benefits of College Search Social Media Tools

Colleges are turning to college search social media tools more and more frequently for good reason. In Cappex.com's 2010 study of how admissions departments are using college search social media tools, admissions professionals noted plenty of benefits to using these sites.

Familiarity

Today's students are extremely tech-savvy and regularly use social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, in their personal lives; therefore, it is a natural and logical step for them to use college search social media in their college searches.

"It's a way students like to consume information," said Brett Schraeder, associate vice president for enrollment management at Occidental College in Los Angeles, California.

Colleges also noted that having a dialogue with students on a platform dedicated to college search, rather than on a mainstream social media site, makes the interaction that much more purposeful and focused. "These sites allow us to interact with the

students on their level, but without invading their Facebook space," said Teege Mettillie, assistant director at Lawrence University, a private liberal arts college in Appleton, Wisconsin.

Student Autonomy

Just as the Internet has made information about colleges more readily available to any interested student, college search social media sites are giving students more control over their college search than ever before. Many admissions professionals commented that the prospecting period is shifting from the college's schedule to the student's schedule. "Students can insert themselves into the prospecting process whenever they are ready, versus being on the receiving end of information that we send out on our timeline," Schraeder said.

That means colleges can meet students when they are ready and serious about taking charge of their college search. Through college search social media sites, colleges often have an opportunity to meet students earlier, giving them more time to build a strong connection. And by allowing students to engage with a school in a low-pressure way, college search social media sites are helping colleges combat "stealth applications," wherein a student's first direct interaction with a school is when they submit their application.

Filling the Conversation Gap

Between early prospecting and accepting an application, college

search social media allows colleges to keep in touch with students on a regular basis. In fact, one school interviewed in the Cappex.com study said they may have between 12 and 24 points of contact with a student over a two-year period, and college search social media sites help facilitate those interactions.

"A lot of these sites get students to come back with frequent updates, surveys, and information about scholarships," said Jake Earl, prospect information assistant in the Department of Admissions at Marymount University in Arlington, Virginia. "That gives us multiple opportunities to connect with students."

Other schools see college search social media sites playing an important role in creating an ongoing dialogue with students. "We've had success using traditional methods at the early stages to get prospects to set up a campus visit, but we weren't communicating much between the campus visit and when they actually make a deposit," said Earl. "Social media is fulfilling a new role that was always needed."

Quality Prospects

When colleges find students through college search social media sites, they are able to search specifically for students who match their criteria for ideal types of applicants. Because of this targeted approach, many admissions professionals find college search social media tools generate higher-quality inquiries than any other recruitment method.

Additionally, since college search

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social media tools allow students to actually opt-in to become prospects, colleges can begin recruiting with a smaller, concentrated pool of students who are the most qualified for their school and who already have a level of interest.

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"Typically, colleges could simply fill their enrollment through traditional methods alone," said Long. "But there's always a need in admissions offices to find those applicants who match the student populations the college wants to strengthen most, be it to achieve gender balance, bring in out-of-state students, or build a certain academic program. And that's where college search social media tools can really play a powerful role."

Flexibility

Whereas changing a direct mail recruiting campaign midstream can be costly and cumbersome, college search social media sites let schools quickly and affordably change strategies, personalize messages, and

target specific student segments via the Internet.

A number of colleges commented they've had success using college search social media sites to reach out to students in specific geographic areas. For example, Marymount University has created campaigns to specifically target students from the five states currently not represented in its student body.

Schools are also using college search social media campaigns to search for students with interest in sports and extracurricular activities, arts, and specific academic areas. For instance, when IUPUI launched a new Music Technology program, the school was able to send out a specific message to any student who had similar interests.

If a particular message isn't working, college search social media tools also give colleges the flexibility to quickly change tactics. Likewise, discussion forums on these sites let universities see what people are saying about the college in real time, and respond accordingly if needed. The forums provide a form of market research where colleges can quickly get qualitative feedback.

Metrics and ROI

In a results-driven admissions office, college search social media tools provide colleges and universities with solid metrics for tracking inquiries and potential interest. Several participants in the Cappex.com study noted results are simply easier to track with college search social media sites than with direct mail. Plus, sites like Cappex.com give colleges

up-to-the-minute reports so they can regularly monitor how they are matching up to objectives and goals. One admissions officer from a private college on the East Coast said this level of measurability is particularly appreciated in the current admissions environment, where there is “more pressure from the university to move to evidence-based practices and show results.”

Colleges also report that not only are results from college search social media tools easier to measure, they’ve also seen higher pre-qualification of prospects compared to buying lists or tracking response cards. Ultimately, colleges are tracking a solid number of enrollments directly back to

their college search social media efforts. Nearly one third of colleges participating in Cappex.com’s study said they receive as many as 6 to 20 percent of their enrollments via college search social media sites.

That number is likely to grow in the future, as 39 percent of schools cited an increase in enrollments in the last school year resulting from college search social media tools.

Becoming Part of the Mix

With so many benefits to using them, it’s not surprising that schools are already taking college search

social media sites very seriously, despite their relative newness in the recruitment space.

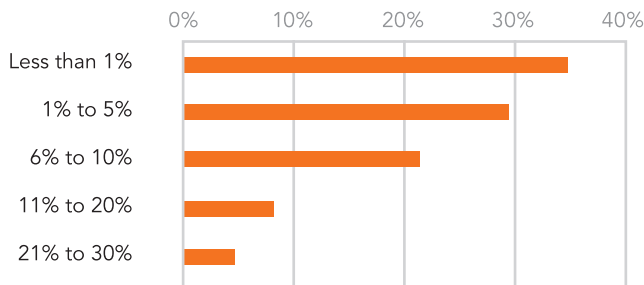
And as admissions professionals become more sophisticated in their understanding of what these sites can accomplish, most agree that integration is the key to using them most effectively.

“I don’t envision college search social media sites as a replacement for traditional recruiting methods, but I do think they’ll be integrated with traditional methods,” said Schraeder, adding that these tools have made his team think differently about how they do things.

Case in point, some schools already are doing things differently in terms of how they initially search for students. Because of the high-quality inquiries generated by sites like Cappex.com, many schools have found they can maximize their effectiveness by using them to jump start their usual student search process. “These sites have displaced a level of search for us,” Mettillie said about the prospecting process at Lawrence University. “Our strategy has been to reach out and get the students using Cappex.com or Zinch.com, and then put them through our regular process.”

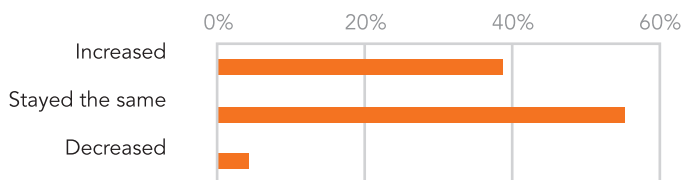
Schools also see college search social media tools as a natural way to promote their other marketing efforts, whether it’s sending students a link to a campus video tour on YouTube, or inviting them to receive their viewbook or other printed materials. “We’ve used the tools to make students aware of our presence at a particular event, such as a college fair,” Bell says about IUPUI’s efforts. “If we’re going to California, we can

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Question 2: Approximately what percentage of your enrollments came as a first source from College Search Social Media Sites?

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Question 3: How did the percent of your enrollments that came as a first source from College Search Social Media Sites change this year compared to last year?

search for students from specific high schools to let them know we're coming out there. We've also used them to promote national college fairs and campus events."

When it comes to printed materials, some schools are using the information they collect about students through college search social media to personalize what they send via direct mail. At Occidental College, the admissions team has redesigned their printed materials in order to better integrate them with their social media outreach. "We used to have a 40-page viewbook, and now it's split into four magazines that go out on a regular basis," said Schraeder. "With these shorter-format printed pieces, we can easily integrate them in social media channels."

to college search social media in the 2011-2012 school year.

The Outlook

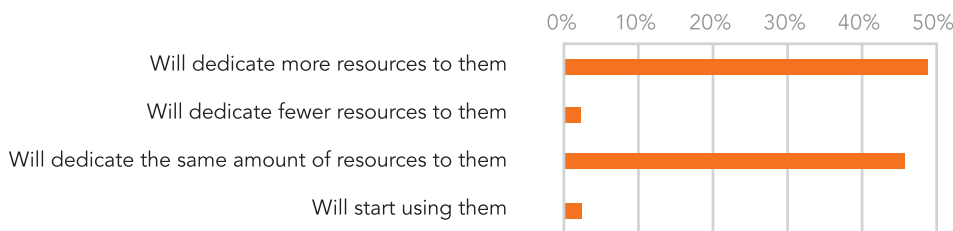
It's a fact that for many universities, nothing can replace a one-on-one conversation or campus visit when it comes to communicating the school's unique selling points, whether it's a beautiful campus, unusual location, or truly vibrant student body. Therefore, the consensus among schools is that college search social media tools will continue to complement, not replace, traditional recruiting efforts. But as more and more students use college search social media sites and admissions offices become more familiar with their advantages, these tools are sure to play a larger role in the admissions process.

Others predict college search social media sites will expand their role beyond the initial search function. "I could see these tools not just introducing students to schools, but taking a more active role in helping see that student through the application and matriculation," said Bell, noting that he recently had a California student reach out to him via Cappex.com with a question about the IUPUI application. "We were able to continue the dialogue, and now we're going to have our California recruiter work with her."

College search social media technology might also inspire schools to re-think their traditional printed materials, perhaps migrating viewbooks into e-zines that can be distributed easily through social media channels. And as technology evolves, the tools could help colleges communicate with students through everything from new smartphone applications to emerging social media platforms.

No matter what the future holds, college admissions remains a relationships-based industry. Admissions professionals agree that any new technology that can efficiently help them build stronger relationships with prospects, including college search social media tools, should play a role in the recruitment mix. While face-to-face interaction is still a top priority, college search social media and online tools are dynamic, engaging, and social – all things that can help schools be more creative in how they connect with prospects and start a real dialogue that will hopefully help students and colleges find the right fit with each other.

Nearly 50 percent of colleges said they will dedicate more resources to college search social media in 2011-2012.



Question 4: What is your plan for using College Search Social Media Sites for the 2011-12 school year?

Despite their success with college search social media tools, colleges are still figuring out how much emphasis to place on them in their overall recruitment mix, particularly in the context of limited recruiting budgets. But some schools are already shifting portions of their budget toward college search social media; in fact, nearly 50 percent of colleges participating in Cappex.com's study said they will dedicate more resources

Some schools see college search social media tools changing how they identify prospects at the start of the recruitment process. Admissions officers anticipate being able to more effectively and efficiently target their ideal candidate with college search social media tools, which could cut back on their traditional search methods.

Getting Started

Haven't yet worked with college search social media tools? Here are some tips for getting started:

- **It doesn't have to be all or nothing.** Start with one site that won't require a lot of manpower to manage, and use it to target one or two specific student populations that are a priority.
- **You don't have to reinvent the wheel.** Complement what you're already doing by using college search social media to introduce students to your school and direct them to your website or more traditional printed materials. You can also use these tools for more specific, timely purposes, such as promoting a local high school visit or getting word out about a campus event.
- **Set the right tone.** On its most basic level, social media is about people connecting with people. So keep your tone friendly and authentic, and remind yourself there's a real person at the other end of every interaction. Every connection is an opportunity to start a relationship and keep a dialogue going.

For Additional Information

We welcome your comments and feedback on this study. Please contact:
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About Cappex.com

With more than 2.5 million cumulative student users, Cappex.com is a highly cost-effective way to reach students as they are actively discovering and researching colleges.

On Cappex, admission officers can reach their enrollment goals by going beyond student search to generate qualified inquiries online. They can attract the students they want without needing to spend time identifying lists and writing campaigns. Colleges receive up-to-the-minute reports so they can consistently measure results to ensure their objectives are being met.

Colleges can also promote their websites, Facebook pages and YouTube videos right on Cappex.com, driving students to their digital content.

To learn more about Cappex, visit www.cappex.com or contact us on our Facebook page at www.facebook.com/cappexcom.

Founded in 2006, Cappex is based in Highland Park, Illinois.

