

## White Paper

# Making the Grade in Higher Education Admissions Recruitment with Web Technology

**SYSTEMSALLIANCE**  
Think Big. Work Smart.

## Abstract

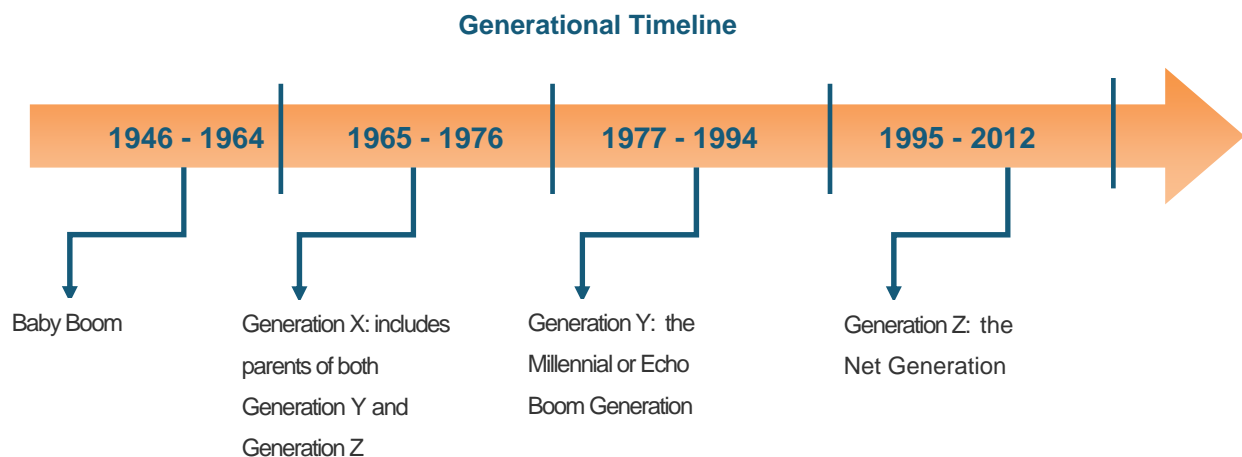
Today's colleges and universities face a complex set of circumstances for student recruitment, application and enrollment. As a result, higher education institutions are finding that they must engage in more creative marketing to put themselves in the best light to prospective students. One of the most effective ways to differentiate the institution and engage the prospective student is by using the Internet. This paper will examine the importance of Web presence in higher education recruiting and discuss how to effectively use a content management system to maximize these efforts.

# Contents

Abstract .....	1
The Current Higher Education Environment .....	3
The Role of Web Presence in Recruiting .....	5
A Social Media Sidebar .....	7
Using a CMS to Enhance Your Web Presence.....	8
Measures of Success.....	11
Conclusion .....	12
Endnotes .....	12

## The Current Higher Education Environment

Today's colleges and universities face a complex set of circumstances for student recruitment, application and enrollment. On one hand, generational population gaps have resulted in fewer students overall who are applying for college. Generation Y – whose later members are currently attending or applying for college – is larger than its predecessor. But Generation Z – comprised of current high school students who are beginning to think about college choices – is significantly smaller. Generation Z also faces challenges in affording tuition that Generation Y did not. As a result, higher education institutions must compete for a shrinking pool of candidates.



On the other hand, the number of students applying to each institution has grown, in most part due to the Internet and the relative ease of submitting applications. According to the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC), 19 percent of freshman submitted seven or more applications for admission in 2008, in contrast to 1967 when less than one in five reported applying to four or more colleges.<sup>1</sup>

Nearly 400 American colleges and universities have adopted the Common Application, a shared set of questions that applicants can answer and submit to one or all of the members to be considered for admission. Some institutions require an additional supplement form with questions specific to their selection process, but overall the Common Application facilitates multiple submissions. Applicants are also getting savvier about requesting application fee waivers, and institutions are granting more of them or have done away with application fees altogether.

Prestige, curriculum and monetary incentives are no longer enough to attract the top candidates to an institution. Colleges and universities are finding that they must engage in more creative marketing to put themselves in the best light to prospective students. Institutions that were used to simply selecting the top students from the applicant pool must now actively “sell” the benefits of attending and differentiate themselves from competing institutions.

One of the most effective ways to differentiate the institution and engage the prospective student is by using the Internet to reach the most plugged-in, online generation to date. And the Internet doesn’t simply refer to Web presence, although that is crucially important. It also means engaging candidates in the online communities they frequent and via the social networking tools that they use.

Higher education Websites are breaking new ground in the ways they interact with prospective students, parents, high school guidance counselors and college consultants. The intersection of creative marketing and technology is making this possible, especially when it comes to the content management systems that power Web presence.

This paper will:

- Examine the importance of Web presence in higher education recruiting
- Provide insight into how students are using the Web to make college selection decisions
- Look at how institutions can leverage social marketing techniques to reach candidates.

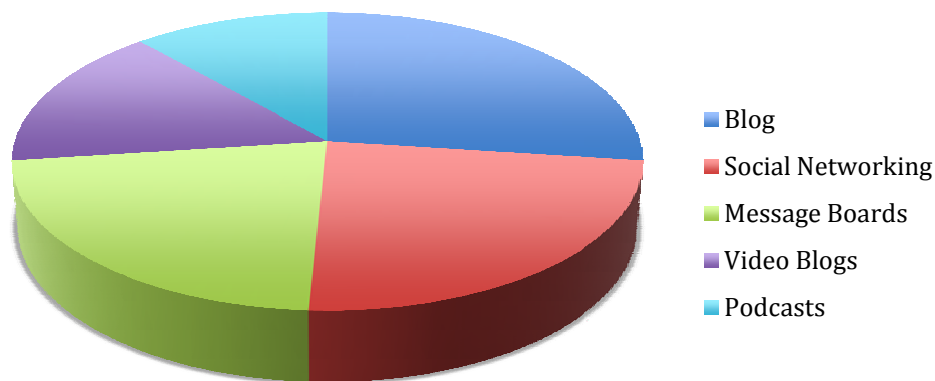
We’ll also discuss how to effectively use a content management system (CMS) to support these initiatives, which features and functionality are important, and the importance of policies to govern content and collaboration. Finally, we’ll leave you with some thoughts on how to measure the success of your CMS and Website initiatives.

## The Role of Web Presence in Recruiting

While their parents visited brick-and-mortar libraries to look at college viewbooks, college-bound members of Generation Y – often called the Net Generation – are comfortable using the Internet as their first and primary medium to explore their higher education choices. Teens visit Websites long before they set foot on campus for a prospective admission tour. They are not seeking daily news, but rather want to understand in a matter of seconds what they may like about a college or university. The experience they have will likely influence their short list, so institutions must use this first impression to both inform and engage the student. Integrating photo libraries, video, podcasts, interactive campus maps and blogs into Websites is increasingly popular but presents new Website maintenance challenges for admissions teams who already feel overwhelmed.

In addition, many higher education marketers attest that before you can get a student to visit your world, you first must visit their world – the world of social media. Students are talking about their higher education choices with peers online and reading about positive and negative experiences by their older siblings and high school friends. Although they are careful not to be perceived as a “Big Brother,” admissions marketers see value in participating in and even initiating these conversations.

According to a NACAC report in April 2009, a majority of higher education institutions maintain a presence in social media to reach prospective students, as shown in the chart.



**Social media usage – as reported by NACAC in April 2009**

User-friendly technologies make these marketing initiatives easier, but the amount of time required can be daunting, particularly for institutions with small marketing teams.

Parents, too, are using the Internet to research colleges and universities. In addition to the institution's Websites, they turn to third-party sites such as:

- CollegeBoard ([www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com))
- FastWeb ([www.fastweb.com](http://www.fastweb.com))
- The Princeton Review ([www.princetonreview.com](http://www.princetonreview.com))
- Peterson's ([www.petersons.com](http://www.petersons.com))

Colleges and universities can manage their profiles on these sites, however the discussion forum content is purely user-generated. Parents speak freely about their impressions and experiences — good and bad — researching institutions. Often the opinions extend above and beyond typical interaction with admissions officers. Institutions should consider these forums to be free portals into the minds of their target audiences. Higher education marketers can glean critical information that can be used to improve the way they present their institution both online and offline.

Another effective method to target prospects — students, parents and even guidance counselors — is to drive Web traffic to microsites or mini-Websites. Higher education marketers tend to put so much work into crafting and optimizing their institution's primary ".edu" Website that designing a microsite seems superfluous. But consider this scenario:

- You purchase \$250,000 worth of print, television and online media for your admissions campaign
- You pay an outsourced marketing agency \$25,000 to craft the messages around your brand promise
- Your call to action is to visit your ".edu" Website
- 20,000 unique visitors go there and have no idea where to go next because your homepage is just that — a well-designed, well-written homepage about your college or university with no targeted messaging about your campaign

Microsites serve as a separate entity from a homepage to present very specific information to visitors. They serve as an entryway when you need to guide your guests down a specific route. The design template can mimic that of the main Website with customized graphics, content and navigation. When visitors arrive they will see exactly what they were promised in your campaign messages without having to search through content clutter to find it. This sense of fulfillment will encourage them to stick around, click around, and click through.

## A Social Media Sidebar

### **Getting Started with Social Media – Eight Tips for Higher Ed Marketers**

By Melissa Richards, Director of Marketing and Strategic Communications, Virginia Tech

- Create a Facebook page and encourage faculty, staff, students and friends of your college or university to become “Fans;” use interactive messages like trivia and contests to engage them
- Start a blog and write about your key messages with links back to your Website and third-party news references about your institution
- Use RSS to send news from your main Website to your Facebook page and blog
- Establish a Twitter presence to “tweet” (send) messages and links to parents, alumni and key influencers; “follow” people who follow you; and monitor their replies and “retweets” (when they resend a message that you post)
- Engage students to produce short (2-3 minutes), “real life” videos that you can incorporate into your Website and post on sites like YouTube
- Leverage student organizations, department heads and popular professors to produce podcasts on academic and research topics
- Create a mobile version of your homepage and microsites to reach prospective students on the go
- Consider geo-targeted pay-per-click (PPC) campaigns like Facebook Ads, Google Adwords and Yahoo!; drive visitors to a microsite with a fun call to action that enables you to capture their contact information using a simple Web form for future opt-in correspondence

## Using a CMS to Enhance Your Web Presence

Building an attractive Web presence takes more than marketing savvy and an understanding of today's media — it takes the right technology. A content management system (CMS) is a crucial tool for creating and maintaining compelling Websites.

According to the Association for Information and Image Management (AIIM.org) a CMS is defined as a system “that helps in maintaining, controlling, changing and reassembling the content on a Web-page...The user interacts with the system at the front end through a normal Web browser. From there he can edit, control parts of the layout and maintain and add to the Web-pages without any programming or HTML skills.”

When selecting a CMS, higher education marketing teams should look for the features that will make their jobs easier throughout the entire content management lifecycle and support the following goals:

**Emphasize Contributions from Academic Departments:** A university Website should include specific and relevant content from all the academic departments regarding majors, research opportunities, courses and faculty. There are multiple reasons why a CMS facilitates these contributions. First, given the number of departments at most institutions, it would be a logistical nightmare to collect, organize and maintain this information without the use of a distributed CMS. Second, some academic knowledge owners may shy away from using complex technology or may have had frustrating experiences working with technology experts who do not understand academic areas of expertise. A user-friendly CMS offers individual departments the ability to add, edit and delete Web content as needed with restricted access to only their appropriate pages of the Website. CMS features that support departmental contributions include:

- **Group and role based security** – By assigning users to specific groups and roles, administrators can control access to certain areas of the site. This safely lets departments contribute content within proscribed limits.



- Version control and auditing – With content stored in a central repository, users benefit from version control features that ensure only one person at a time is editing the content. Auditing makes it possible to review a document's history, see who made changes, and roll back to a previous version if needed.

**Maintain Brand Integrity:** The institution's brand is, quite possibly, its most important asset. Maintaining the consistency of that brand over thousands of Web pages is daunting, but a centralized CMS can make this job easier by enforcing standards set by the marketing team. Look for a CMS that will allow the following:

- Use of multiple templates – Every department or academic function will want a distinct personality, but they must all reflect and respect overall brand standards. A CMS should support multiple templates based on cascading style sheets (CSS). CSS effectively allows the separation of content from appearance, making it possible to change design elements at the template level and have them ripple (cascade) through all pages based on that template. The marketing team should have the ability to review and adjust templates to enforce brand, if needed.
- Approval workflow – Nothing is more embarrassing than a typo or grammatical errors at an institute of higher learning! When a CMS supports approval workflow, content can be routed via email to an editor or reviewer before it is published live on the site. Document comparison features make it easier for a reviewer to see the changes that were made.

**Engage External Parties with Interactive Websites:** Dynamic, interactive Websites are no longer novel; they're expected. A CMS must support a variety of media, applications and back-end scripting languages. The more engaged a visitor is with a Website, the longer he or she will stay and explore what the school has to offer. Consider features that support interactivity:

- **Microsites** – Enhance online and offline marketing activities by using microsites for campaigns, events or to emphasize specific content. A CMS should have the ability to use multiple templates at once and support the multiple domains or sub-domains involved with microsite marketing.
- **Mobile Web** – Today's college recruits are on the go, with increasingly sophisticated smart phones. A CMS should let users easily develop, manage and deliver content that is ready for mobile Web users. Rather than develop alternate content for mobile applications, a CMS should automatically render existing content for handheld devices.
- **Forms and Surveys** – Quick polls are a fun way to immediately engage visitors while also eliciting useful information. Forms allow visitors to provide more information and request contact. A CMS with these features will help boost the interactivity of a site.

**Simplify Search and Search Engine Optimization:** A Website is useless if potential visitors can't find it, so a site must be designed with search engine friendliness in mind. Similarly, once visitors reach the site, they have to quickly be able to find the content they're interested in, or they'll simply go elsewhere.

- **Search Engine Optimization** – Even the best marketers can find it difficult to keep up with the changing algorithms behind the popular search engines. A CMS that ensures valid XHTML and WC3 compliant pages makes it easier for the search engines to index a site. Intelligent CMS solutions will accommodate directory structures and file names that allow the use of keywords in the URLs to help with SEO. Finally, a CMS must have the ability to create unique title and meta tags for every page.
- **Search** – For Websites with potentially thousands of pages, search functionality is critical to enable visitors to find the content they need. A CMS should have its own integrated search engine that returns relevant results quickly, or at a minimum it should support third-party search engines.

Even the best CMS on the market can't determine what content gets placed on a Website. If you're thinking about implementing a CMS, make sure you spend the time necessary to put policies and procedures in place that will govern the type of content that is permitted on the Website. All content contributors — and this could potentially be many people — should receive training and guidance as to what constitutes appropriate content for the institution.

## Measures of Success

Now that you see why Web presence is so important and how to use a CMS to enhance it, you may be wondering how to determine whether you've succeeded in making your Website a compelling destination. As with any marketing initiative, determine at the outset what the quantitative success criteria should be and put the analytical tools in place to measure them. Here are some tips:

- Measure the parts and the sum – Measure individual marketing activities at a micro-level as well as the integrated campaign at a macro-level. Track unique visitors, time spent on page, and click-throughs for individual stories as well as the homepage or other specific pages.
- Throw boomerangs – Track external sources that drive traffic to your Website and look for appropriate opportunities to return the favor. If third-party Websites are referencing your site, then you know your messages are penetrating Internet “noise.” Also, cross-traffic with trusted sources helps search engine optimization.
- Ask for RSVPs – Include registration forms for open houses, tours, lectures or other on-campus events so you can track which visitors are truly interested in your offer.
- “Please RT” – This phrase, started by Twitterers, encourages social media users to push your message out to their followers and fans, multiplying your reach infinitely. Use it and measure how many people “Re-Tweet” your message. If your message is interesting, they most likely will.

Analytic tracking codes should be embedded in your templates, so that every page is monitored. Reviewing traffic patterns on a regular basis will help you determine which messages, features and content are reaching the intended audience.

## Conclusion

There are many choices when it comes to selecting a CMS, and many that could potentially meet your needs. However, it helps to have an experienced system integrator on your team who already knows the ins-and-outs of content management systems. Systems Alliance has assisted numerous higher education clients with the implementation of SiteExecutive, a CMS that reduces the complexity, cost and effort of building highly effective Websites for organizations of all sizes. SiteExecutive has a full suite of features that gives non-technical personnel the means to create and publish Web content, while enforcing compliance with organizational processes, branding guidelines and industry best practices.

To learn more, please visit: <http://www.siteexecutive.com>.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> [Pryor, J. H., Hurtado, S., Saenz, V. B., Santos, J. L., & Korn, W. S. (2007). The American freshman: Forty year trends. Los Angeles: Higher Education Research Institute, UCLA]

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## About Systems Alliance

Systems Alliance, Inc., founded in 1993, is a Maryland-based company that provides business and technology consulting services to leading colleges, universities and research centers, including Johns Hopkins Carey School of Business, Tulane University School of Public Health, Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, The Center for Biosecurity at UPMC and Medical University of South Carolina. Systems Alliance has local offices in Florida, Georgia, Michigan, North Carolina, Tennessee and Virginia. To learn more, visit <http://www.systemsalliance.com>.

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