Things certainly have changed a lot in the 40+ years we have been engrossed in the college admissions business. It wasn’t uncommon back then for a high school valedictorian to begin thinking about where to go to college in March or even later of the senior year. The higher education pecking order was much less well defined and entrenched and students readily floated from one college choice to another without thinking that this was the most important decision they will ever make. It is a different world in the 21st Century with students beginning the college search as early as their freshman year in high school and firm decisions being made about their choices by the end of the junior year.
Students have accelerated the college search process.

GDA Market Research surveys 30,000-40,000 college bound students every year to find out how they are going through the college choice process. They regularly tell us that they have made a list of possible colleges by the end of the sophomore year and a final list by the summer of their junior year. As hard as it may be to believe, fewer than a third of the latter group end up enrolling at a place that wasn’t at the top of that list.

Students are not the only ones pushing up the process. Colleges are sending out pre-populated applications in August and encouraging students to apply early with application fee waivers and scholarship incentives. September and October are the new December and January when it comes to the submission of applications and Early Action programs have replaced rolling admission as the way to encourage this activity.

Everybody working in a college admission office is aware of these developments but few have adjusted their recruitment programs to confront the new reality. Far too much time is spent during the last 12 months of what is now a 24-month recruitment cycle trying to recruit seniors who already know where they are going to college and not nearly enough time is dedicated to converting sophomores and first semester juniors into first choice applicants. The focus is more on getting students to complete an application than making the case for the benefits of the institution. As a result, colleges are getting more and more applications from students who have little genuine interest, yield rates have fallen through the floor, and few enrollments are actually growing.

Close to 70% of students know which college they want to attend by the end of junior year.

An interesting outcome of this accelerated process is the tremendous decline in the number of students who are actually responding to student search and becoming active members of a college’s prospect pool. Of course a few students show up for high school visits or college fairs and several visit the campuses of their top choices before they apply, but an increasing number of the students in the applicant pool are first source applications or “phantom apps.” Gone are the days when 98% of a college’s applicant pool was actual inquiries before they applied.

As the system now works, the vast majority of students has been admitted and received merit scholarships before January 1 and those awards represent the lion’s share of what they are going to be offered in financial aid gift assistance. All that remains to be done in the new year is push some of the many incompletes to finish the process and begin aggressively implementing the accepted applicant yield phase of the recruitment process. The problem is: remember, close to 70% know where they are going by the end their junior year so a dishearteningly high percentage of this time-consuming, expensive yield activity is actually just a whole lot of sound and fury signifying nothing.

Colleges need to get out in front or be left behind.

It is time to begin rethinking this crazy process and redirecting the admissions staff’s time and resources where they are likely to have the greatest impact, at the front end of the process. “Wait,” you say, “We can’t do that, we have to enroll this year’s class first. We don’t have time to communicate with sophomores and juniors.” To which we say, “You are going to have to do both or wallow in the mediocre results that come from late cycle recruitment.”

Obviously, one cannot make the switch all at once and second semester senior yield activities will always have a place in the recruitment plan. However, it is time to begin confronting the need to develop a larger, more interested inquiry pool of juniors and convert them into seriously interested applicants. The transition is time consuming and expensive simply because you have to continue serving both populations, but it is a cost that has to be born if a college wants to get out of the current rut of more applications, lower yield, and more work that ultimately result in fewer enrolled students.

GDA Integrated Services can help you develop a plan to make this transition without losing ground in the current recruitment cycle. We take what we have learned in our market research to develop a series of messages that we know resonate with students and are conveyed in a well organized, integrated print and electronic communication flow. We also use our Interest Predictor Model to significantly reduce the cost of the inquiry pool development. The plan works best if there is personal contact early in the process between the prospect and a member of the admissions staff either in person or on the phone, but this is not always possible given staff limitations. So the emphasis is placed on a more automated communication flow that outlines the most salient points and tells the distinctive story of your college.
It’s the battle cry of a new century. In the era of Big Data, consumers expect advertisers to prove their claims. So do college bound students and their parents.

Liberal arts colleges are especially vulnerable because career preparation is not necessarily at the heart of the mission. The ability to back your college’s outcome claims and quantify your track record of success can be key marketplace differentiators.

Recent Outcomes Index survey

The Most Valuable Research You May Have Never Done.

Prove it!

What can a graduate do with an education from your college?
Do you know which recent graduates go to graduate or professional schools and where they attended?
Do you know the average starting salary of your English major graduates?
Do you know what percentage of your recent graduates got a job related to their major right out of college?
Can you identify recent graduates now working in aviation?

How well can your institution answer these kinds of questions?

Introducing ROI, the Recent Outcomes Index survey.

In our experience consulting with 400+ liberal arts colleges and universities, we find few that have enough detailed information on their recent graduates to persuade a prospective student, substantiate a claim, or impress an accrediting agency.

Armed with ROI data, you can

- Strengthen student recruitment efforts
- Promote and improve career services
- Empower development and alumni relations efforts
- Improve retention
- Reassure your accreditation agency

ROI comes from GDA Integrated Services, and it provides interactive access to employment information about your alumni 10 years out of your college and up until 2011.
What does ROI include?

→ Results of an exclusive Web-based survey of all alumni that graduated between 2000 and 2011, annotated with explanations and recommendations.

→ Draft of an outcomes brochure based on the results of your ROI survey including graphs specific to your institution. (See examples below and to the right)

→ The ability to sort the data by 15 categories ranging from college major and starting salary out of college to job satisfaction and attitudes toward college experience. Contrast and compare multiple subgroups, such as “women in law in the Northeast.” Produce a list of alumni who attended top quality graduate schools. Pinpoint income groups. The data can be sorted countless ways.

Visualize your school’s contribution to gaining skills that are important to employers with graphs such as this.

Gain insight into when alumni secure their first job after graduation.

Measure alumni attitudes toward their alma mater, and use this data to guide development and alumni relations efforts.

Find out where your recent alumni have gone — and where they are going — with the education received at your institution.

Promote your school’s track record graduating prepared, satisfied, and successful alumni.
Is Student Search Dead as We Know it?

As a higher education marketing firm devoted to helping its clients invest their resources in the recruitment strategies that work best, GDA has pondered these questions. We asked ourselves if diverting the resources to a social media initiative or a stronger Web presence or virtually anything other than traditional search would not make more sense. And, if we were to simply rely on our gut reactions, we would probably counsel colleges to consider these or other alternatives to search.

However, luckily we and our clients don’t have to rely on gut reactions and ponderings. GDA Integrated Services is a research-based firm that has always built its marketing strategies on what our market research tells us about how students select colleges. We survey between 30,000-40,000 college-bound students each year — by telephone, the most accurate and in-depth method — and ask them directly, “What is important to you? What kind of information do you want to receive from colleges? How do you want to receive it?”

As a result of this ongoing research, we have accumulated a huge amount of data. And we decided we should review our research and listen to what students have told us about search, instead of heeding our collective institutional gut.

What the research tells us

Visibility is absolutely critical to the college recruitment process.

- Students are far more likely to open search letters or e-mails from a college they have already heard of. (This is especially true in secondary and tertiary markets.)
- Students believe prestige is automatically attached to a college that is well known.
- Name recognition, even if it is limited to the student’s immediate geographic area, gives a college a “brand name.” A student feels far more confident choosing a college that is well known in the local area than an unknown college. This is true even if the unfamiliar college is of higher quality and even quite possibly a better fit than the local one.
- There are two primary reasons students will open unsolicited admission material from a college:
  1. they immediately recognize the name, and
  2. the college is located in a geographic area they are considering.
- Last (and certainly not news), self-initiated inquiries are far more likely to enroll at a college. However, in order to initiate an inquiry, a student must first know about the college.

Direct mail as the most cost-effective way a college can gain visibility.

- Advertising, the traditional means of building visibility for many products and services, is outrageously expensive to execute correctly and effectively. Even if it were cheap, less than 3% of traditional college-bound students tell us they became interested in a college they first heard about through media advertising: including radio, TV, newspapers and billboards. And, by definition, mass media does not give you an option for zeroing in on your target market.
- When it comes to recruiting students the direct mail lists provided by the College Board, ACT, NRCCUA and CBSS are still the gold standard. No other lists are available from any other sources at any price that allow colleges to target their mailings so precisely.

Direct mail as a visibility tool should not be a stand-alone marketing technique.

- Our research shows that colleges that do direct mail in concert with a repositioning “branding” initiative, a word-of-mouth marketing campaign, or a service marketing campaign at secondary schools have better responses and develop a much stronger “buzz” of interest in the college. Direct mail simply helps to cement the message.
Just because students aren’t responding in measurable ways to search doesn’t mean they aren’t receiving your messages.

In every survey we have done, between 45% and 55% of college-bound students say they became interested in a college based on an unsolicited letter.

Another 19% to 24% tell us that they became interested in a college after receiving an unsolicited e-mail.

Between 18% and 25% of college-bound students tell us that they are enrolling at a college they first heard about from an unsolicited direct mail appeal.

When asked how they typically respond to an unsolicited direct mail appeal, 90% to 95% say they go directly to the college’s Website to learn more.

However 48% to 60% tell us that they completed and returned a reply form to at least one college that sent them an unsolicited mailing.

All those first source applications that come out of the blue are frequently late search responses. Colleges that have cut back their searches in certain geographic areas have found that the number of first source applications declines from those areas.

Research-based search strategies

Use your search letter to brand your college. Simply sending multiple letters and e-mails expressing interest in the student is not marketing.

Multiple print and e-mail hits to the search pool might catch students’ attention and they may even end up filing on-line applications, but it is very expensive and responders rarely become seriously interested in the college. Granted, this strategy often increases responses and adds to your prospect pool. But these ‘soft inquiries’ have a poor conversion rate to enrolled students and the cost to service them during the course of the admission cycle is significant.

Distinctive messaging is the key to generating search inquiries that convert at a higher rate to enrolled students — messages that catch students’ attention and help them learn about the specific advantages a particular college offers them. Yes, fewer will respond, but those who do are genuinely interested and more likely to convert. They are the ones you need to focus on.

Students who respond to well-crafted, unsolicited direct mail through traditional venues should be considered hot prospects and treated accordingly in the college recruitment process. They are actually going to far more trouble to make contact with a college than those who simply hit the button to submit a Common Application one more time.

When a student does respond to a search mailing, it is absolutely critical to respond to that student as quickly as possible, with a piece that reinforces your initial messages. Don’t procrastinate — students have short attention spans and you want to keep the conversation going before their attention is distracted by a competitor.

Make sure your Website reinforces the messages introduced by your direct mail program.

Given that students are more likely to go to the Web than to use traditional search response mechanisms, it is important for colleges to have a well thought out, effective, welcoming home page. Your value proposition and key positioning statements should be front and center on the admissions landing page. Don’t make students have to look for key messages — because they won’t.

Use links to short single message mini-Websites or videos to amplify the message you want initial responders to receive.

Don’t forget to give students a reason to complete your Web response form and make sure the Web response form is easy to find.

You would be amazed how many potential serious prospects who have resources to afford your college are in your search non-responder pool.

Each year, GDA Integrated Services clients enroll double and triple digit numbers of students from their search non-responder lists — students who did not respond to any print or e-mail search solicitations. We run non-responder lists through our regression analysis based predictor model and pull out those who predict to be interested in the college. These high predictors are then placed into the college’s prospect file and treated like any other good prospect.

If a client is concerned about student need for financial aid, the high predictors — or even the entire inquiry pool — can be run through the GDAIS “ability to pay” analysis and given a rating.

For the last three years, one of our clients has consistently enrolled five times as many first source predictor students as first source search. That’s making great use of a search list at a time when admission professionals are thinking search no longer works!
GDA INTEGRATED SERVICES
Marketing Solutions for Higher Education

GDA Integrated Services (GDAIS) is a market research, consulting, strategic planning and services firm specializing in customized, integrated marketing solutions designed to help colleges and universities recruit students, gain visibility and raise money.

Our capabilities include:

ADMISSIONS/STUDENT RECRUITMENT
Broadcast E-mail
Communications Assessments
Consulting/Counseling
Custom Designed Communications Flows
Direct Mail
Interest Prediction Model
Operations Assessments
Recruitment Assessments
Recruitment Training & Mentoring
Snapplication™
  Recruitment & Retention Applications Program
Social Media
Tele-Recruiting

CREATIVE SERVICES
Branding/Positioning
Communications Assessments
Institutional Identity Programs
Publications (Print & Interactive E-Books)
Special Message Mini-Websites
Video Production
Website Assessments & Design

FINANCIAL AID
Consulting/Counseling
Leveraging Matrix
Program Audits

PUBLIC RELATIONS
Consulting/Counseling
Development Communications
Guaranteed Visibility Campaigns
Program Assessments

RESEARCH AND STRATEGIC PLANNING
Alumni Surveys
Attrition/Retention Surveys
Branding Research
Custom Admitted Applicant Surveys
Enrollment Growth Feasibility & Advisability Study
Environmental Scanning & Interpretation
“Hybrid” Development Program
Integrated Marketing
National Normative Data
Price Elasticity Study
Qualitative Market Survey Research
Quantitative Survey Research
Segmentation Analysis of Available Research

To discuss how GDA Integrated Services can help you with your needs, contact Topher Small or Bob Campagnuolo at 860-388-3958 or by email: topher@dehne.com or bob@dehne.com. For market research and strategic planning, contact George Dehne at 843-971-9088 or George@dehne.com.