Rethinking the Orientation Communication Methodology: Leveraging New Technologies for Orientation and Transition Communications

Bart A. Swecker

The purpose of this paper is to describe how utilizing a comprehensive orientation communications plan can provide a tangible return on investment (ROI) and create a welcoming and knowledgeable atmosphere for students. The information presented is based on the author's experience in the development of an orientation communication experience.

The last interaction a student has prior to enrollment is often with a campus orientation or transition program. To ensure a seamless movement between recruitment and the transition into the university, fragmentation of communications from a student view should be eliminated. Orientation and transition programs should seek to integrate prospective student communication flows into admissions, recruitment, and yield messaging. Messaging can take on many forms; however, electronic communication continues to be the preferred method on both the sender (university) and receiver side (student). There are a number of methods to achieve electronic communication integration across the student recruitment and transition lifecycle. Universities are utilizing client-relationship management software (CRM), student information system communication engines (e.g., Banner), and targeted print strategies to maintain a relationship with students in an increasingly competitive recruitment market.

From the area of orientation and transition programs, there are a number of opportunities to develop an orientation communication experience and achieve institutional goals. Orientation programs are well positioned to finish the recruitment of a student and provide necessary information to positively affect academic and student life environments after school begins. Rethinking orientation communication strategies can assist the institution in achieving priorities, assist students by easing anxiety regarding all the items they must complete, and shepherd students through the enrollment and transition period.

Bart A. Swecker (bswecker@uab.edu) is an Assistant Director of Enrollment Management Communications at The University of Alabama at Birmingham.

Orientation Communications

The print and electronic media which accompany an orientation program often include reminders about orientation registration and further steps that students need to take. Typically, this method of information dissemination calls for every student to receive the same message in the same format simultaneously. What can be achieved through emerging technologies is the segmentation of the communications delivered by an orientation and transition office. Segmentation can include target marketing to specific cohorts or groups of prospective students regarding a range of topics which center on the yield/transition experience. By providing different and relevant messages across the incoming students, the ability for orientation communications to assist in the continued recruitment and transition can be increased. These segments can include first-generation, international, local, and out-of-state students, and can easily be adapted to fit strategic priorities within an institution.

An increasing number of students are attending multiple orientation programs and utilizing the experience as a final selection/yield event; therefore, if orientation communications are centralized with admission and recruitment materials, the voice to those "desired" populations can be shaped to achieve enrollment management priorities. The messages delivered during the orientation and transition process can be more readily examined and quickly redeveloped if the desired outcomes are not being achieved.

Reduce Publication Costs

A reduction in the publication and mailing cost serves as a practical example of the ability for an integrated electronic communication strategy to provide a positive ROI. In 2010, The University of Alabama at Birmingham had 3,248 students admitted by the date for the initial orientation invitation. An e-mail was sent prior to the mailing, prompting students to register for the program and notifying students of dates and cost. The e-mail was viewed by 1,224 students (38.61%). The remaining 1,913 students who did not view the e-mail were mailed the invitation brochure. The information was only sent via printed mailing to those who did not open the electronic information that was e-mailed to them. This method of communication resulted in an approximate printing and mailing cost of $2,700.

An integrated communication strategy can provide an orientation and transition office with the following opportunities:

1. **Integrate recruitment life-cycle data into a personalized communication path to matriculation.** Data which are collected from the point of initial contact through the point which orientation communications begin can be leveraged to market pertinent services to a student on an individualized basis. For example, knowledge of a student's financial aid package can trigger additional communications regarding grant, load, and work study procedures.
2. **Reduce cost associated with printing and mailing.** Through a well-

developed communication flow and implementation of a client-relationship management (CRM) software program, information regarding open rates and electronic message delivery can be tracked; therefore, print publications can be mailed to only those students who did not view a particular electronic communication. This method still ensures across-the-board messaging, but utilizes media channels which can be best for the individual.

3. **Centralize communication efforts.** If communications are centralized, the outcome will be a consistent voice with minimal confusion.

4. **Leverage behaviors and preferences.** From the information obtained through data mining, CRM can provide programs with the necessary information to shape communications and programmatic changes. This data usage is especially useful with non-mandatory orientation and transition programs and can help to increase the appeal of the program, thereby increasing participation.

5. **Personalize the experience.** With the knowledge of behaviors and interests, the post-program communications can focus only on those topics which are relevant to the student. This can provide an opportunity for more targeted communications to assist in the educational consumption of the messages. The wealth of knowledge collected during the recruitment process can be made available to academic advisors, peer leaders, and other personnel for their programmatic interactions.

6. **Utilize technolgy.** If all or part of the orientation experience at an institution is delivered online, leveraging the data collected during the recruitment and transition cycle through a CRM could be utilized to provide specific orientation content via an online platform. For example, if orientation personnel knew a student was not living on campus during the fall, would information about housing be needed during that student's online orientation experience? While the initial set-up costs of an online orientation that differs by student needs will be high, the robust educational experience will be worth it.

Elements of a Communication Methodology

In order to begin to discuss and develop an orientation communication strategy, a few items must be considered to achieve a well-developed outcome. Communications strategies should begin by identifying the audience and any sub-audiences. Identification of target audiences allows for communications to take on a general tone and voice which speaks to the group receiving the communication. Second, determine how students and parents prefer to communicate and implement those communication channels. This could be as broad as students, to as specific as asking each student his or her preferred method and using that as an individual communication strategy. Finally, develop communications and messages which achieve both student preferences and institutional priorities through multi-channel and variable messaging platforms. Following this process can assist in assessing the current landscape and providing the framework from

which to expand and refocus communications.

Summary

Information which is targeted and personalized is more likely to be opened and read, and one method for achieving this is through the use of electronic communication management software (CRM) in orientation and transition communications (Gadbut, 2008). While CRM programs have not experienced widespread adoption beyond undergraduate recruitment offices, institution-wide adoption has increased, and those who have already integrated are poised to be market leaders (Engelbert, 2012). Customer/constituent relationship management (CRM) software is a product which has been a part of business strategies for some time and is now quickly expanding into higher education, particularly the recruitment/yield arenas (Seeman & O'Hara, 2006). Gefen and Ridings (2002) stated, "The driving force behind the rise of CRM is the increasing competition brought about by globalization…and client expectation for high-quality customized online service" (p. 48). A CRM program, at its core, is used to understand and centralize the communication efforts of a company.

The long-term goal of CRM integration should be to provide a method of communication flowing between students and institutions. Students who take the initiative to interact with the institution during the recruitment process are more likely to enroll; therefore, the focus should be on those interactions through matriculation. For example, it would help drive conversation if advisors knew what majors of interest students indicated on the ACT/SAT, if they are coming in undeclared, to help drive conversation. With a CRM, this data can be leveraged and can assist in transforming an orientation communication flow to one of robust conversations with students.

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