With mobile devices becoming more and more integrated into teens’ lives, the conversation among college admissions professionals has shifted from whether to go mobile to when and how to do so.
While we were sitting in one of our recent student focus groups, one student had a comment that really shed some light on teens’ mobile habits and how they fit in with everything else digital.

The student said, “I read all of my e-mail messages on my phone first. For an e-mail that’s important, and if I need to follow-up or send a detailed response, I’ll open it up and respond to it on my computer when I get home.”

There are a few interesting thoughts in that statement, including the fact that teen interactions now begin with their cell phones or mobile devices, even if they don’t end up there. Forty percent of 13 to 17 year-olds now own a smart phone device (Nielsen), and they are using those devices for a variety of purposes.

Though much of what teens do on their mobile devices is fleeting and trivial, such as texting or posting on Facebook, it is apparent that they are also using their devices to monitor e-mail that may come from work, high school, or a potential college.

Teens may also use their mobile devices to look up quick facts about something new that they encounter, such as a college they heard about from a friend. This poses the question to colleges — is your site optimized for mobile viewing?

These days, home computers seem to be used for more involved activities, such as in-depth internet research, watching videos (though teens may do this on their phones, too), and of course answering and cataloging e-mails.

Though teens may respond to an e-mail from their home computer, they are constantly monitoring their mobile devices, and that’s usually where they are most receptive to messages.

For colleges, now is the time to realize that paying attention to your brand and communication from a mobile perspective is not just a nice thing to do, it is critical.

Wanting to explore these trends further, we surveyed 2,124 college-bound high school students and admissions officers from 151 colleges about their use of the digital and mobile space as it relates to college admissions at the start of 2012.

Here are four key things we found:

• Mobile-friendly websites are becoming a must-have for most colleges, and the conversation has shifted from “Should we have a mobile website?” to “What is the priority content that we need to have on our mobile website?”

• Mobile apps are gaining popularity among students for their college search, though they are not yet a “must have.”

• Teens are talking on the phone less and less with each passing year. Basically, teens love to text (those who do text are exchanging 3,400 messages a month on average), but it’s important for colleges to ask for student preferences and consider sending only timely, relevant messages.

• E-mail remains the number one tool that students use to communicate with colleges, though they now receive those e-mails on their mobile devices.

To look at how this unfolds in more depth, we explored three main stages of the college search and selection process: introductory communication from colleges, dialogue between colleges and students, and getting to know a college campus.
Initial point of contact between students and colleges

Cappex asked students how they would like to be contacted by schools that they had not yet reached out to. They were able to choose as many communication channels as they wanted for this scenario. Eighty-five percent of the surveyed students replied that they would like to be contacted via e-mail. Other popular channels included mail (69%) and college search sites that they subscribed to (33%). Additional options such as phone calls, text messages, or Facebook all came in at under 20 percent, similar to last year.

For this initial stage, colleges definitely recognize the importance of using e-mail, mail, and college search sites. The majority of respondents ranked each of these as either “important” or “critically important” for making prospective students aware of their school. However, 60 percent of colleges also consider calling students’ home phones to be an important or critically important channel of communication and 50 percent consider calling students’ cell phones important as well. Only 11 percent of students responded that they would like to be initially contacted via their home phone and only 19 percent would like to be initially contacted via cell phone.

The low student preference for unsolicited phone calls from colleges makes sense in light of today’s teen communication trends. A recent Nielsen study found that 13 to 17 year-olds spend less time per month talking on the phone than any other age group under the age of 65. This is likely due to the thousands of text messages many teens are exchanging each month. With teens spending less and less time talking on the phone in general, it becomes even less likely that they would want to talk on the phone with an unfamiliar college.

These preferred modes of communication then begin to shift as students move further along in the college search process.

Following up with students after they connect with your institution

How should colleges follow-up with students once they’ve inquired for more information? Ninety-one percent of students still want to be e-mailed at this point, while mail is in second place at 68 percent. Though cell phone and text message were still ranked relatively low at 27 percent and 26 percent respectively, these numbers increased from the number of students who preferred them for the initial point of contact with colleges. Logically, it makes sense that students are more open to these more personal channels of communication with a school once they have already been introduced to it or expressed interest in it.

Similar to the initial contact stage, it seems that college admission departments place much higher importance on phone calls than students do. Sixty-eight percent of the
colleges surveyed view home phone calls as either “high priority” or “critical” for following up on student inquiries. For cell phone calls, 60 percent of the colleges surveyed viewed them as “high priority” or “critical.”

Cappex asked each college whether they ask for prospective students’ cell phone numbers, and 68 percent confirmed that they do. Obtaining students’ cell phone numbers obviously opens the possibility of communicating with them via text message. However, it is important for colleges to ask students for their preferences on how their cell phone number can be used.

Seventy-three percent of students who are okay with colleges texting them replied that they would like to receive a text any time a college has a relevant message for them.

“I would like to know things like that they’ve received my application or a deadline reminder, but I don’t want to be overloaded with messages. There’s only so much you can fit in 160 characters anyway, and I might not even open a message that’s from an unfamiliar number.”

- High school senior study participant

Another interesting discovery in this area is that colleges with a student body of 2,000 or less tend to rely on text messaging and Facebook as follow-up tools more than larger colleges do. Thirty-six percent of small colleges surveyed said that text messaging was “important” or “critical” to them, as opposed to only 23 percent of the colleges surveyed overall who responded that way. Nearly 50 percent of the small colleges surveyed ranked Facebook as important for following up. This is likely due to the fact that smaller colleges typically are able to have more intimate, one-on-one conversations with students across all channels of communication.

![Should a college contact you by text message every time they have a relevant message for you?](chart)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>73%</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>27%</td>
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What tools do students want for getting to know a campus?

Once a student has shown definite interest in a college, it is critical to showcase the campus in the best possible way in order to hold their interest and compete with the other colleges they may be considering. Unlike the earlier college search stages where students preferred mainly traditional means of communication, students who are in the “getting to know the campus” stage seem to be more adventurous and open to exploring schools via new and different means.

Cappex asked students which tools they would like colleges to offer for getting to know a campus better. Virtual tours of the campus were ranked highest, with 36 percent of students saying they would “really like it,” and 30 percent of students calling it a “must have.” Student-produced videos came in second, with 36 percent of students who would “really like it” and 13 percent who thought it was a “must have.”

When it comes to this stage of the college search process, it appears that the majority of colleges have yet to catch up with student trends. Only 21.3 percent of the colleges surveyed place a high priority on virtual tours, and only 17.3 percent place a high priority on student-produced videos.
With such high demand for student-produced videos, it is definitely important for colleges to have students produce those videos and let them tell their campus stories.

Students also often turn to their mobile devices during this later stage in the college search process. When asked whether they’d prefer to download a college’s mobile app or go to their mobile website, 46 percent of students preferred a mobile app, and 54 percent preferred a mobile website.

This is a significant change from 2011 when only 35 percent preferred a mobile app and 65 percent preferred a mobile website. In addition, 35 percent of students surveyed said they would be okay with a GPS-enabled mobile app replacing a traditional campus tour, which is consistent with 2011.

When asked what type of information they would like to be able to access on a mobile device, students cited a variety of things. Around 70 percent of students responded that they would want college descriptions and admission information, deadline reminders, and application tracking capabilities. These areas could easily be addressed with a mobile website. For colleges who are just beginning to go mobile, or are considering doing so, a mobile website can provide mobile access to a wide range of information, as opposed to an app which is often more limited or serves one specific function. As shown on the chart to the left, student preferences for an app vs. a mobile site are split almost exactly in half as of this year.

As smartphone devices become more and more integrated into teens’ lives, the need for colleges to go mobile will likely continue to increase. In the long term, availability of mobile technology could save time, money, and resources for colleges. For example, a campus tour app would not only cut down on the need for colleges to provide campus tour guide staff, but also enable those schools to better accommodate the busy schedules of students and parents who are not able to attend regularly scheduled tour times.

“Our organization now thinks outside of the box when communicating with prospective students. We meet students in the middle, instead of forcing them through our traditional channels.”

- Enrollment officer study participant
Where should colleges be focusing their resources for next year?

Though it is impossible to predict exactly what the communication trends for college admissions will be in 2013, comparing 2011 and 2012 data side by side does begin to form a picture. Cappex asked college admissions officers what amount of time and resources they planned to spend on various digital communication channels compared to the previous year. The channels on which the majority of colleges have increased spending each year starting in 2010 are Facebook, student videos, virtual tours, and a mobile version of their website. Based on all of the data mentioned in the previous sections, spending in these areas is likely to increase once again for 2013. For other channels such as Twitter and blogs, the majority of colleges responded that their spending has stayed the same since 2010. Unless popularity of these channels among students drastically increases in the near future, it is unlikely that colleges will spend more on them in 2013.
Four takeaways for enhancing your digital admissions communications

1. **If your school does not already have a mobile-friendly website, now is the time to develop one.** Seventy percent of the colleges we surveyed who did not have one were planning to create one in 2012. With a mobile-friendly website, users can access a wide range of content, as opposed to an app, which is sometimes more limiting.

2. **If your school has the resources to develop a mobile app in addition to a mobile-friendly website, that can also be a great tool to provide to prospective students.** The amount of students who preferred an app over a mobile website increased by 31 percent this year, and the percentage of colleges who have an app more than doubled from 13 percent in 2011 to nearly 28 percent in 2012.

3. **When asking prospective students for their cell phone number, it’s important to ask their preferences for how their cell phone numbers can be used.** Many students don’t think that a college should ever text them.

4. **Don’t lose faith in e-mail.** Though other communication tools are gaining popularity, e-mail still remains the number one tool that students use to communicate with prospective colleges. Maintain your school’s current level of spending and resources for e-mail as you begin to explore these new channels.
For Additional Information

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

Chris Long, Cappex.com president | clong@cappex.com | 847-748-9005

About Cappex.com

With more than 3.5 million student users, Cappex.com is a highly cost-effective way to reach students as they are actively discovering and researching colleges online.

On Cappex.com, admissions 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.

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