# THE DIGITAL FRONTIER:

# The Implications of Evolving Technology on Strategic Enrollment Management

**Joseph A. Merante, PhD**

**April 7, 2009**

## CONTENT

## SUMMARY

To remain competitive, universities must upgrade their enrollment management methods and strategies to better address economic uncertainty and take charge of demographics in the higher education arena. Certain factors – economic downturns, advancement of social media, the growing ineffectiveness of traditional advertising with the younger demographic – demand more aggressive strategies that employ both old and new methods. Fortunately, the advent of new digital technology, in the form of social media, behavioral targeting, and strategic notification, can aid institutions in achieving and maintaining optimum enrollment and shaping the consistency of its student body in line with both its mission and financial goals.

## INTRODUCTION

Myriad factors will affect existing enrollment management strategies in the coming years --an anticipated decline in high school graduates, continued depopulation of rural areas, and dwindling state support. Competition for star students – academically robust full-pays – is expected to become even fiercer, especially as economic pressures squeeze family budgets. The expected reduction in the number of high school graduates alone has the potential to adversely affect the application pool. The nationwide predictions range from the disturbing to the dire. A recent study by The Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) anticipates a

steady decline in the number of public high school graduates through 2013-14.[1] A late

2008 LA Times article suggested that the number of high school graduates nationwide

is expected to dip by 4.5% by 2014, with up to a 20% decline anticipated in New

England and Upper Midwest states.[2] In such a climate, existing enrollment strategies

–site visits, phone calls, direct mailings, word-of-mouth, alumni outreach – will not be

sufficient to keep institutions competitive. Institutions can no longer rely on traditional

methods of advertising either; younger demographics are less responsive to television

and radio advertising than their predecessors. Retention may also suffer; with less

financial aid and mounting tuition costs, students may opt to leave school early to

enter the workforce.

But with change comes opportunity. A bevy of emerging technology tools has

the potential to breathe new life into existing enrollment management strategies.

These tools have the power to affect recruitment and retention across a broad

spectrum and will further allow institutions to respond on their own terms to volatile

economic forces. Yet few colleges and universities are prepared to integrate these

technologies into existing enrollment campaigns. Institutional unfamiliarity with the

new technologies, a dearth of best practices, and the sheer speed of evolution and

adoption of these technologies have thus far kept some institutions from committed

entry into the new digital fray. To remain competitive, it is critical that higher education

institutions become informed about the evolving technology and its applications in

---

[1] WICHE, *Knocking at the College Door: Projections of High School Graduates by State and Race/Ethnicity* 1992-2022, March 2008, Publication Number: 2A365, 6. Available at http://www.wiche.edu/policy/knocking/1992-2022/knocking_complete_book.pdf

[2] Larry Gordon, "Out-of-state colleges boost recruiting efforts in California," LA Times, November 29, 2008. Available at http://www.latimes.com/news/education/la-me-recruit29-2008nov29,0,6595117.story

strategic enrollment management plans. This paper examines these new tools –

specifically social media, behavioral targeting or psychographics, and strategic mass

notification – and how higher education institutions can leverage these tools to

enhance their competitive edge in the enrollment management arena.

## HISTORY OF ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT

The push toward more active marketing and the building of relationships between

institutions and student families began almost forty years ago. As funding and

financial aid availability changed, universities began considering how to better manage

recruitment and retention. The term "enrollment management" was first used in a

recruiting and retention context in the early 1970s by John "Jack" Maguire, then dean

of admissions at Boston College. By 1981, adherence to an enrollment plan, which

included the strategic use of financial aid packages, had allowed Maguire to double

Boston College's number of yearly applicants from 7,000 to 14,000 and reduced the

acceptance rate from 90 percent to 35 percent.[3]

Demographic downturns in the 1980s, in combination with changes to higher

education funding, pushed the benefits of more aggressive enrollment management

planning to the forefront. Financial aid started to be viewed system-wide as the

primary tool in enrollment management strategies, and higher education institutions

began incorporating more robust advertising and direct mail techniques into

---

[3] Robin Matross Helms, "Interview with John Jack Maguire," College and University Journal, Vol. 79, No. 1, Summer 2003, 33. Available at http://www.maguireassoc.com/uploadDocs/College%20and%20University%20Journal%20Interview%20 with%20Jack%20Maguire.pdf

admissions campaigns. By the mid-90s, enrollment management had evolved into "strategic enrollment management" or SEM, and colleges and universities, primarily in the private sector, began establishing full-fledged SEM departments. SEM was used to address not only admissions, but financial aid, retention, marketing, and with more and more students looking at institution composition as a selling point, campus demographics. Prospective students and parents now wanted to know average SAT scores, numbers of National Merit scholars, and alumni statistics in order to determine the long-term value of an institution's educational offerings.

Twenty-first-century SEM saw the advent of website presence and online applications, but not much else. At many schools, today's SEM plan mimics last decade's SEM plan. Institutions continue to concentrate their enrollment planning on high school visits, college nights, traditional advertising techniques, and general website configurations. But while traditional marketing efforts may have sufficed in a "snail-mail" culture, these methods no longer produce the same results. Competition for rankings is stiff, and schools with aggressive enrollment management techniques are snapping up prospects. Rapid changes in technology in the past five years mean that 21st-century SEM has the potential to be much more robust and interactive. To survive, and thrive in uncertain economic times, enrollment management planning needs to adapt to the new interactive environment, reaching students where they "live," virtually, as well as using psychographic advances to more actively control and determine campus composition.

## NEW TOOLS – SOCIAL MEDIA

New social media trends – along with the availability of devices that allow on-the-go usage, such as Apple's iPhone and Blackberry's Storm – are rapidly transforming the marketing landscape. Defined as a cluster of technology tools used to facilitate social interaction, social media, unlike traditional media, is fast, instantly accessible, and relies on user-generated content. Forms include social networks (Facebook, MySpace), blogs, wikis, podcasts, forums, video sites (YouTube), micro-blogging (Twitter), and content communities (Flickr, YouTube). Social media offers easy, instant connections, and when viewed against the continuum of traditional media, is still in its infancy. Wikis were first used in the mid-90s and blogs in the late 90s. Originally a social networking site for college students, Facebook was invented in 2004. Twitter, a free social media utility that allows users to send short messages of 140 characters or fewer, or *Tweets*, to individual networks, was first available in 2006.

Social media forms are already immensely popular, especially among the 18 to 24 year old demographic. As of February 2009, Facebook had over 175 million active users worldwide.[4] According to research conducted by AllFacebook, almost 20 million of those users reside in the United States and are between the ages of 18 and 24. Researchers at the Pew Internet & American Life Project determined that, as of December 2008, approximately one in five online adults, ages between 18 and 24,

---

[4] Available at http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics#/press/info.php?timeline

use Twitter or similar applications.[5] A recent study (2009) undertaken by Nielson

Online found that social networking and blogging now rank as the fourth most popular

online activity, trumping personal emailing.[6]

Where then is social media's place in enrollment management? As both a

bridge between social and academic life in the context of retention and as a

recruitment tool, social media can be used at numerous stages along the enrollment

management lifecycle. According to the US Department of Education, the four-year

graduation rate for degree-seeking students was 29 percent at public institutions; 50.3

percent at private, non-profit institutions; and 25.7 percent at private, for-profit

institutions. On average, only 36.1 percent of students will graduate in four years; the

number jumps to an average of 57.5 percent at six years.[7] Retention and timely

graduation is critical not just as a factor in an institution's financial stability but to the

institution's image as perceived by potential matriculants. As part of retention efforts,

social media tools can help keep students engaged and focused in both the academic

and social arenas, and thus more likely to continue on to graduation. Social networks

like Facebook and MySpace can foster a sense of community outside the lecture hall,

critical in freshman and sophomore classes where active participation can be thwarted

by sheer class size. Social network postings, instant messaging, and Tweets allow

---

[5] Amanda Lenhart and Susannah Fox, Pew/Internet PFW Internet & American Life Project, "Pew Internet Project Data Memo Re: Twitter and Status Updating," February 12, 2009. Available at http://pewinternet.org/pdfs/PIP%20Twitter%20Memo%20FINAL.pdf
[6] Nielson Online, "Social Networks & Blogs Now 4th Most Popular Online Activity, Ahead of Personal Email, Nielsen Reports," New York, NY, March 9, 2009. Available at http://www.nielsen-online.com/pr/pr_090309.pdf
[7] Laura G. Knapp, Janice E. Kelly-Reid, Scott A. Ginder, Elise S. Miller, "Enrollment in Postsecondary Institutions, Fall 2006; Graduation Rates, 2000 & 2003 Cohorts; and Financial Statistics, Fiscal Year 2006: First Look," NCES 2008-173, US Department of Education, 11. Available at http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2008/2008173.pdf

educators to reach out to students beyond the classroom; the formation of positive relationships between teachers and students plays a well-documented role in retention and eventual graduation. Accessibility to podcasts and blogs can supplement the traditional syllabus, providing a greater breadth and depth of knowledge via a variety of learning channels. Social media content can be both disseminated and received via mobile devices, thus better accommodating working or off-campus students.

During the recruitment process, the use of social media addresses both university image creation and traditional prospecting. Social media tools allow universities to craft an image and enter into relationships with prospective students much earlier than traditionally possible. In regards to image, an active presence in the social media arena allows institutions to further differentiate from the competition by creating a unique institutional persona. An institution that very clearly defines itself – its goals, mission, student makeup, strengths – can help undecided students arrive at a school selection decision with greater clarity and ease.

## NEW TOOLS – PSYCHOGRAPHICS

While the use of social media in an enrollment context can offer insight into prospect preferences and aspirations, the use of psychographics can deliver a more complete picture of personalities, values, lifestyles, and attitudes. Psychographics has matured significantly with technology and can be extraordinarily useful as a fundamental component of enrollment management campaigns. The most successful colleges and universities will be those who are able to identify the characteristics of the right

psychographic. What kind of students would flourish on campus? Are they brighter, more conservative, aggressive, or creative?  With gender differences diminishing as a factor, new forms of identity will be emerging in 2009, forms more attuned to lifestyle and values.

Psychographic research data has long been applied in the corporate arena. Claritas, a psychographic data provider, segments households and individuals into 66 distinct clusters. These segments, known as PRIZM clusters, provide the opportunity for marketers to target potential customers based on precise demographic, consumer behavior, and geographic data. Claritas became well-known for its catchy, descriptive PRIZM cluster names. "Urban Achievers" reside in ethnically diverse neighborhoods near urban public universities. "Towns and Gowns" are highly educated 18 to 24 year-olds with a preference, but not the budget, for prestige goods. "Shotguns and Pickups" work at primarily blue-collar jobs and enjoy hunting, bowling, and sewing.

Mindset Media offers similar psychographic profiling services via its Mindset Profile process. The Mindset Media survey types target audiences on twenty-one "personality elements." Types are then further refined by the use of an intensity scale based on spontaneity levels. Mindset Media defines Spontaneity 1 types as "super-planners," while Spontaneity 5s are described as those who like to "fly by the seat of their pants." An individual's Mindset –a combination of personality traits and inclination towards impulsive behavior – can help determine both consumption preferences and brand affinity:

*People with high self-esteem are more likely to drink premium coffee.*

*Altruists floss more, and deliberate people pay off their credit cards*

*more regularly. Pragmatists like minivans, but station wagons appeal*

*more to spontaneous types. And highly open people buy organic foods*

*at nearly three times the rate of the general population.[8]*

This micro-targeting, or hyper-targeting, has the potential to have a significant impact on the recruiting process by allowing institutions to spent more time on content development and less time trying to identify primary market segments.

## NEW TOOLS – STRATEGIC NOTIFICATION

Many universities and colleges are already familiar with notification services. Originally intended for use in contacting localized students, faculty, and staff in case of emergency, notification services are now gaining popularity as both prospecting and retention outreach tools. Enrollment managers can send time-sensitive notifications to thousands, or hundreds of thousands, of constituents in a very short time frame. Communications can be received via phone, text, or email on a variety of devices.

Notification services can improve the quality and efficiency of recruiting efforts, saving hours of time that would have been spent making individual phone calls to candidates. When used in tandem with psychographic data, notification services allow

---

[8] From the Mindset Media *Overview* page. Available at http://www.mindset-media.com/advertisers-overview.php

institutions to send highly specific messages to well-defined prospective student segments. Messages can be tailored to a particular constituent subset and sent numerous times over the recruiting lifecycle. These services can also be used to remind students of application deadlines, campus events, and other related recruitment activities.

Institutions can target messages to students and families during the decision-making process, as well. During the financial aid process, many students, unaware that they qualify for aid, miss important aid deadlines. Notification systems can be used to remind students of both their qualification for aid and important filing dates. As phone messages can be recorded in the voice of a specific individual, institutions can reach out to families and students via institution-affiliated individuals – professors, students –who may have connected with a desired constituent segment.

As a retention tool, notification facilitates regular communication between students and institution faculty. Professors who would not normally have the time to personally contact hundreds of students can now distribute one phone message, in their own voice, to each individual. Regular communication between students and institutions can halt attrition by fostering a sense of community and responsibility and encourage student success through increased interaction.

While many institutions continue to use notification services solely for emergency messaging, forward-thinking institutions have already leveraged them to efficiently further enrollment management goals. With an enrollment nearing 30,000 students, Santa Monica College (SMC), a two-year community college in Southern

California, found it difficult, if not impossible, to interact with new and existing students on a personal level. Contact was critical, however, to ensure registration, enrollment, and continued student performance.

SMC implemented a notification service to facilitate a variety of communication and enrollment management activities, including enhancing the impact of its Outreach Program. SMC witnessed quick results. One of SMC's first calls – a "welcome message" sent to 18,500 students – captured enough revenue-generating registrants to more than repay the cost of the service. In addition, by using the service to send messages to remind students about deadlines, special programs, and campus visits, SMC experienced an overall 5% increase in enrollment within a year. The number of out-of-state students grew from 5% to 9% over the same period.

University of North Texas (UNT), a public research university in Denton, Texas, also experienced a tangible return on investment when administrators used a notification service to inform students of impending class schedule cancellations due to delinquent accounts. Connecting with students regarding delinquent accounts – and thus taking an important step in keeping students on the track to graduation – was a high priority for UNT administrators. But contacting 10,000 students a year was problematic. Phone calls required a tremendous outlay in temporary staff, equipment, and office space, and emails were not effective as they often went unanswered and delivery couldn't be ascertained. Sending messages via the notification service not only allowed for efficient, cost-effective delivery but consistency of message and delivery confirmation. In early December, UNT notified 1,400 students that their

classes would be dropped unless payment was remitted immediately. Within one week, UNT had fully recouped 800 of those accounts. Prior to using the notification service, UNT would have expended considerable resources to deliver the same message.

## CHALLENGES

While new technology tools are changing the face of enrollment management, the road ahead is not without a few bumps, and several issues must be addressed prior to integrating new tactics into existing recruitment and retention plans. Privacy is a very real concern; the easy availability of personal and institutional information means that institutions need to more closely examine existing privacy policies and consider what constitutes an appropriate use of online data, especially as it relates to FERPA (Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act). The lack of available best practices must also be considered: because the media of communication has evolved so rapidly, institutions will need to develop new enrollment management strategies without the benefit of benchmarks.

Without easy access to best practices, developing and effectively utilizing content will require a certain amount of trial and error, with the results of such efforts being necessarily public due to the open nature of the new media. Content, of course, is still king, and with hundreds of institutions competing for the same prospects, content must be engaging, detailed, and above all, perceived as useful.  It is worth remembering, as well, the very public nature of the internet. Internet content can instantly be parsed and repackaged. Facebook's recent retraction of its new service

terms notwithstanding[9], institutions must remember that content placed on the internet can move very quickly beyond the realm of the institution's control and exist into perpetuity at various locations unrelated to the institution's domain. In addition, while institutions can put forth carefully chosen content and craft a certain image, users, via social consensus, are the final determiners of the institution's reputation.

Support and maintenance issues are also of concern. Integrating new tools into existing strategies requires broad support from a variety of departments, as well a commitment to ongoing maintenance. Social media and other new technologies are not static and cannot be managed like websites. It is therefore critical for institutions to employ knowledgeable and sophisticated content creators and managers to create and maintain content consistent across all media. It must be realized, as well, that in this arena authenticity is paramount. Today's tweens, teens, and college students are highly media savvy and can instantly recognize institutional content that tries to be too "cool." Chris Lott, author of the now-closed blog, Ruminate, used the phrase "creepy treehouse" to describe what happens when institutions force constituents into social or quasi-social situations, e.g. professors who insist students communicate via Facebook or other social media. According to a 2007 study undertaken by The Joint Information Systems Committee in the United Kingdom, university students wanted to keep their online information private from corporations and institutions, yet were still amenable to

---

[9] Facebook's change to its services terms in February 2009 asserted that the company had permanent rights to any content that users create or upload, even after the user deleted the content from the site. Worldwide outrage provoked a quick retraction by the company and a return to the original service terms.

instant feedback and information from instructors via the same online tools.[10] As these

technologies continue to grow and evolve and are even more widely adopted, the idea

of the "creepy treehouse" may become irrelevant, and along with it any ambivalence

regarding an institution's place in a student's online social presence.

Institutions should also note that these new technologies should be considered

*part* of an integrated campaign and should never completely replace other campaign

strategies and tactics. The goal is to create a multimedia campaign through cross-

channel integration. No one marketing or communication medium can be expected to

function as the whole solution but rather must be viewed as a component of an

integrated, dynamic whole. In the corporate arena, integrated marketing plans are

used to facilitate outreach to individuals rather than markets. Higher education

institutions must get in the habit of crafting and disseminating messages – via direct

mail, social media, and email notification – that cater to the wants and desires of the

individual student.

Messages must be mutually reinforcing. Everyone involved in the process, from

the dean to Twittering professors to official student bloggers, must work together to

craft a consistent similar look and message across all channels to ensure the

presentation of the institution as a cohesive unit. Message content – and thus

consistency – will be informed by the institution's core competencies. What is the

culture on campus? What is unique about the institution and thus distinguishes it from

local or even national competitors? Institutions must also ensure that content is useful

---

[10] Stephen Hoare, "Students tell universities: Get out of MySpace!" Guardian.co.uk, November 5, 2007. Available at http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2007/nov/05/link.students

and relevant. Today's students receive a plethora of information via multiple channels, which means that unfocused or irrelevant information is instantly discarded or ignored.

## INITIAL STEPS

Integrating social media tools, behavioral targeting, and strategic notification into existing enrollment management plans can invigorate recruitment and retention strategies and decrease the threat of competition. However, getting started can seem daunting; especially as higher education institutions are now facing the very real prospect of budget and program cuts and will soon have to do more with less. A complete enrollment management program overhaul, however, isn't necessary or even desirable. Small steps, in combination with comprehensive research, allow institutions to explore uses for new technology tools in a manner that will yield more insights and benefit long-term enrollment management planning. Institutions can:

**Start testing the waters in the social media arena.** This allows institutions to begin "listening" to potential and existing constituents. This process of listening also demonstrates that the institution is interested in two-way communication, not just building a "creepy treehouse" for its own marketing purposes.

**Begin considering methods of tracking success.** How will your institution define success with the new technologies? Email campaigns can be partially

evaluated by delivery and click-through statistics, but what about Facebook pages, blogs, podcasts, and the use of psychographic data?

**Consider partnering with a technology provider**. Numerous providers can offer ready-made strategies, as well as experience in the social media and notification arenas. These providers can aid institutions in testing performance and forging a model for future initiatives.

**Define core competencies.** Old methods of prospecting – printed viewbooks, high school visits – may have allowed institutions to be vague about existing core competencies. However, it is no longer sufficient to for institutions to define themselves by region or available programs and merely being "geographically desirable" or offering specialized programs isn't enough. While these attributes may factor into a prospective student's decision to matriculate, an institution's culture, values, and connections now play a more critical role. Since students on average apply to five or six schools (with some students applying to as many as ten to twelve), the clear conveyance of core competencies allows prospective students to easily understand the differences between institutions. For example, Loyola Marymount University (LMU) is a Catholic institution. However, the perceived value of an LMU education attracts more than just those interested in religious studies: fewer than 60 percent of enrolled students are Catholic. With University of South California (USC) and

University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) as local competition, LMU further distinguishes itself by small class size, commitment to service, and a consistent ranking as one of the top most beautiful campuses in the United States. USC, in contrast, emphasizes tradition. UCLA touts its leadership in numerous fields of study and its selectivity in regards to its freshman classes. Like LMU, USC, and UCLA, institutions must take the time to identify what makes them unique and desirable in the eyes of prospective students.

**CONCLUSION**

While some institutions have moved forward, incorporating new methods into existing strategies, higher education institutions in general are not yet fully leveraging these new communication methods. The reason cannot be monetary; many of these new technologies require low or no cost to participate. Time and labor may be considered factors, but institutions can surely find ways to leverage existing staff and student resources. Notification services require an initial and ongoing investment but that investment can be rapidly recouped by gains made in retention.

What then is the biggest barrier? Simply stated, the existing higher education culture is the barrier. While higher education institutions are well known for their dynamic and forward-thinking contributions in science, economics, and other academic areas, they traditionally lag behind the corporate arena in the progressive use of technology in a marketing capacity. But in today's economic climate, failing to

apply new technology to existing enrollment management planning may lead to failure. Economic uncertainty, a dwindling application pool, and a decline in state funding demand that new approaches be employed in existing recruitment and retainment strategies. To guarantee survival and to ensure better care of both existing and prospective constituents, higher education leaders must respond with creativity, innovation, and a willingness to integrate innovative digital technologies into existing multichannel enrollment management planning.

## GLOSSARY

**Blogs** are online journals or diaries. Originally called "we**b logs**," blogs generally include written commentary (organized in reverse chronological order) but can also feature graphics and video (see Vblogging below). Blogs are labeled or "tagged" according to subject matter and can be syndicated via RSS (Really Simple Syndication). Anyone can blog for free via Wordpress.com, Blogger.com, or LiveJournal.com.

**E-mail** is the oldest and most widely used digital communication method and is considered second only to customer reviews on websites in its power to influence online purchases, according to DoubleClick Performics' "Green Marketing Study," conducted by Opinion Research Corporation in February 2008. While the proliferation of spam has done some damage to e-mail marketing, e-mail is still considered by many to be the most effective e-marketing tool.

**Folksonomy** is a user-driven method of labeling and organizing online information, including websites, photos, podcasts, and videos. Unlike taxonomy, which relies on the hierarchical organization of information as determined by experts, folksonomy relies on users to add labels or "tags" using their own vocabulary and subject knowledge. Broad folksonomy (see Del.icio.us at http://delicious.com/) occurs when many people tag the same object. Narrow folksonomy (see Flickr at http://www.flickr.com/) occurs when a few users tag many different items.

**Podcasts** are downloadable audio files; podcasting allows for the later redistribution of live audio content, e.g. radio programs, lectures, sports broadcasts. Unlike traditional radio broadcasting, podcasting allows users to determine when and how they listen to content. Podcasts can be downloaded to a variety of devices, including MP3 players (iPod, iRiver, Zune), laptops, and MP3-capable mobile phones. Video podcasts are downloadable video files.

**Proximity Marketing or Bluetooth Marketing** allows businesses to deliver content – location-based coupons, localized information such as weather or traffic, contextual advertising – to a mobile device when that mobile device enters a specific area or zone. Mobile devices must in "discoverable" mode and sending is permission based. For example, a prospective engineering student visits the engineering and technology section at Borders. Using Bluetooth marketing, the engineering department at the local

university can send a message – notification of an event, reminder of an application deadline, general information regarding the program – directly to the student's phone. Proximity marketing has been used in Europe for years and is just now gaining popularity in the United States.

**Social Media** are a group of online media tools that allow people to easily share ideas, opinions, knowledge, and experiences. Social networks – MySpace, Facebook, Twitter, Plurk, Flickr – rely on user-generated content. There is generally no cost to participate.

**Video Blogging (Vblogging)** is a type of blogging where posts consist primarily of amateur videos instead of text. Video sharing sites like YouTube and Google Video allow vbloggers to share postings with a wider audience.

**Widgets** are small programs embedded in web pages. There are a wide variety of widgets available, including weather reports, news headlines, advertisements, and entertainment programs like a digital Magic 8 ball or daily Dilbert cartoon. Widgets can also be used to track website visitors or target sidebar ads to particular viewers. Bloggers add widgets to their sites to encourage readers to bookmark a site or add a site to a feed. In the higher education sphere, widgets can be used on an institution's website to provide additional information such as event schedules, news, or department-specific highlights.