



THE PROSPECTIVE STUDENT JOURNEY:

Reaching Traditional College Students

Contents

3
Introduction

4
The Journey Begins - Capturing Inquiries

- The Early Years of High School

7
Decision Time - Converting Inquiries to Applicants

8
Marketing Optimizations for Schools of All Sizes

- Opportunity #1: Streamline the RFI Process
- Opportunity #2: Improve Conversions from Inquiries
- Opportunity #3: Reach Out with One-on-One Support
- Opportunity #4: From Application to Matriculation

12
Final Thoughts

13
Enrollment Stages Cheat Sheets

15
We're Here to Help



Introduction

College admissions teams face strong headwinds in attracting and enrolling traditional college-aged students due to the [enrollment cliff](#), societal shifts after the pandemic, and the fierce competition for schools to fill classrooms. Reevaluating the student journey can help colleges develop new strategies to effectively intervene and achieve their enrollment goals.

In this whitepaper, we will explore recent research and survey data to uncover insights you can use immediately to optimize your recruitment strategies in this evolving higher education landscape.

THE COLLEGE JOURNEY TO ENROLLMENT



For more than 50% of traditional students, the college journey begins in their first two years of high school. To win more applicants, schools should start by comparing their current marketing strategy to this expanded view of prospective parent and student behavior in the search process.

Identifying gaps, friction points and optimizing the plan can help boost not only the number of prospective students in their pipeline but also the rate of converting those contacts into enrolled students. We have identified four specific points in the journey where schools can make small changes that can increase the number of students incoming students.



The Journey Begins

CAPTURING INQUIRIES

When a student begins their college search journey, it is the best time to capture new prospects, increasing the likelihood of nurturing them through the funnel.

First, we need to understand what it takes to capture the attention of prospective students and make them consider your school over others. Our recently released [student and parent survey](#) revealed the top three factors influencing a student's choice of a higher education institution: 1) total cost, 2) the availability of their desired major, and 3) the quality of career preparation they will receive. By effectively showcasing these factors, colleges can better attract prospective students.

It's important to engage prospective students early through informative content and maintain their interest throughout the decision-making process. If students easily find the information they need at these early stages, they will be more likely to engage/inquire. Drawing students and their parents into an engagement relationship with your school relies on you having the right content combined with the right social media, search and website content that meets both groups where they are.



“Creating compelling content is not just about showcasing a school’s features; it’s about telling the institution’s story. Genuine narratives are what set a school apart in a crowded market. They’re the stories that stir emotions, forge connections, and guide students on their journey to find the perfect fit for them.”

– **AMANDA RAMBO-JACKSON**, Southeast Director, Advance Education

The Early Years of High School

[Advance Education’s 2024 Student/Parent Survey](#) showed that 50% of students and 54% of parents began the college search during the student’s freshman and sophomore years in high school. When students are in their first or second year of high school, admissions departments may not pay them much attention, yet this could be a missed opportunity. At this stage, students may not have formed solid ideas about what they want in their college education. However, the concept of college is on their radar, and even more so for their parents.

Optimizing your marketing to effectively target prospect segments is crucial for a successful strategy. You need to communicate your value proposition and highlight what differentiates you from other schools. Here are the primary areas to consider:

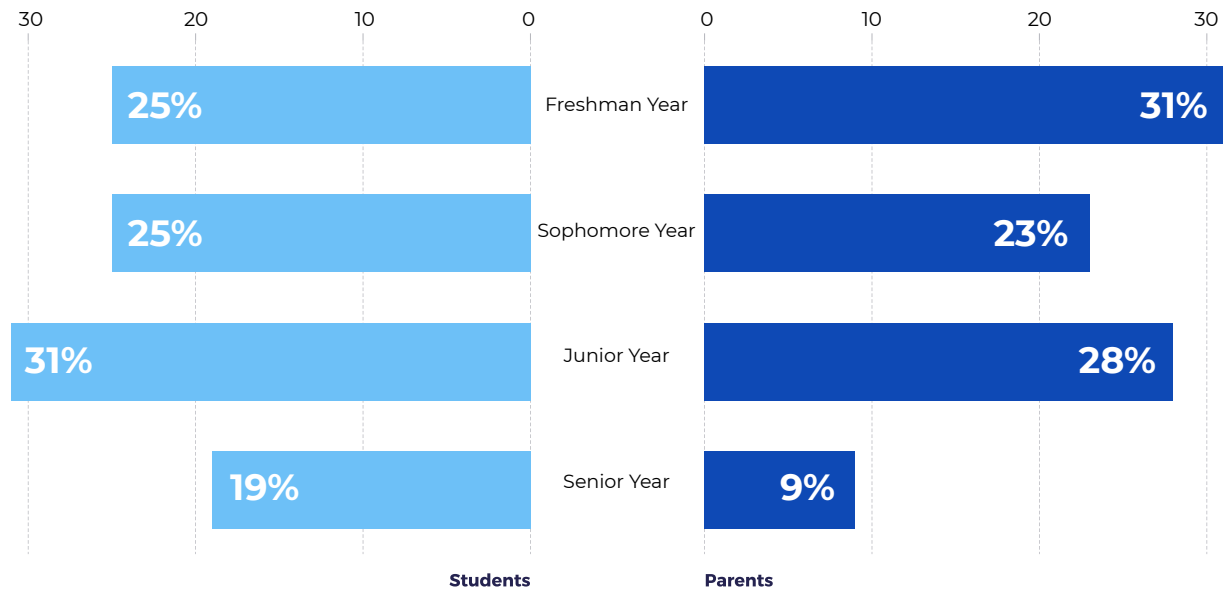
ANALYTICS: Analytics can help you define target geographical and demographics for outreach, direct your advertising and email campaigns, and discover missed opportunities in your strategies.

WEBSITE: Designing a user-friendly website with intuitive navigation and good loading times is crucial.

VIDEO: Incorporating video into all your marketing channels increases engagement: virtual tours, video testimonials to showcase student success, faculty videos about programs, and event videos are just a few of the types to include.

SOCIAL AND EMAIL: With insight from Advance Education’s [2024 Parent & Survey](#), use the right social media platforms to target students and parents separately. Ensure your email outreach is mobile-friendly and conversational, and segment your lists to optimize messaging.

WHEN DID YOU BEGIN YOUR SEARCH?



The strength of your marketing presence can influence students' perceptions of college options and generate interest in your university as they begin their search. You have many ways to ensure students and parents get relevant and positive information about your institution during these years. A robust website, consistent and appealing social media content, events in target communities, SEO and digital advertising strategies that make your institution easily discoverable will all help position your school as an educational possibility for students in their first years of high school.



“Many prospective student journeys begin with a simple Google search for “How to become a cybersecurity analyst.” If your college or university website is optimized according to best SEO practices, it can rank on the first page of search engine results pages for relevant search queries where prospects are researching the courses your college offers.”

– **CARLTON SMITH**, Southeast Marketing Director, Advance Education

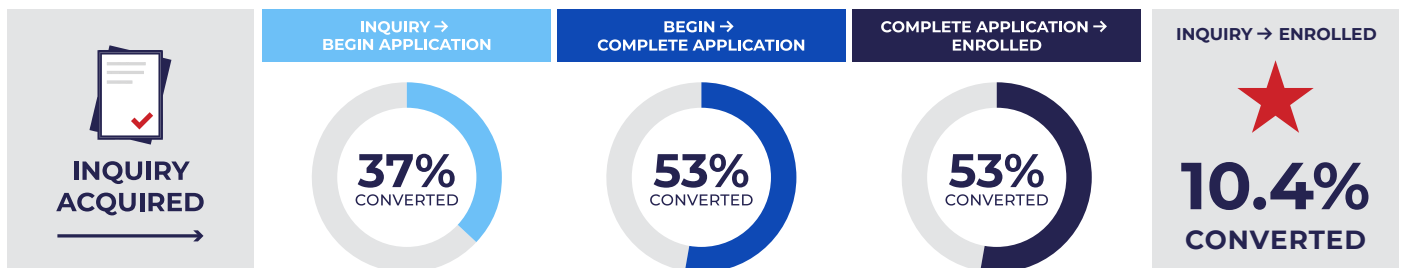
Decision Time

CONVERTING INQUIRIES TO APPLICANTS

Most marketing touches occur before that initial inquiry. The primary objective is to transition inquirers into applicants and ultimately committed students. When students and their parents are making these decisions, from late junior to senior year, you have more opportunities to influence their decision.

Let's zoom into this critical stage and examine the micro-moments you should be focused on to improve conversion rates. Every tiny increase in your success can net more students in your classrooms.

2023 AVERAGE RATE OF CONVERSION THROUGH THE STUDENT ENROLLMENT STAGES



The first step to increasing the efficiency of your post-inquiry marketing efforts is to assess how many prospects progress from being inquirers to applicants to enrolled students. Note that ONLY 10% of inquiries are making it all the way to enrollment. Therefore, optimization can focus on two things: 1) getting more inquiries at the start of the pipeline; 2) improving the conversion rates of each micro-moment to get more prospects enrolled.

How do your numbers compare to the national average?

Here's a checklist to help you establish your baseline:

- ✓ What does this look like for your school?
- ✓ How many of the people who reach out to inquire begin their application?
- ✓ How many of those who start an application complete it?
- ✓ How many of those students do you accept?
- ✓ And how many accepted students express their intention to enroll?



Marketing Optimizations for Schools of All Sizes

OPPORTUNITY #1: **Streamline the RFI Process**

Inquiries represent an excellent opportunity to connect with students and initiate a relationship. When schools capture inquiry leads from interested students, this is the ideal time to begin communication.



- ✓ Make it easy for students to reach out to you. Talk to your prospects in their language and make the information they are looking for easy to find.
- ✓ One way to evaluate this step in the journey is to ‘secret shop’ your RFI experience. Is your school’s “shopper” experience as pleasant as your favorite consumer brand?
- ✓ Streamline the RFI to reduce friction. Don’t ask for every detail of their lives on the RFI form. Keep inquiry forms simple with a maximum of seven questions.

OPPORTUNITY#2: Improve Conversions from Inquiries

In 2023, on average, 37% of individuals who inquired about a specific program progressed to the application stage – a 14-point increase from 23% in the 2019 survey, according to a [whitepaper](#) by InsideTrack and UPCEA. While the increase in students progressing from inquiry to application is encouraging, there is still room for improvement.



“To put this into context, six out of ten prospective students drop off at this stage of the journey. Capitalizing on this could have an outsized impact on the entire student enrollment process and unlock crucial insights into how we can improve our personal connections with students during this critical moment of school selection.”

– JOSHUA DANA SWINDLE, Southeast Senior Strategist, Advance Education

What happens when a potential student visits your website and submits an inquiry?
Here are some steps to consider to optimize this stage of the journey:



- ✓ Target prospective inquirers with customized digital audiences on social platforms to push application submissions higher. Highlight and promote important milestone dates, starting from application opening dates through early decision deadlines to regular decision deadlines and beyond.
- ✓ Identify the top three questions potential students ask when they request information. Find ways to better answer these on your website or with swift responses through chat or other channels. Be ready with the answers and use this opportunity to connect more deeply with students, giving them additional useful information that could prompt them to take another step toward applying.
- ✓ Consider your response time to inquiries. Speed matters when students have many choices. Answer their inquiries while you are top-of-mind to avoid missing their moment of interest. Keep them in conversation with your school rather than moving on to their next option.



OPPORTUNITY #3:

Reach Out With One-on-One Support

Once students begin the application process, they may get distracted, stumble over a step, or lose interest. In fact, more than 50% of students reported that applying to college was the [most stressful academic experience](#) for them. Imagine a first-generation student with no one at home to help them finish the application.

How can you make the application process easier for students?



- ✓ Make the application process more user-friendly. Even if students are using the Common Application system, proactively provide a complete guide to filling out the application. Provide a comprehensive list of what they will need to complete the process. Do you require an essay? Do they need their transcript? Is a resume helpful? Do test scores have to be in before they begin?
- ✓ Reach out to offer a one-on-one meeting with a counselor to answer questions for the student or provide chat and phone resources to prospective students to help those who need a deeper level of support.



OPPORTUNITY #4: **From Application to Matriculation**

The period between completing their application and hearing whether they have been accepted is stressful for students. At this stage, you want to make students feel welcome and wanted to build their confidence in the value of your school, increasing the odds they will enroll.



- ✓ Answer accepted students' questions in a timely and straightforward manner. Students may be comparing schools, trying to imagine what dorm life might look like, or wanting to determine the academic requirements for a specific major.
- ✓ Encourage students to follow your social media posts, hold online or in-person events for accepted students, and clearly communicate the next few steps in their journey.
- ✓ Ensure a reasonable (but not overwhelming) cadence of communications – emails, calls, or texts – to give students the opportunity to interact with your staff.

Final Thoughts

The college search process is a complicated journey that most prospective students begin in their first two years of high school. Most students aren't on the journey alone – their parents are right there with them guiding, influencing and sharing in the decision-making process.

For schools to make a noticeable difference in enrollment and increase marketing ROI, they must concentrate on engaging and influencing both students and parents at every stage of the search process.

1. Build trust and influence with campaigns that target students and parents separately.
2. Reach students and parents differently utilizing the social and digital channels they use the most.
3. Tailor messaging and creative to the specific audience.
4. Lead students and parents to the information they need to successfully research, apply and decide what makes your school the right choice for them and their children.

At Advance Education, we can offer you new tools and perspectives to help you move the needle and bolster your conversion rates. We want to take you from the start to the finish, helping you measure your progress at every step. As you walk beside your prospective students in their journey, we can be your partner as you transform your marketing to reach today's students. [Contact us today](#) to get started on your personalized marketing plan.

Sources:

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<https://www.insidetrack.org/reports/enrollment-strategies-and-evolving-expectations-of-potential-inquirers>

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ENROLLMENT STAGES CHEAT SHEETS

Content ideas for each stage of enrollment

1 CAPTURING INQUIRIES

BEGINS: Freshman year

CALL TO ACTION: Increase urgency each year

AD & CONTENT GOALS:

- Branding and awareness
 - Identify key targets
- Beginning research
 - Student concerns
 - Parent concerns

TARGETING PROSPECTS:

Target look-a-likes of current students & families

- By metro area or county
- By high school
- By family makeup (income, occupations, life-stage group)

KEY METRICS: Number of inquiries

TIMING & CALL TO ACTION:

The level of urgency should increase as students progress

- **Sophomore and Younger:** Focus on branding, acquiring an email address
- **Junior Year:** Urgency increases to push for campus visits, attending college fairs, interacting face to face
- **Senior Year:** Highest urgency: Schedule a visit, Learn how to apply, How to guides sent in exchange for email address

BLOG & SPONSORED CONTENT SUBJECTS:

Student focused content:

- Do you have my major(s)?
- Can I afford to go?
- Campus life
- Dorms and facilities (varies based on interests)

Parent focused content:

- How to prepare to pay for college
- Distance from home
- Reputation
- Financial Aid available
- Requirements for admission:
 - Tests scores
 - Applications
 - Essays
 - Extra curriculars
 - ACT/SAT prep
 - What high school classes are needed
 - What grades are needed
 - How to prepare their child
 - What their child needs to do and when

2 CONVERTING INQUIRIES TO APPLICANTS

BEGINS: Late Junior year

CALL TO ACTION: Apply Now!

CONTENT & MESSAGING GOALS:

- Increase engagement
- More granular information
- Connect students to resources

TARGETS:

- Audience from inquires
- Audience based on interests
- Feeder high schools

KEY METRICS: Percentage of applications from Junior-Senior inquirers

TIMING & CALL TO ACTION:

- Start hitting them with apply messages in late spring of Junior year
- Encourage students to start applying summer before senior year through deadline
- Increase urgency in calls-to-action as summer ends through late fall/winter

TARGETING INQUIRERS & POTENTIAL APPLICANTS:

- Create custom audiences from inquiries that move into this stage (spring-summer before senior year and beyond)
- Focus on feeder high-schools and historically high-volume feeder counties and areas
- Add additional inquiries to custom target audiences as they come in
- Remessaging campaigns from your website should be segmented based on the area of the site visited (admissions vs facilities vs a particular department)

CONTENT & MESSAGING TO INCREASE ENGAGEMENT:

How To “Explainer” Articles:

- Help students understand how to apply
- Explain how to estimate total costs by providing calculators, downloadable spreadsheets or worksheets

Increase Engagement:

- Encourage campus visits
- Remind students to complete their application materials via text message & email
- Connect prospective students with current students online or through in-person event

Segmentation:

- Segment content based on area of interest – department or area of study, athletics, clubs and professional organizations
- Segment content for students and parents

3

ADMISSION AND ACCEPTANCE

BEGINS: As applicants are accepted and before they commit

CALL TO ACTION: Accept/Commit Now!

CONTENT AD MESSAGING:

- Apply for scholarships
- Planning guides
- Make 1:1 contact with students

TARGETS: Accepted students and parents

KEY METRICS: Number of accepted vs. applied

TIMING:

- As soon as you receive applications, turn names and email addresses into custom audiences
- Late fall to spring-summer before matriculation

CALL TO ACTION:

- Confirm your acceptance and place deposits or housing applications
- Apply for FASFA (winter-early spring)
- Reserve your space in the Class of 20XX

CONTENT & MESSAGING TO INCREASE ENGAGEMENT:

- Reinforce the value proposition
- Guides on how to secure funding sources: FASFA, scholarships, work-study, grants
- Housing guides, meal plans, budgeting and school living resource guides for students and parents
- Push meet up events to connect future students to campus and current students in their area

4

ENROLLMENT

BEGINS: Spring/summer before first semester

CALL TO ACTION: Get Ready!

CONTENT & MESSAGING:

- Increase engagement
- Essential guides
- Connect students
- Important dates

TARGETS: Accepted students and parents

KEY METRICS: Percentage of committed to enrolled

TIMING: Spring-summer before first semester after commitment

CALL TO ACTION:

- Learn how to be a successful Freshman
- Are you Ready?
- Get Packed, let's go!

CONTENT & MESSAGING TO INCREASE ENGAGEMENT:

- How to arrive on campus and move in – “essential” guides for every type of student
- How to register for classes
- Finding your place on campus – the definitive guide to extracurriculars, clubs, interest groups, Greek life, student government
- Dates every new Freshman needs to know: Summer orientation dates, registration requirements, advisor meetings, etc.



Let's Discover Your Unique Challenge

Who are your most likely converts?

What's working and what's not?

Can we bring you a plan?

We're enrollment marketing experts and we're here to help.

Advance Education is a digital marketing agency specializing in enrollment marketing for higher education, community colleges, and vocational schools. Through partnerships with traditional four-year universities, community colleges, and technical and career schools, we help institutions level up marketing strategies for student recruitment, as well as alumni outreach.

- 1** Market intelligence and student assessments help us build the perfect targets for your enrollment goals.
- 2** Creative that connects, intrigues and inspires fuels the science of marketing strategy.
- 3** Never-satisfied, results-oriented optimization is what keeps our campaigns on top, delivering continuous ROI aligned with your goals.

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I have learned a lot from you and your team in the short time we have worked together. **You have changed the way we do business.** Thanks for all that you have done for this campus.



CASSANDRA CONNOR, PH.D.

Vice President, Traditions Campus
William Carey University

Email us at EnrollmentConsult@AdvanceEducation.com.

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