

PARK UNIVERSITY

Higher Education Admissions: What are they selling?

A Content Analysis

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Abstract

Twenty-five college Web sites were analyzed to discover what admissions departments are selling and what type of students they attract. This study found the majority of NAIA schools advertise social and faith organizations. Caucasian women appear eight times as much as minority males in photographs across 50 Web pages.

Description of the Study

This study focused on the Web site pages of higher education institutions, to discover the main selling points of the schools. Both the home page and the main page aimed towards prospective students were analyzed for content of the copy and photographs.

Only institutions whose sports teams play in the NAIA league were analyzed. The NAIA is a league composed of small American and Canadian colleges and universities. The NAIA institutions generally are private, not public; they also have 2,000 daytime students or less. Selecting only NAIA schools ensures each institution is not only an athletic competitor, but each is roughly the same size in terms of enrollment. This is more effective than analyzing the marketing materials of an NAIA private school of 1,000 attendees against an NCAA public school of 40,000 attendees.

The NAIA Web site lists nearly 300 institutions. This study analyzed 25 Web sites, choosing the first listing under each letter of the alphabet (except “Z,” for which there was no listing). This method of selection was chosen to add an element of randomness and decrease bias. It also eliminated the researcher’s home institution.

This topic – the main selling points of high education – was chosen due to recent public discourse about the value of college. It has been alleged college is a waste of time, is just a means to an end, and is no longer relevant by editorial columnists nationwide. This researcher hoped to find trends suggesting why this opinion may be rising.

Research Questions

RQ1. Are admission materials from higher education institutions selling an education, a career, an experience, or something else?

RQ2. Do higher education admission materials suggest college is for a particular type of student?

Method

The researcher analyzed two pages from each Web site – the home page and one admissions page. Each page was coded on a separate sheet, resulting in 50 finished code sheets.

The code sheet is organized into 10 sections: Major Art, Overarching Theme, Photos of Students (Activities), Demographics of Photos, Academic Keywords, Extra-curricular Activities, Residence Life, Financial Aid, Career Boosts, and College Town.

The “Major Art” category notes the content of the photograph heading the page. Options include a building, students, athletes, social activities, and posed people. The Overarching Theme was gathered through the majority of the page’s content. Therefore, pages that mentioned religion or faith more than any other topic were said to be faith-themed.

The student activities and demographics were designed to show the target audience of the marketing materials. It was assumed the photograph demographics were designed to appeal to a certain audience, and imply who would fit in at that school.

The academic keywords were listed to find the focus on education. Career boost items were coded to define if a college marketed itself as a “means to an end”. Residence life, Extra-curricular activities, and College Town were coded to examine the vibrancy of the community, according to the admissions materials.

This study is limited to 25 of the 300 NAIA schools. While these results do provide some general ideas about the state of private education in the United States, it will take a thorough analysis to suggest more accurate trends.

Results

This analysis found the Web site Major Art was either a social situation (eight sites) or a photograph of a building (nine sites). Other photographs were mascots, logos, or no artwork at all. Showing a building suggests the reputation of the institution should persuade a student to attend, whereas a social situation sells an experience of friendship and community. Neither of those is particularly related to an education.

The Overarching Theme of these Web pages was most commonly community (13 pages), followed by faith (12 pages). Other results were institution themed (seven pages), education themed (six pages), career themed (four pages), and service themed (one page). No page was themed to be mostly about athletics. Community and faith are very interlinked, and both related to a non-academic experience of college. Neither of those were connected to study groups, honor

societies, or other academic pursuits. Instead, they were based around extra-curricular social activities.

The demographics of the photographs were tabulated per appearing person. The code sheets show 376 female students and 254 male students across the 25 Web sites. This is roughly a 1.5:1 ratio of women to men – actually a more equal ratio than higher education currently (reportedly at 2:1 ratio of women to men).

Race was a much less equal area. Caucasian (European, Middle Eastern and Northern African) students amounted to 503 across 50 Web pages, whereas only 83 African-American students were pictured. Asian students amounted to 15, Hispanic and Latino students were coded to 8, and Native Americans were tabbed to 3. Basically, that amounts to a 5:1 ratio of white students to non-white students.

However, the researcher noted items that were not on the code sheet, relating to race. It was found the majority of minority race students were playing a “role” in the photographs. African-American traditionally-aged students were most often pictured as athletes or gospel singers. Non-traditional African-Americans were unanimously pictured in tutoring sessions. Asian students were commonly depicted as scientists or musicians. Native American students were invariably pictured in traditional regalia. It was rare to see a minority student in social situation photographs outside of the historically black college, and never pictured in photos of service work.

Two particular colleges stood out when evaluating the equality of race in the student photographs. On the Reinhardt University home page, the only two African-American students located on their Web site were playing a football game. Besides only being shown as athletes,

these men were not even students of Reinhardt – they were wearing the jerseys of an opposing team. This may suggest racial tension in their community, as the only minority students pictured are – quite literally – the enemies.

The other college with a particularly strong example of unequal race exposure appeared on the Union University home page. The only minority students pictured on either coded page appeared in a photo of a campus visit – *these minority race youth were not even students at Union*. All of the photographs of current students depicted Caucasian youth.

Every analyzed school mentioned at least one extra-curricular activity. The most popular type of activity appeared to be athletics, with 19 colleges mentioning this type. Other types were faith (17 schools), art/dance/music (14 schools), academic societies (10 schools), study abroad opportunities (10 schools), service learning (9 schools) and social organizations such as sororities (8 schools).

Roughly above one-third of the analyzed schools included academic organizations (honor societies, newspaper, clubs in majors) in their promotion materials. The coverage of academic clubs was generally related to awards or community service and warranted just text, whereas the faith and social opportunities were covered with photographs, testimonials, and video. This may lend the idea to prospective students that academic clubs are not “cool” or fun to be a part of.

Finally, 14 schools mentioned residence life and dorm living. The most popular amenities were private bathrooms and bedrooms, followed by WiFi Internet. More schools boasted single-sex dorms than co-ed dorms, usually coinciding with a religious community.

Only six schools specifically mentioned careers and graduates as part of their selling points, usually with talk of undergraduate internships. Only one school mentioned famous graduates as an incentive.

The results suggest the answer to RQ1 is “community”. This is best exemplified with the numerous mentions of making new friends, creating a “home away from home,” and developing “a second family.” Each item appears to be in place to assure a prospective student she won’t be lonely at her new school, nor will there ever be a lack of things to do. Most colleges did not mention opportunities for academic fulfillment – only two schools mentioned research opportunities, and three mentioned honors programs.

The answer to RQ2 is suggested to be a traditionally-aged Caucasian, Christian female. Other students – including males and all other races and ethnicities – may have to work harder to fit into these institutions unless they are athletes or scientists, if the photographs are believed to be an accurate representation of the campus culture.

Why This Study Matters

This research topic has a social impact because the photographs and copy could be limiting the type of students who wish to attend higher education. If there is an 8:1 chance that an African-American male will become a student compared to a Caucasian female (as the data about gender and race distribution in photographs suggests), this may dissuade the male from applying.

The results also suggest the experience being sold to prospective students – one of social situations more than academics – may set them up for disappointment in their actual experience. College students may not understand why their academic workload is too heavy to partake in

social activities if the college experience they believe they are purchasing never mentions classes, honor societies, or hard work.

Suggestions for Future Research

A complete analysis of NAIA schools would provide a much more accurate picture of the trends in admissions materials. This small sampling may happen to include a lot of exceptions.

To expand on prospective student types, a researcher could compare and contrast the overarching themes of the admissions materials with the retention and graduation rates of the colleges. Are institutions touting their social organizations able to graduate as many students per capita as academically-focused colleges?

Finally, coding for roles of minority students in photographs may suggest the visual diversity created by marketing departments perpetuates stereotypes.

Enns – Higher education admissions materials

SCHOOL: _____ PAGE: _____

Major Art : Logo Mascot Building Studying Social Posing

Overarching theme: Education Career Service Faith Athletics Community Institution

<p>Photos of students:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Posing• In Class• Doing Science Experiments• Athletics• Social Activities• Dressed casually• Dressed in business attire <p>In photos, students are: (tally)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Male• Female• Caucasian• African-American• Hispanic/Latino• Asian• Other Race• Traditional (younger)• Non-traditional (older)• Military• Athletes• Scholars• Scientists• Communicators• Artists <p>Academics</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Small Classes• Class Ratio• Hands-on work• Critical thinking• Majors• Evening/Online available• Research opportunities• Challenging	<p>Extracurricular activities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Academic• Art/culture• Social• Service• Faith• Athletics• International /Study abroad <p>Dorm Rooms and campus in general</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Mentioned• Kitchen• Pool• Community• Other amenities -- list <p>Financial Aid</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Federal• Need-based• Merit• Athletic• Art/Music/Dance <p>After graduation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Speed of Degree• Graduation rate• Graduates with jobs• Companies graduates work(ed) for• Famous graduates• Internships <p>The "Experience"</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Town• Shopping• Food• Attractions nearby
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