

# 2016 E-Expectations Trend Report

Examining Transitions From  
Junior to Senior Year



**RUFFALO**<sup>SM</sup>  
NOEL LEVITZ

 **OmniUpdate**<sup>®</sup>

**CollegeWeek** **Live**

**NR@UA**

## INTRODUCTION

**The summer between junior and senior year is pivotal in terms of a student’s college selection process. Test scores arrive. Talks about money transpire. College visits take place. And minds change. As they transition from prospects to inquirers to applicants, students’ online behavior related to the college search changes, too.**

This 2016 E-Expectations report from Ruffalo Noel Levitz, OmniUpdate, CollegeWeekLive, and NRCCUA examines the differences in how college-bound students used the digital tools at their disposal from the spring of their junior year to the fall and spring of their senior year.

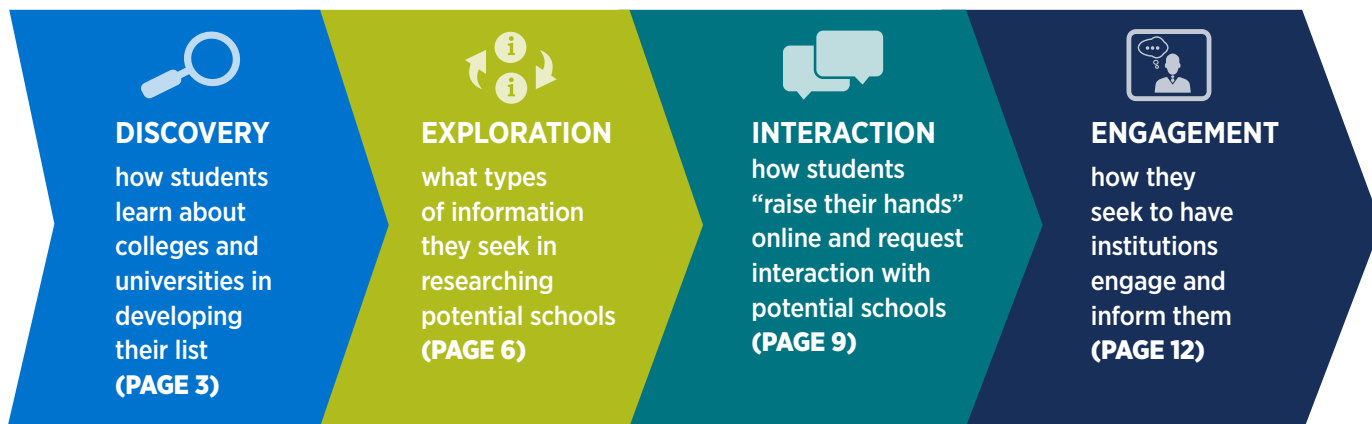
This report contains results from three web surveys conducted in May 2015, October 2015, and May 2016.

- May 2015 survey: 1,526 class of 2016 juniors (spring juniors)
- October 2015 survey: 2,064 class of 2016 seniors (fall seniors) and 2,064 class of 2017 juniors (fall juniors)
- May 2016 survey: 1,559 class of 2016 seniors (spring seniors) and 1,558 class of 2017 juniors (spring '16 juniors)

Within this report, the survey groups are referenced as:

- 2016 cohort: spring '15 juniors, fall '15 seniors, spring '16 seniors
- 2017 cohort: fall '15 juniors and spring '16 juniors

**As we analyze how the student perspective changes over time, this report is divided into four sections reflecting the stages of a student’s consideration:**



To help you readily shape and optimize your online strategy, we share key findings and our recommendations related to these findings within each section.

As the college selection process becomes increasingly student-driven, a robust online presence is non-negotiable.

**This report will help you strengthen that presence and maximize its impact.**

**You will find the full data—charts and graphs—in the 2016 E-Expectations Addendum.**





## HOW STUDENTS DISCOVER COLLEGES

Your website remains their top resource.



**77%** OF SPRING JUNIORS and **82%** OF FALL SENIORS ranked it highest.

**HALF**

OF FALL SENIORS

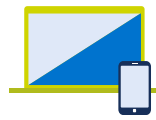
reported college planning websites played an important role as well.

### And multichannel matters.

As we expected, all channels had slightly higher importance among fall seniors.



Across all three point-in-time surveys, **print** was important to **2 in 5**.



**Emails** and **phone calls** were important to **1 in 2** spring seniors.



**Rankings** were important to **just over a third** throughout this time period.

### How are they finding your site?



**88%** of seniors used **search engines** to find college and university websites.

**>86%** of all students searched **by school name**—that's far and away the most popular way students found targeted colleges.



**Searching on location** was another widespread technique among **both juniors and seniors**.

**Juniors searched program name and school name** at rates **higher than seniors**, potentially indicating their more in-depth research into developing a list.



**Just about a third** (29% spring juniors, 34% fall seniors) knew the URL. **By spring of senior year, 41%** knew it.



Spring juniors were more likely, at **54%**, to **click on a link** from an email to get to your website.

## How does paid interactive marketing fit in?

When they clicked on ads, at least **3 in 4** did so via a Google search. Google and Facebook continue to be the leading sources for paid ads.



But between the spring and fall studies for the 2016 cohort, **there was a shift in use.**

Students clicked on **Google ads** at a rate **5x more** than via Yahoo, Bing, and other channels/search engines.



**Juniors** had the highest rates of clicking on ads for unfamiliar schools... as well as for those they were **already considering.**

Those rates **dropped slightly** in fall of senior year, and, as we would expect, dropped again as they entered spring of senior year.

The use of paid ads as a lead generation strategy is not yet common in undergraduate recruitment.



indicated that this is a "major" part of their recruitment marketing strategy.

—2016 E-Recruiting Practices Report

## How influential are college planning sites?

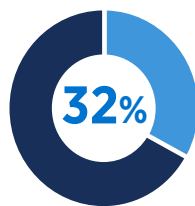
**70%**  
of four-year  
privates

**63%**  
of four-year  
publics

**38%**  
of two-year  
publics

promote their institution via college planning sites.

—2016 E-Recruiting Practices Report



of spring juniors used college planning sites but use decreased in the senior year to a low of 11% for spring seniors.



About **4 in 10** of all students said that these sites **influenced their interest** in particular schools.



**9 in 10 juniors** and 85% of seniors agreed that they find reliable information on these sites.



As the 2017 cohort progressed through junior year, we saw a **10-point increase** in their use of these sites (57% to 67% between fall and spring).

Find the full data in the E-Expectations Addendum.

## DISCOVERY STAGE: TAKEAWAYS

**Your website serves as the foundation of your recruitment communication strategy.** Students are heading there to learn about your institution—whether they are getting there on their own or via links you’re sharing in print or emails.

Beyond ensuring that your site is optimally serving as the resource they seek and need (which we’ll cover next), there are things you can do to attract more users.



### DIRECT TRAFFIC TO YOUR SITE

**Your communications via all channels should include links to your site.** This includes highlighting important URLs in direct mail and links (especially to landing pages) in email.



### OPTIMIZE YOUR WEBSITE FOR SEARCH

Does Google know how to find you? **Adopt search engine optimization best practices** that will improve the search rankings of your website and academic program pages.

Searching on location was a fairly widespread technique among juniors and seniors, indicating the importance of **using location keywords in content and metadata.**

**Make your website mobile-friendly.** Mobile and responsive sites receive higher search engine rankings.



### DEVELOP A PAID AD STRATEGY

**Using paid interactive marketing strategies as part of your overall lead generation process is a sound practice.** The increase in use among traditional markets is compelling and should continue as more institutions engage in search engine marketing strategies.

One interesting finding is the **high rate of ad clicks for schools that students are already considering.** What are they hoping to find through these paid ad clicks that they haven’t found already on the site? Or is this their first attempt to engage with a specific college or university website? Consider this as you develop your ad strategy and content.



### UTILIZE COLLEGE PLANNING SITES

These sites have significant influence, particularly with juniors as they learn about the process and seek schools that are their best fit—which serves both the student and the institution well. **Coordinate efforts with leading college planning sites to make sure your information is accurate and compelling for the students you seek.**



## HOW STUDENTS EXPLORE COLLEGES ONLINE

### Shifting buying motives.

The information students seek when they arrive on your website hasn't changed—in decades! Their questions include: *Do you have my major? What's the cost? Can I get in? How do I apply?* It's essential to understand, however, **what's most important, and when.**

#### TOP THREE WEB CONTENT TARGETS AT EACH POINT IN TIME



### What content is most valuable?



**Job placement stats** are top throughout the student process. **75%** of spring juniors indicated this was important to know. And nearly **2 in 5** fall seniors sought grad school placement statistics.



**Testimonials and quotes** follow right behind. **60%** of spring seniors sought this content.

### What do they want to see?

Survey participants were asked to identify the **types of photos** they thought would be most interesting on a college website.



**3 in 4**

prefer photos of student life/non-academic activities



**2 in 3**

prefer candid, unstaged photos



**2 in 5**

prefer photos featuring people engaged in activities in labs, classrooms, and libraries

Real feedback from conversations with prospective students:

“ Pictures where someone is looking right at me distract me from taking in how the campus looks. ”

## How do they use mobile?

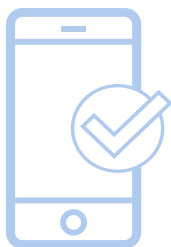
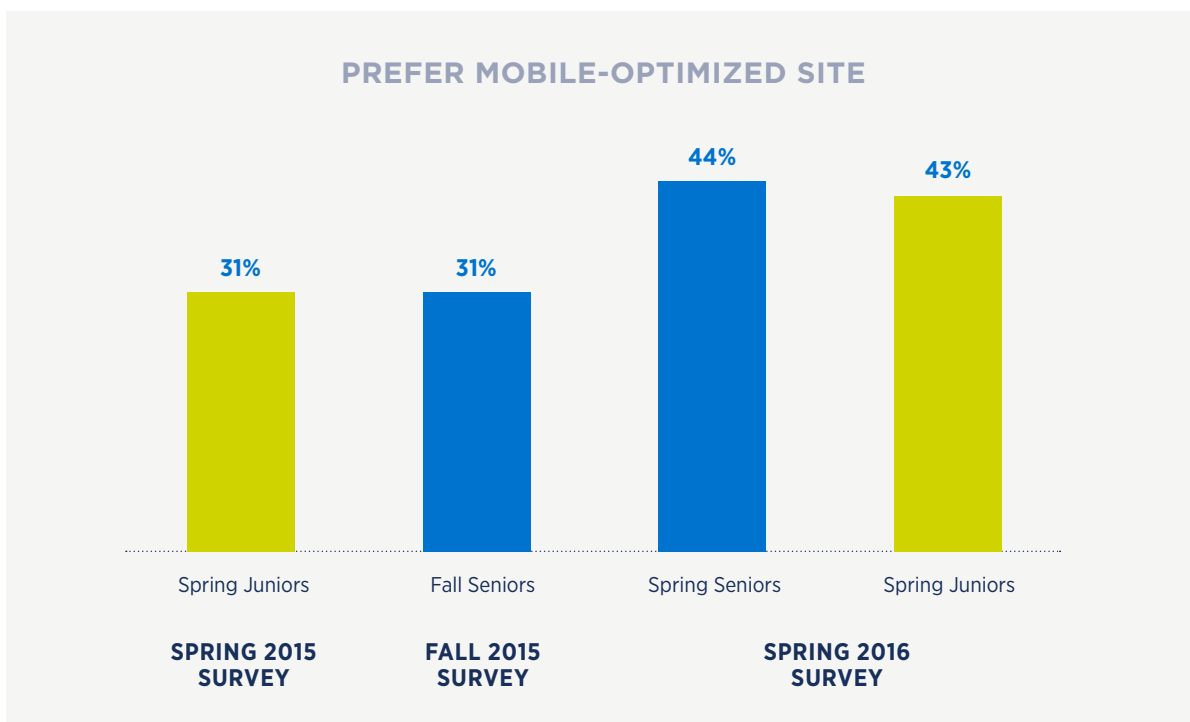
Nearly all E-Expectations survey participants now have access to mobile devices, and **mobile has become a key part of the college search experience.**



When researching via a college or university website, **33%** used a smartphone and **47%** used a laptop.



**38%** of students in the 2017 cohort used a smartphone for this purpose, compared to **28%** in the 2016 cohort.



About **4 in 10** used mobile “all the time,” while approximately **half** used it when no PC was available to them.

It is interesting to note that a **higher percentage** of spring juniors in the 2017 cohort (46%) used mobile “all the time” relative to those in the 2016 cohort when they were spring juniors (41%).

A significant **shift in preference** for responsive design has occurred between 2015 and 2016.

## EXPLORATION STAGE: TAKEAWAYS



### UNDERSTAND AND ACCOMMODATE SHIFTING BUYING MOTIVES

Make sure that site visitors can readily answer key questions. **Ensure admissions and financial aid/scholarship pages are prescriptive with strong calls to action.** Throughout your outreach among all channels, offer the most important types of content based upon where a student is in their process.

**Videos cannot be overlooked.** Improve the volume of videos available to users through the website and social channels to help students develop a deeper understanding of and appreciation for your institution's unique value propositions.



### PROVIDE THE CONTENT THEY DEMAND

Students demand web content that answers two questions: *What are the post-grad prospects for your students? And, what do students actually say about the place?*

#### FIND AND SHARE OUTCOMES DATA

**Though many colleges and universities lack strong outcomes data, it's important to shore up this content.** Students (and parents) want to know what their return on investment will be. Include job placement statistics and graduate school acceptance information. Both juniors and seniors are interested in job placement data, with seniors showing greater interest in graduate school placement statistics.

#### IDENTIFY AND SHARE A WIDE VARIETY OF TESTIMONIALS

**Beyond the data, make sure they can find the stories of your institutional experience.** Student stories and testimonials are key to helping prospective students establish fit, and alumni testimonials for each program support and enhance the outcomes data.



### PAY ATTENTION TO IMAGERY

There are many challenges in devising tests for photo preferences, and we acknowledge the limitations of these tests. However, some of the consistent patterns in the three studies outlined in this report provide direction for creating and selecting photos that appear on college and university websites.

Juniors and seniors are very similar in their responses to images, both favoring those that show campus spaces. **Choose images that give a sense of place and people, but diverge from the classic "three-under-a-tree" shots.** Include campus beauty shots and aerials that allow students to envision themselves on your campus.

Don't be afraid to compose or **select images with students who are not smiling directly at the camera**, and don't overdo attempts to depict ethnic diversity.



### GET (OR OPTIMIZE) MOBILE

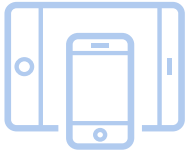
Within the last year, there's been a significant shift in preference for website experiences that are optimized for mobile devices, concurrent with sizable growth in students' use of smartphones in exploring colleges and universities. This may create friction for students viewing college or university websites that are not fully responsive or adaptive. **Work to ensure your site renders optimally where students are most often viewing it.**





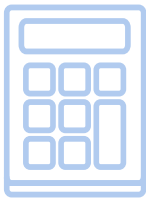
## HOW STUDENTS CHOOSE TO INTERACT

### Are they using mobile to “raise their hands”?



**71% of seniors** and **65% of juniors** completed college enrollment-related forms on their mobile devices.

Juniors were much more likely to complete request for information, open house, and campus visit forms. **47% of spring juniors** completed a request for information form via their mobile device.



Seniors were somewhat more likely to complete admission applications and use calculators. **32% of spring seniors** completed an application for admission via a mobile device.

Of seniors nearing graduation, **30%** indicated they used a cost calculator—but only **24%** had used a scholarship calculator.

### How do they use request for information forms?

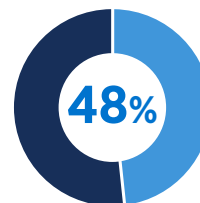
A new series of questions in the 2016 survey looked at **online request for information (RFI) forms** as a means for students to register their interest and obtain more information from a specific campus.

**2/3** of both juniors (64%) and seniors (65%) actively sought out schools and requested information rather than waiting for schools listed on standardized tests to reach out to them.

At the time of the spring 2016 study, about **3/4** of seniors (76%) and juniors (73%) had already completed an RFI on a college or university website.

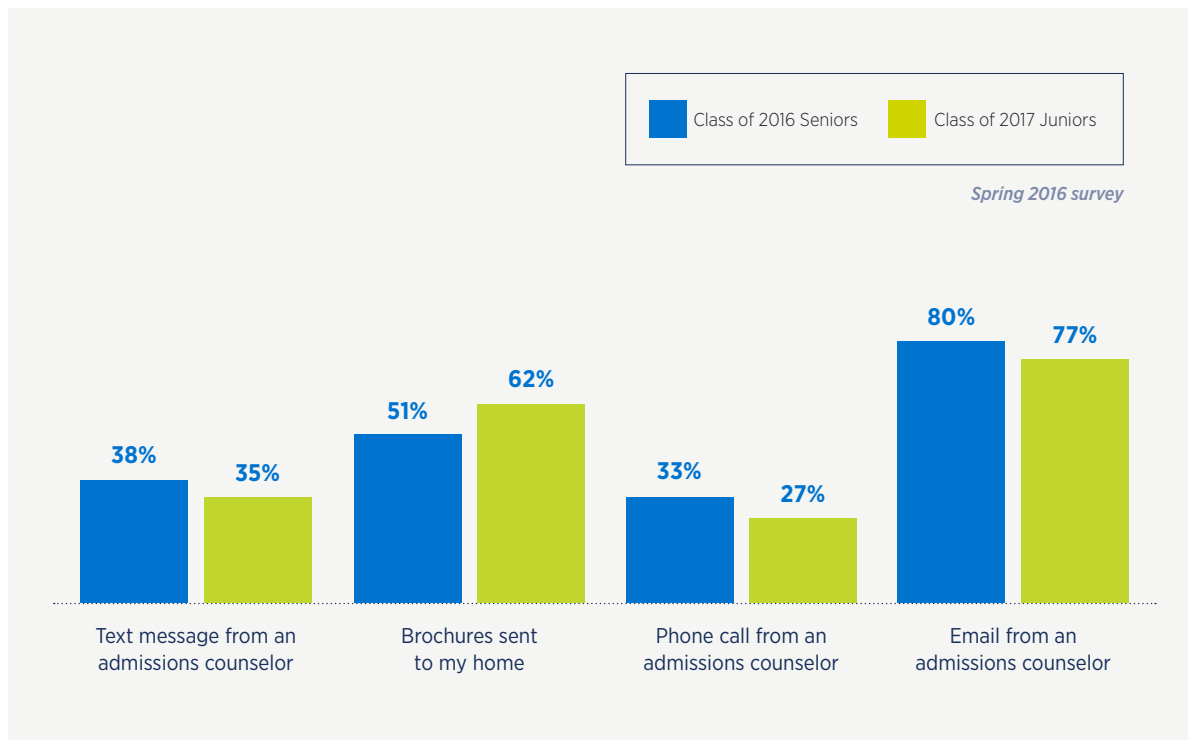


More students were willing to share their **email** address on the form (nearly **9 in 10**) than their **name** (**8 in 10**).



were willing to share **mobile numbers** at this stage in their engagement.

## What do students find valuable after submitting RFI forms?



**80%**  
OF SENIORS  
and  
**77%**  
OF JUNIORS  
considered email from  
an admissions  
counselor valuable.

## INTERACTION STAGE: TAKEAWAYS



### HELP THEM REACH YOU FROM WHERE THEY ARE

**Testing your forms and confirmation pages on mobile devices should be a regular practice,** and completing the forms to gauge the quality of the user experience is essential.

**Your confirmation pages represent great opportunity.** Many institutions deliver very simple, uninspiring confirmations. Yours should keep the student engaged and have clear and compelling calls to action, such as suggestions for additional content, ways to connect through social channels, or an invitation for live chat.

Given that more graduating seniors have utilized cost calculators than scholarship calculators, evaluate how you can bridge that gap and **ensure students are receiving comprehensive information that helps them estimate their true net cost.**



### ENCOURAGE THEIR OPT-IN FOR ENGAGING WITH YOU

While facilitating engagement on your website is critical to foster interest among your prospective students, **developing a relationship with them is critical to progress them toward application and enrollment.** As students increasingly self-direct their search, provide them with avenues to let you know they're interested.

**Make the RFI form easy to find and mobile-friendly,** and not too long or with too many questions.

**Let users know how and when they can expect a response.** Your immediate response—the thank you page—should invite them to take another step, such as plan a visit, attend an open house, explore application process information, engage with social channels, use live chat, or attend a webinar.



## HOW STUDENTS WANT COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES TO ENGAGE THEM ONLINE

### Keep the email coming.

**97%** of all students used email at least once a week and **opened messages** from schools they were currently considering.



Willingness to open messages from **unknown schools decreased** as students progressed through their senior year.



Recall that **4 in 10** students in the spring 2016 study indicated they found their way to college websites through links in email messages—and that email was the preferred response to a completed inquiry form.

Class of 2017 juniors were **more willing** to provide their email address than class of 2016 juniors were at the same point in their high school career.

**65%** of spring seniors checked their email at least once a day from their mobile devices.

Among all groups in our 2016 studies, **>85%** checked their email on a smartphone or mobile device at least once a week.

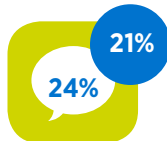
**56%** of spring seniors and **49%** of class of 2017 spring juniors preferred viewing a responsive email on their smartphone.

### How do they feel about text messaging?



**>70%** of all students were willing to receive text messages from colleges and universities.

Yet, other than spring seniors, **<20%** have ever received a text from a college.



In our spring 2016 survey, we found **24%** of seniors and **21%** of juniors who received texts from schools had unsubscribed from at least some messages.

#### USE OF TEXT MESSAGING BY COLLEGES/UNIVERSITIES

**41%**

of four-year  
publics

**40%**

of four-year  
privates

**33%**

of two-year  
publics

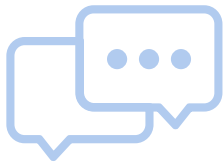
are sending mass texts to prospective students.

—2016 E-Recruiting Practices Report

## What do they want to receive via text?



## Is chat worth it?



Only a **small percentage** of students used live chat on a college or university website (11% of seniors and 7% of juniors).

But they **overwhelmingly considered the experience helpful** in learning about the school (78% of seniors and 82% of juniors).

Of those who used a live chat tool, they initiated the chat (as opposed to a chat representative doing so) **just under half the time** (48% for seniors, 45% for juniors).

## Where should you be on social media?



**47%** of seniors said **Facebook** is the best channel to learn about college options... But juniors seem less enthusiastic. In the spring 2016 study, they rated it **11 points lower** than their 2015 counterparts.

While we saw a jump in class of 2016 seniors looking at college/university **Facebook** resources, we noted:



**YouTube** is the second most useful social resource, used by the most students on a weekly basis, and it has the **second-highest** use on a daily basis.

A significant **decrease** in users clicking "Like"



An **increase** in joining groups and adding comments



**Snapchat** leads in students' regular daily use, and we **expect to see growth** in its use as a college search resource as more institutions utilize the platform.

Further surveys will help us understand patterns in this interesting shift.

## What is live streaming and how should we use it?



A new functionality offered through social media channels, including **Facebook** and **Periscope**, live streaming allows campuses to keep their social contacts engaged with real-time activities.



**In the spring 2016 survey, we asked students to indicate which topics might be of interest to them in a live-streaming format.**

**Campus tours and college classes** were the leading topics, with **at least half** indicating they would attend a live-streaming campus tour or class in their program of interest.

## What type of content belongs on social media?



**PHOTOS ARE TOP.**



At least **3/4** of students in all groups considered photos valuable.



**>60%** of juniors and seniors used photo-driven **Instagram** daily.



About **half** considered videos and news stories/features valuable in their exploration.

## What's the best content to share on social media?

INFORMATION AND IMAGES RELATED TO:



Student life



Campus buildings



Academic success



**Spring seniors** were more interested in deadline reminders, while **juniors** were more interested in campus visit invitations.

## ENGAGEMENT STAGE: TAKEAWAYS



### CONFIDENTLY USE EMAIL AND TEXT MESSAGING IN A RELEVANT WAY

They're expecting email from you and are open to receiving text messages, but they'll tune it out if what they're receiving isn't meaningful to them. **Ensure your messages are providing the right information to the right market and stage at just the right moment.**

They're using their mobile devices to read your messages, so **be sure your emails appear in a responsive format**, and test your messages for spam traps.

**Make sure your email messages include engagement opportunities.** Use landing pages to enhance engagement through expanded content and calls to action.

**Pilot an inquiry response communication flow via text and keep track of engagement and enrollment results.** Overall, there appears to be interest and acceptance in receiving text messages containing content of a transactional nature to help students track their progress.



### ENHANCE ENGAGEMENT BY OPTIMIZING HOW YOU USE SOCIAL MEDIA

**Social channels play an important part in prospects' exploration of your campus.** Deliver a sense of place, fit, and value through use of images, video, and even live streaming that show student life, academics, and aerial views of your campus.

**Invest time in the channels** through which students want to find you and that support your particular markets and brand.

**Create an editorial calendar to coordinate posts across assets**—and don't just duplicate posts from one channel to the next. Note that students seek a sense of what the campus is like, so feature current students and campus views in your posts.

Remember that engagement appears to escalate as students progress through the enrollment process. **Create posts to support yield and stave off melt.**

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## FINAL WORD



While technology and the dramatic rise in online platforms along with the fast pace of change in their popularity and use may present colleges and universities with new and complex challenges, they also provide unprecedented opportunity. **A well-planned and data-backed online strategy reaches more students with more relevant information.** By better serving prospective students, you're building a more engaged and more informed incoming class.



## QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS REPORT OR OPTIMAL STRATEGIES FOR YOUR WEB COMMUNICATIONS?

We welcome your questions and comments about the E-Expectations study. We are also available to discuss your specific goals and challenges for your website and online recruitment strategy. Send an email to [ContactUs@RuffaloNL.com](mailto:ContactUs@RuffaloNL.com) or call **800.876.1117**, and we will be happy to answer your questions.

### About the survey sponsors



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### How to cite this report

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