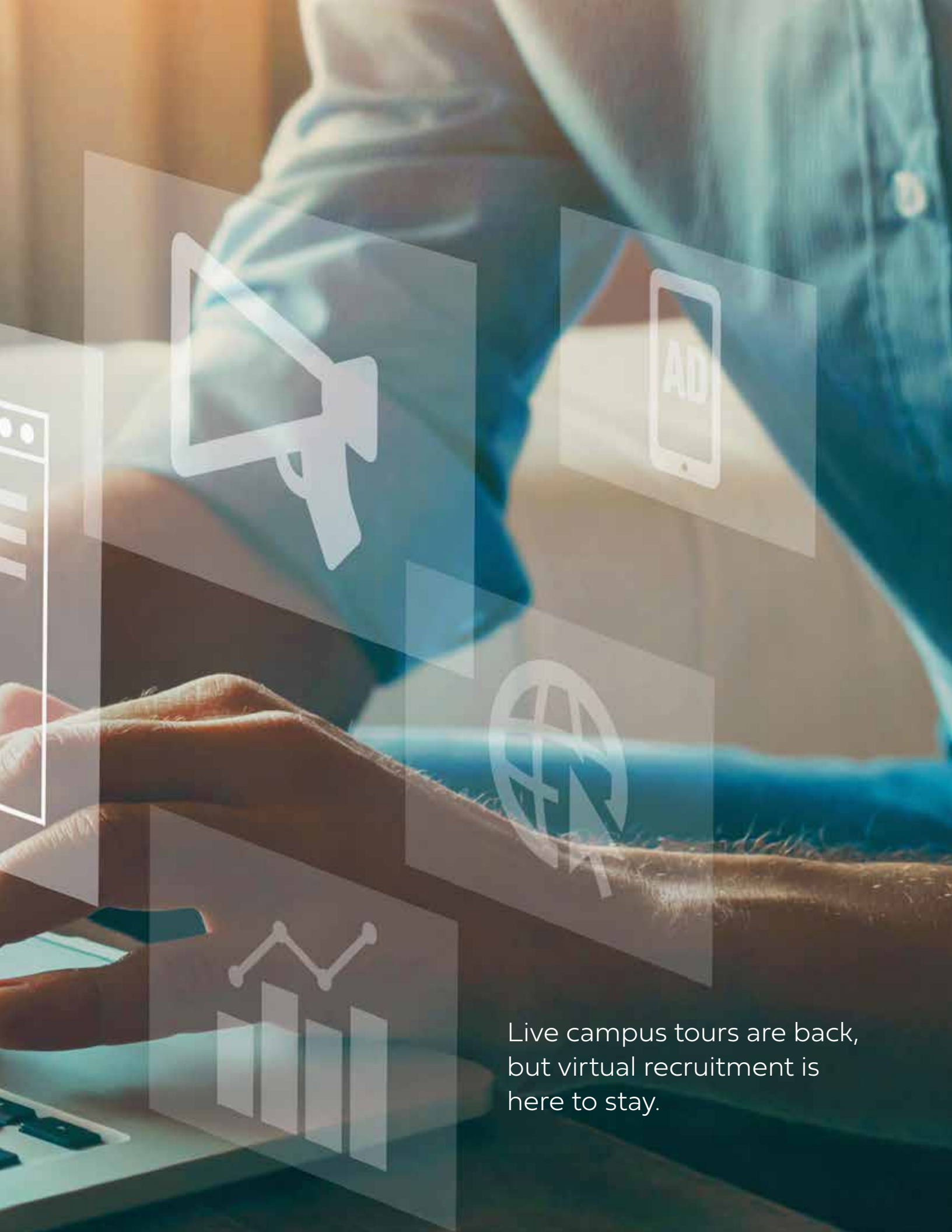




VIRTUAL RECRUITMENT

By Eric Neutuch



Live campus tours are back,
but virtual recruitment is
here to stay.

Across the country, significant numbers of high school students and family members are once again visiting colleges. This is a world away from March 2020 when Jaharra Anglin Stubbs, a high school junior, was developing her college application list.

"I was planning to tour colleges in Washington, DC, during spring break of last year, then the pandemic happened," recalled Stubbs, who is from Yonkers, New York.

In Stubbs's case, there was no strolling across campus quads following backward-stepping guides, yearning for gut feelings on whether a college was the right fit. "We had to work around the pandemic," she said.

... VIRTUAL RECRUITMENT WILL HAVE LONG-LASTING STAYING POWER AS A SUPPLEMENT TO IN-PERSON RECRUITMENT.

She spent hours logging onto virtual events, attending virtual college fairs, and binge-watching virtual college tour videos to refine and finalize her college application list. In order to make her final college selection, she recalled, "I paid attention to all of the [virtual] admitted student activities, simulated classes, meet-and-greets, and information sessions."

In April 2021, Stubbs committed, sight-unseen, to Colgate University (NY), one among a number of schools that made her strong financial aid offers. The staff from the school's admission office "went above and beyond in reaching out to me," Stubbs said. The positive virtual interactions were a factor that contributed to her selection.

Her plan is to visit Colgate in the early summer with her mom and aunt. With the pandemic receding, all three are comfortable staying in a hotel and interacting with others while on campus. "I know it will be the right place for me," she declared.

As the pandemic subsides in the United States and parts of the country edge toward normalcy, NACAC professionals believe that the virtual recruitment resources that Stubbs leaned upon and that colleges invested much effort in developing will not vanish. They say that virtual recruitment will have long-lasting staying power as a supplement to in-person recruitment.

VIRTUAL CONTENT, BUILT OUT FAST AND ACCESSIBLE EVERYWHERE

"Pre-pandemic, every college did not have a uniform and robust set of online options. The pandemic changed that," observed Julio Mata, director of college counseling at the Francis Parker School (CA). It was not until the pandemic that ways of learning virtually about colleges really got a proverbial shot in the arm, even though there have always been some students who have made college selections without the benefit of visiting, he said.

At Syracuse University (NY), Jonathan J. Hoster, an undergraduate recruitment

specialist for the college of engineering and computer science, collaborated with in-house communication professionals to develop a series of video tours highlighting the school's high-tech laboratories. The videos began as pandemic patches to replicate the in-person "wow factor" of the school's student machine shop, flight simulator, and engineering workshops. But now, Hoster sees the lab tour videos as more or less permanent elements of his school's enrollment marketing toolkit, expected to last beyond the pandemic.

The admission office at Santa Clara University (CA) had aspired to develop additional video content for its website prior to the COVID-19 crisis, according to Lorenzo Gamboa, senior associate director of admissions. "The pandemic expedited that. We had to mobilize. Instead of going 20 miles per hour, we had to reach 60."

On April 3, 2020, just a couple weeks after the California stay-at-home order went into effect, the admission office released a "Skateboarding Tour" video series. The videos follow four student ambassadors jumping, ollieing, and longboarding around the SCU campus in between introductions to academic programs. What could be called "chillout" music plays in the background during slow motion camera panning. The tone, to use Gamboa's words, is "California casual."

The video series was an instant hit. It now has 29,000 YouTube views (and counting) and is the centerpiece of a robust VirtualSCU webpage.

INTERACTIVE VIRTUAL TOURS BECOME MUST-HAVES

Alongside the climbs in video production and viewership, interactive campus tours skyrocketed during the pandemic.

YouVisit, the popular platform for 360-degree and virtual reality campus tours that was initially launched in 2010, saw a 228 percent spike in traffic during March and April 2020, as compared to the same period in 2019.

Gamboa remarked, “Our YouVisit tour caught traction during the pandemic, and overall, education technology solutions exploded.”

According to John Michaels, a spokesperson for EAB, YouVisit’s owner, the number of institutions contracting YouVisit for tours grew from 460 to 630 institutions since the onset of the pandemic, an increase of more than 36 percent.

Mark Tressler, the chief operating officer at Niche, a college and school search website, has a hypothesis to explain the strong tailwinds for flashy interactive virtual tours and amped-up virtual content, including the solutions offered by Niche. He argues that admission offices increasingly need to leverage top-notch web-based content to generate prospective student leads now that SAT and ACT registration cannot be relied upon to drive prospect generation. “The pandemic accelerated the shift to a more digital college admission process,” he stated.

PERFECTING VIRTUAL EVENTS

In the emerging new normal, many college admission professionals envision

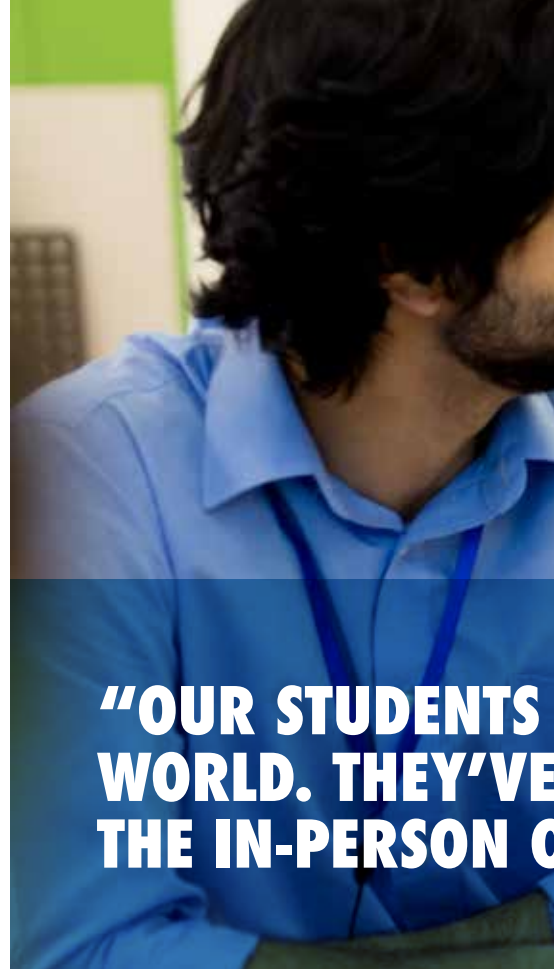
HELPING HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS AND THEIR FAMILIES NAVIGATE THE PROCESS

Use these tips to help rising juniors and seniors (and their families) take full advantage of the emerging hybrid recruitment landscape:

1. **Sign up for virtual offerings:** Even with in-person opportunities available, students and families should leverage virtual events as another learning resource. Werner, of Baton Rouge Youth Coalition, urges students “just sign up for virtual information sessions, virtual college fairs, all of it. Take advantage. Explore.” Students and families might find that a college previously overlooked is a good fit.
2. **Visit colleges when it is safe:** Mata, of the Francis Parker School, advised that there is no rush to visit colleges immediately, especially for those students and families who do not feel safe doing so. “For juniors, I recommend waiting a few more months. Colleges will have better visit experiences by then.”
3. **Connect with institutions via email:** Perkins, of Miami University, encouraged students to share their email addresses with colleges to stay up-to-date on in-person and virtual event opportunities. Her tip is that students should add colleges’ email addresses to their SafeSender lists to prevent messages from getting blocked by spam filters.
4. **Follow your heart and mind:** The final piece of advice comes from Jariel Christopher, a Baton Rouge Youth Coalition student who plans to attend her hometown school, Louisiana State University (LSU), this fall. Christopher shared, “Had I been able to physically visit more colleges, it might have been hugely different.” But, given what she knew, Christopher says that she followed her “heart and mind” to decide to study at LSU. She encourages younger students to follow their hearts and minds too and to always look forward rather than back. ▢

admission work being conducted in an increasingly hybrid approach in which in-person recruitment is supplemented by virtual events and strengthened virtual resources. Mata, describes this hybrid future of admission as “both in-person and virtual.”

Many say that virtual events will continue post-pandemic not out of necessity but because they offer a convenient and cost-effective way for students and families to learn about schools. Plus, they are more affordable for colleges to stage than sending admission officers around the



**“OUR STUDENTS
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country with rental cars and rolling suitcases.

“I barely knew what Zoom was prior to the pandemic,” Hoster, of Syracuse University, joked. “Going forward, I think that we are going to be seeing more people on campus, but we’ll still want to have virtual events. It makes us more accessible to people who might not have the ability to hop on a plane to come visit for an event.”

Darryl W. Jones, senior associate director of admissions at Gettysburg College (PA), recalled the past 16 months of event programming as an evolution. “At first, the answer to everything was, ‘Let’s do it on Zoom,’ but, as time progressed, we switched from reactive to proactive,” he explained, citing a number of ways in which Gettysburg admission staff iterated their virtual opportunities.

One-on-one virtual consultations were offered to accepted students, bringing a human touch and personal relationships into the virtual admission process.

Region-focused virtual events, such as West Coast Wednesday Information Sessions, were launched to meet students’ and families’ time zone preferences and to facilitate smaller forums. “We used several different platforms for large and small events and a flexible schedule to accommodate international and multiple time-zone events.”

Other campuses were also figuring out what worked and what did not in virtual event programming. An early lesson at Miami University in Ohio was that programs needed to be fast-moving, high-tempo, and Netflix-like

to grab and hold the attention of Zoom-fatigued audiences. According to Bethany Perkins, assistant vice president and director of admissions, the best virtual events are compact ones and incorporate student, faculty, and alumni speakers.

But the path to more successful events was far from effortless at colleges and universities operating under the constant uncertainty of the pandemic, including at Miami. “Our events weren’t honed over years and months. In March 2020, we did not have any virtual events or most of the videos that you see right now,” stated Perkins. “It was stressful to experiment as much as we did and to bring the community along with us. We felt it when only a few students showed up and a faculty member was there. We felt it when the technology didn’t work. All of the development required a Herculean effort.”



NACAC SURVEY OF HIGH SCHOOL VISIT POLICIES, FALL 2021

Typically, the summer is when college admission offices plan their fall visit schedules. This year, however, there's great uncertainty about which high schools will allow visits by college representatives and which COVID restrictions will still be in place.

As a service to the field, NACAC asked secondary schools to answer the following:

- Will your school allow college admission representatives to visit in person this fall?
- Will any COVID-related safety requirements be in place?
- Will your school accommodate virtual visits?
- During which times will your school schedule visits with college reps?

The initial responses are at nacacnet.org/highschoolvisits. Check back frequently as responses from additional high schools continue to come in. We hope this resource is helpful to college admission offices in planning their fall visit schedules and assists overall in connecting prospective students and colleges.



**ARE TIRED OF THE VIRTUAL
HAD ENOUGH. THEY WANT
OPPORTUNITIES.”**

FALL 2021: A HYBRID MODEL

Many colleges are still not providing opportunities for in-person visiting. For those that are—including Miami, Gettysburg, Syracuse, and SCU—there are spikes in tour interest as of the early summer.

“Families have been cooped up in their homes for quite some time,” said Jones.

At the University of Minnesota, Miguel Ovies-Bocanegra, assistant director of multicultural recruitment, describes “an influx of in-person campus visit inquiries.”

This return to campus tours and in-person college recruitment programming cannot come soon enough for the students and staff at the community-based Baton Rouge Youth Coalition (BRYC), according to Chelsea Werner, BRYC’s director of college counseling.

“Our students are tired of the virtual world. They’ve had enough. They want the in-person opportunities,” said Werner, who

added that her underrepresented students sometimes lacked the sufficient computer technology and internet bandwidth to access virtual college resources and events.

The degree to which high schools will be open for visits by college representatives in the fall and beyond is unknown, as is the degree to which admission offices and professionals will be eager to send representatives out on the road. Werner and Mata both reported receiving calls from admission representatives to arrange in-person visits for the fall and are making their visit plans, while others are proceeding cautiously. Jones, of Gettysburg, said, “We won’t travel until it’s absolutely safe to do so.” At Miami, Perkins remarked that her intentions are “to visit fewer schools than pre-pandemic and to continue virtual options.”

Hoster, in particular, hoped “that there will remain a long-term place for engaging with prospective students via virtual platforms,” including via virtual college fairs.

Gamboa fully concurred and, in particular, imagines that virtual fairs will have a strong stickiness post-pandemic, stressing that the continuation of virtual fairs is of special importance for students in rural communities who otherwise have limited access to in-person college fairs. Both Hoster and Gamboa were involved in planning a NACAC Virtual STEM Fair in March 2021, and NACAC will continue its signature college fairs in virtual mode this fall.

With so much still in flux around the transition to a “new normal” in college admission, Werner argued that there is a big opportunity for admission offices to rethink recruitment with equity in mind. “This is a time for us to reimagine the admission landscape and work toward a more equitable system. Admission offices have a unique opportunity ahead of them,” she said, urging them to make the most of the moment. [↪](#)

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