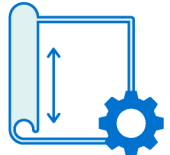
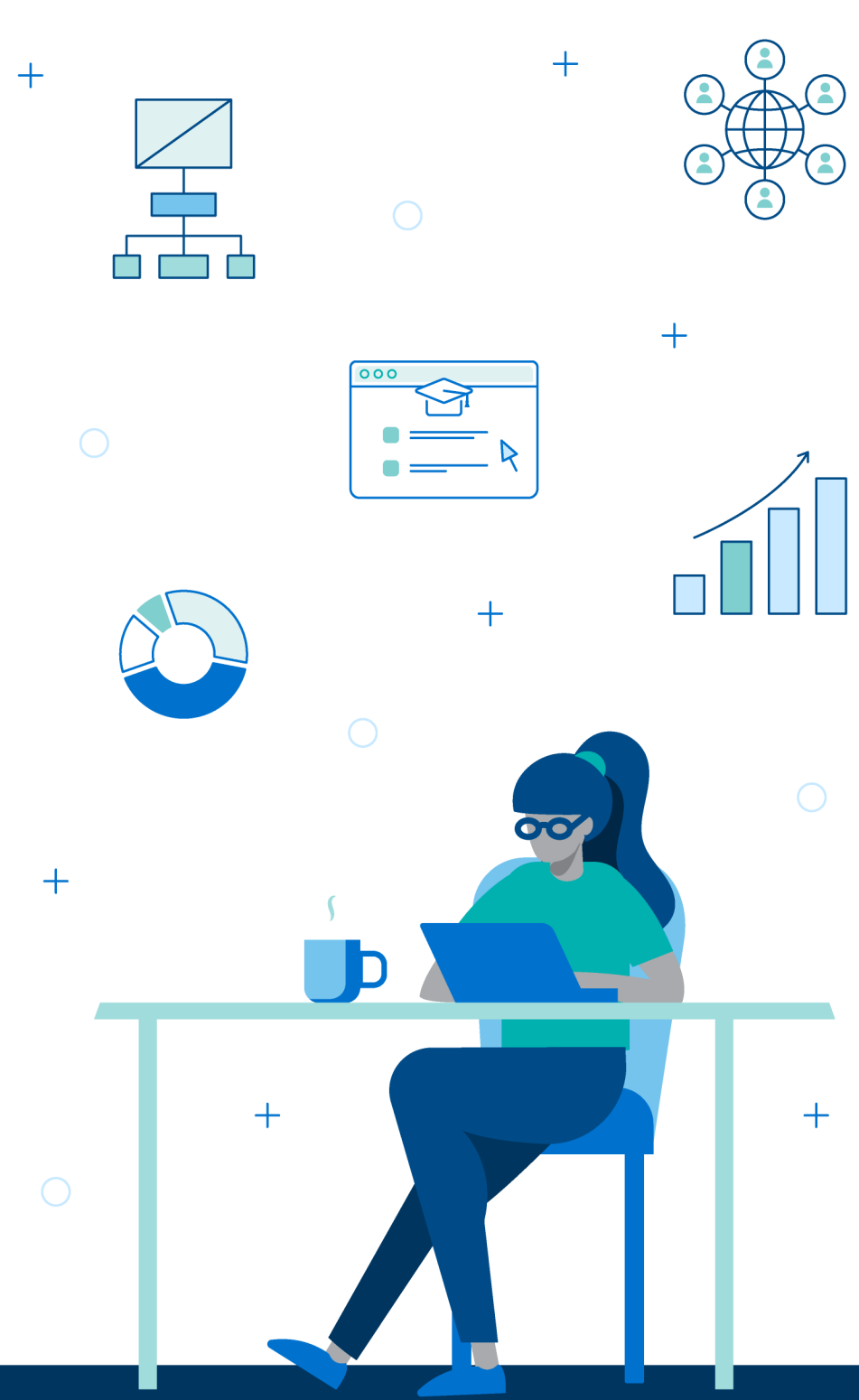




The Enrollment-Optimized College Website

A 10-Part Self-Test on Key Website Features and Performance Standards

Enrollment Services



EAB Enrollment Services

Project Director

Tom Cakuls

Cover Design

Lauren Davis

Rate this report



The QR code above links to a brief (one-question) anonymous survey you can use to rate this whitepaper. Pointing your phone's camera at the code will open the web page on which the survey is located. Alternately, you can access the survey at <https://forms.gle/YhLSfhUDbRLrzAdz5>

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EAB Agency Services

This project was undertaken in partnership with EAB's Agency Services division, a **full-service digital-marketing agency** whose offerings include:

- Full-spectrum digital-marketing strategy
- Website development
- Brand strategy
- Creative services and content development
- Marketing analytics
- Recruitment-marketing integration
- Virtual campus tours and interactive web content

Our agency team includes web strategists, photographers, videographers, editors, researchers, copywriters, project managers, SEO experts, UX designers, developers, and analysts.

To learn more about how EAB Agency Services can turn your school's website into a force-multiplier for student recruitment, contact Emily Bauer, Vice President of Agency Services (ebauer@eab.com).

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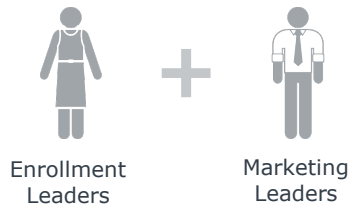
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How to Use this Document

This resource was created for enrollment leaders to use with the primary owners of the school's website



A Tool for Fostering Partnership

Even though college websites play a crucial role in attracting and converting prospective students, they are rarely under the enrollment team's direct control, typically being owned by a school's marketing and communications division. This document was designed to help enrollment leaders collaborate more effectively with marketing leaders, with an eye to ensuring that the school's website is doing all it can to support student recruitment while also serving the larger strategic and marketing goals of the institution.

How Should You Proceed?



Complete the self-tests

The bulk of this report consists of self-tests you and other members of your web team can use to assess how well your school's website is currently serving your enrollment goals. As you work your way through the self-tests, check all boxes that apply to your current situation. Once you're done, tally your results using the guide on page 39 of this report.



Compile a prioritized to-do list

After completing the self-tests, it will be apparent where the greatest opportunities lie for improving the enrollment performance of your website. Because there may be many such opportunities, we have starred those it makes sense for most enrollment teams to prioritize.



Starred items in the self-tests indicate website fixes that should be prioritized because they:

Are relatively quick and easy to implement



Have the biggest enrollment impact

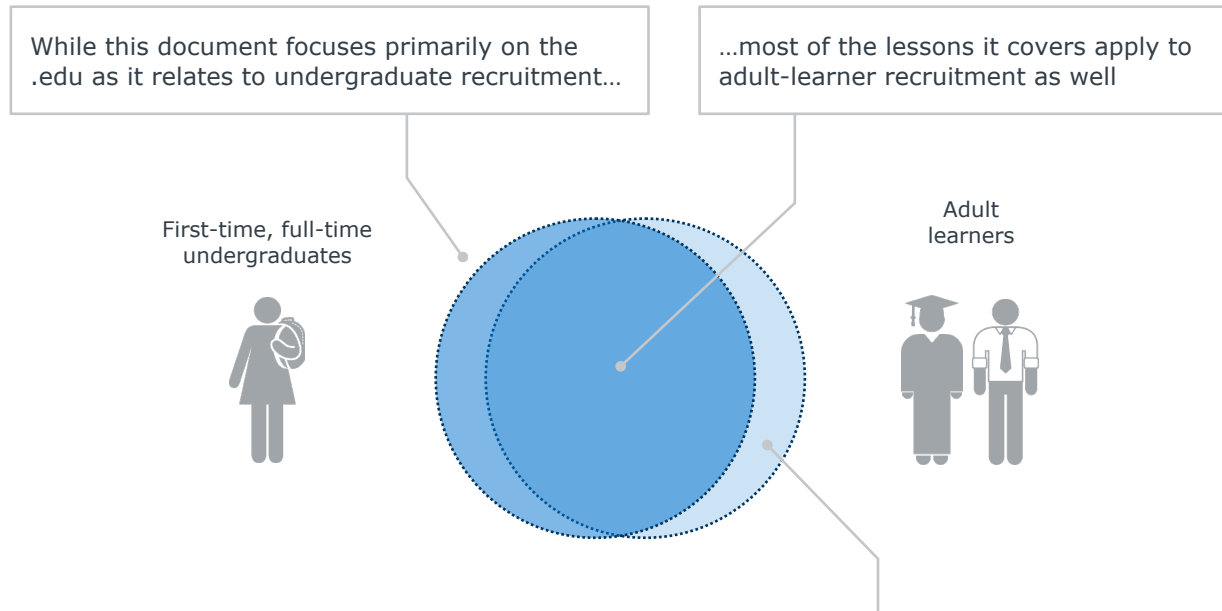


Depend most on the enrollment team's initiative

Undergraduate Recruitment (and Beyond)

Content Presented in This Document

By Relevance for Key Recruitment Target Audiences



Some considerations specific to adult learners are not covered in this report

A school meeting the website performance standards described in this document will see comparable benefit for both undergraduate and adult-learner recruitment. That said, there are a few aspects of website optimization especially relevant for adult-learner recruitment that are not covered in the pages that follow. By way of one example, websites have a bigger role to play in lead generation for adult-learner recruitment relative to first-time undergraduates (the names of college-bound high schoolers being readily available for purchase from standardized testing agencies and other list-source providers).

Why the .edu Matters for Enrollment

Self-Service Search

One of the most consequential current trends in recruitment marketing is college-bound students' growing reliance on self-service information channels for learning about schools. From third-party college-ranking websites to student influencers on social networks, the rapidly evolving digital-media landscape is presenting students with an ever-expanding range of information sources for colleges and universities they're considering.

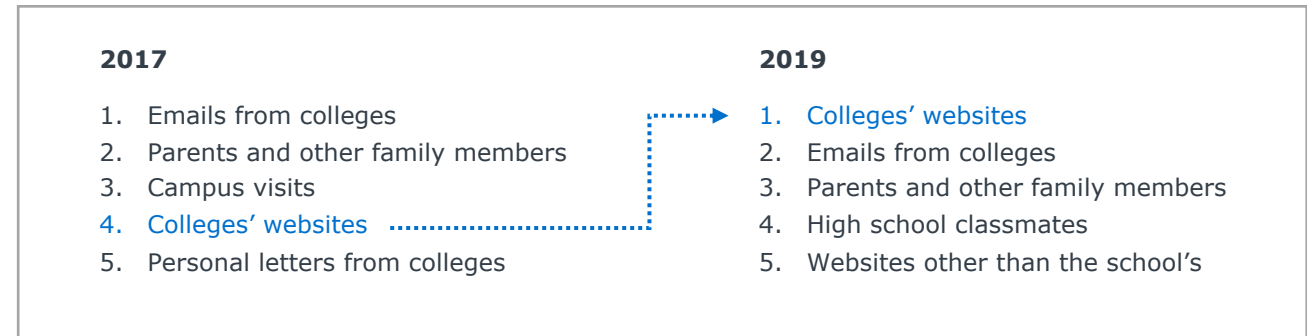
Growing Centrality of the .edu

Successful recruitment marketing depends on effective engagement of students through the self-service information channels they increasingly favor.

A clear first order of business in this regard is the school's website. There is no information source that students rely on more when researching potential schools. And few other aspects of your interactions with them do more to shape their impressions of you—for better or worse, depending on how compelling an online experience you are providing for them.

Information Sources Students Identified as Being Most Helpful in Their College Search

EAB Student Communication Preferences Survey, 2017 vs. 2019



Students and Parents Judge You by Your Website

Sample Student Comments Regarding School Websites from Reddit

“Anyone not applying to a college because you don't like the website?”

“It seriously makes me not want to apply when a school doesn't care enough about something that is a main source of information for most applicants.”

Results from EAB's 2020 Survey of Parents of College-Bound Students



86%

of parents say a well-designed website positively impacts their impression of a school

Many Schools' Websites have Room for Improvement

A Disappointing Status Quo

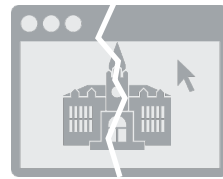
Recent years have seen rapid advances in website design—so much so that the way users experience the Internet changes noticeably from year to year. This is certainly true of the e-commerce and media sites that students interact with every day, from Amazon to Netflix—sites that, increasingly, set the high standard by which your own web presence will be judged.

Unfortunately, many schools have not kept pace. Visiting a handful of randomly selected .edus is enough to show that this holds true for multiple aspects of website performance, from graphic design to navigability to user experience. And the data tells a similar story. Core performance measures for college websites, such as page-load time, suggest that many have room for improvement.

A Digital Divide

Lending urgency to the task is the fact that some schools have already done the difficult work of bringing their websites up to spec—a fact that makes the shortcomings of slower-moving schools' sites all the more conspicuous.

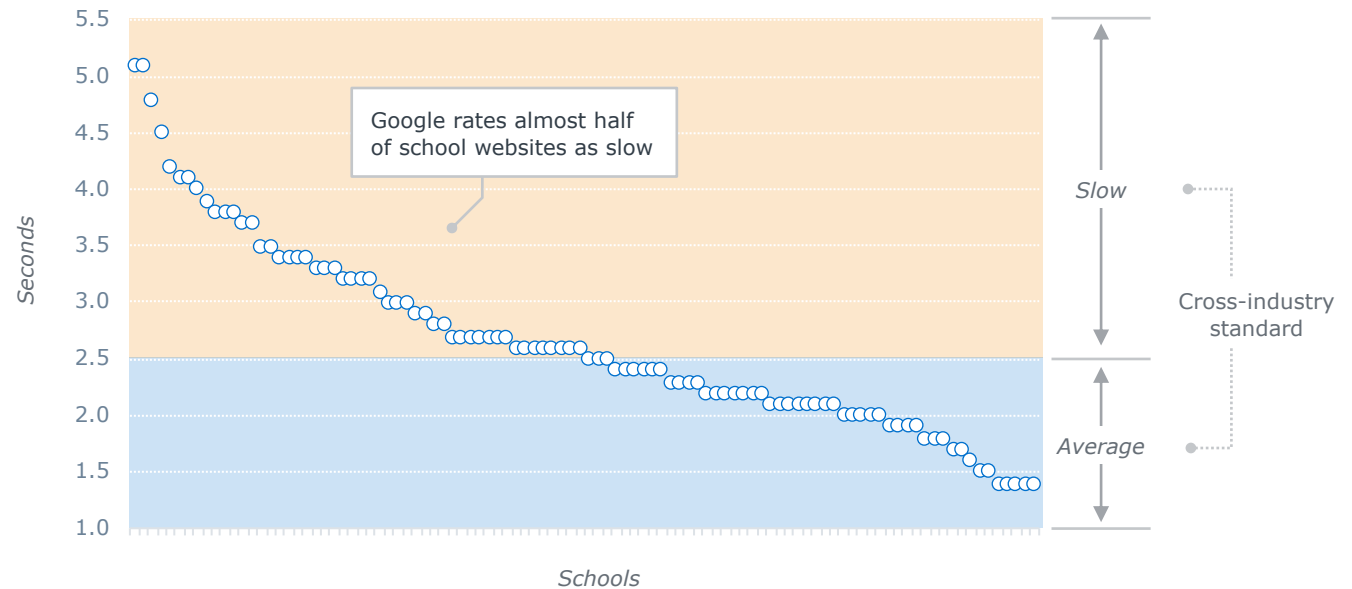
Problems Commonly Seen on College and University Websites



- Confusing navigation
- Inconsistent branding
- Cluttered layouts
- Slow-loading pages
- Hard to use on a phone
- Off-putting appearance
- Confusing subdomain structure
- Outdated content
- Uninspiring content
- Broken links

Troubling Vital Signs

Case in Point: Average Mobile Page-Load Time for 100 Randomly Selected College Websites



Source: EAB research and analysis; thinkwithgoogle.com.

Why Getting the .edu Right is So Hard

Higher Ed's Particular Challenge

There are good reasons why so many college websites underperform. In fact, if any industry could be forgiven for lagging on advances in website design, a strong argument could be made for higher education topping the list.

Complexity Squared

The main reason for this underperformance is the extraordinary complexity of colleges and universities.

All schools comprise several distinct and equally important communities—faculty, nonacademic staff, current students, prospective students, etc.—each with its own particular needs.

When you layer on top of this the inherent complexity of websites—which consist of many interdependent parts and rely on many different individuals for their smooth functioning—the overall picture quickly becomes daunting. Further complicating matters is the high-stakes nature of website development; decisions made during the planning and design phase can lock in the defining features of a website for years.

Barriers to Website Optimization



Constrained by legacy tech

Much of what makes a website feel the way it does is hardwired into underlying systems at the design phase, making later tweaks difficult



Radically interdependent

Even targeted changes to one part of a website can cascade through to countless other portions of it, quickly creating overwhelming complexity



Paralyzed by politics

Different college departments want different things from the school's website, prompting endless, momentum-killing negotiations



Serving many masters

College websites must serve various internal and external constituencies with very different needs, which often leads to inscrutable information architecture



Costly

Because creating websites requires expensive, specialized personnel, inexpertly planned projects can quickly generate cost overruns



Time-intensive

Website redesigns can take so long that sites are obsolete by the time they go live

Close Coordination Between Marketing and Enrollment is Key

An Imperative to Act

Given the complexity of the typical .edu, there's not much enrollment leaders can do by themselves to impact its performance. This would be true even if they typically "owned" college websites, which they do not. That said, given the high stakes for recruitment outcomes, inaction is not an option.

A Crucial Partnership

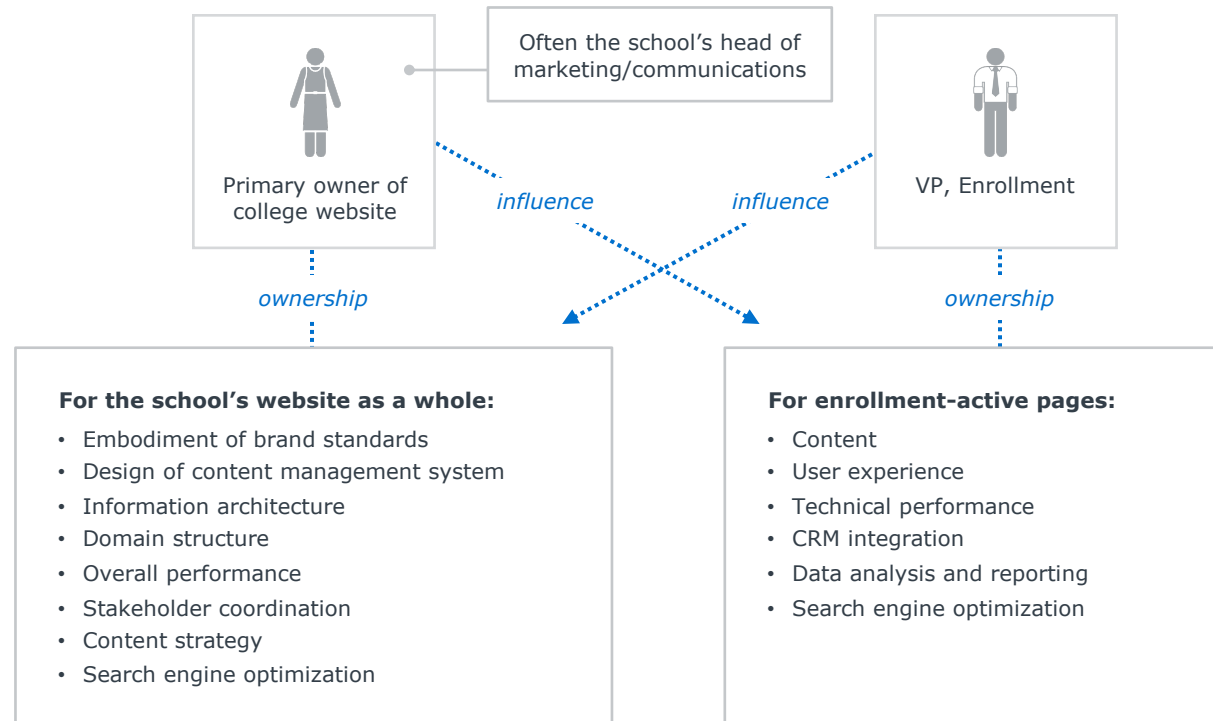
One answer to this conundrum lies in building effective partnerships with those best positioned to shape the school's website at its inception and inflect its performance over the long term.

At most schools, this is the executive in charge of institutional marketing—an individual who is uniquely positioned to coordinate the many interested parties who shape a school's web presence and to ensure that the school's brand gives coherence to those efforts.

Insofar as healthy enrollment is a core strategic aim of institutional marketing, enrollment leaders should be given special prominence in that group of interested parties.

Website Roles and Responsibilities

Roles Played by Marketing and Enrollment Leaders in College Website Design and Management



Source: EAB research and analysis.

Focus on Enrollment-Active Pages

Enrollment’s Website Purview

Enrollment leaders can and should exert a high degree of influence on portions of the site that most directly impact enrollment outcomes—what might be termed “enrollment-active” pages.

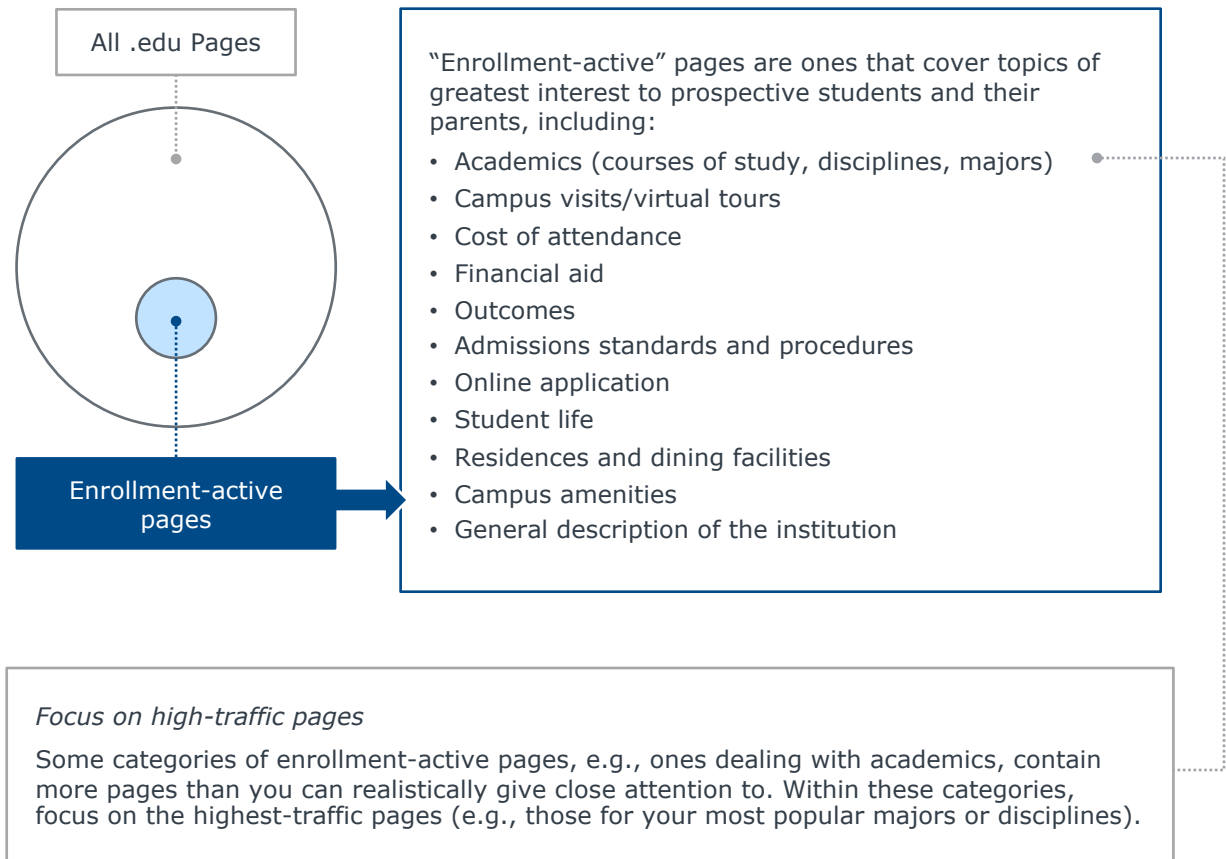
As described at right, pages in this category include admissions-related pages as well as ones that describe the school’s academic offerings. Note that these pages typically constitute a small subset of the much larger universe of pages that make up a school’s website.

A Question of Initiative

There are several different ways in which enrollment leaders can influence the performance of these pages, from owning them outright to working in close, ongoing partnership with their owners.

Whatever the ownership structure, the enrollment team should take a proactive role in defining a vision for these pages, proposing specific plans for them, exercising editorial oversight over them, troubleshooting their technical performance, and measuring their effectiveness.

A Subset of .edu Pages Accounts for Most of Enrollment Impact



Prioritize Quick Wins and Tee Up Even Bigger Gains down the Road

Securing Quick Wins

All too often, much-needed improvements to college websites get sidelined due to resource constraints and related fears that website projects are unavoidably big, complex, and expensive.

The truth is that many worthwhile improvements can be made in a targeted, staged, and incremental way. This means that even modestly resourced teams can rapidly elevate the recruitment performance of the school's site.

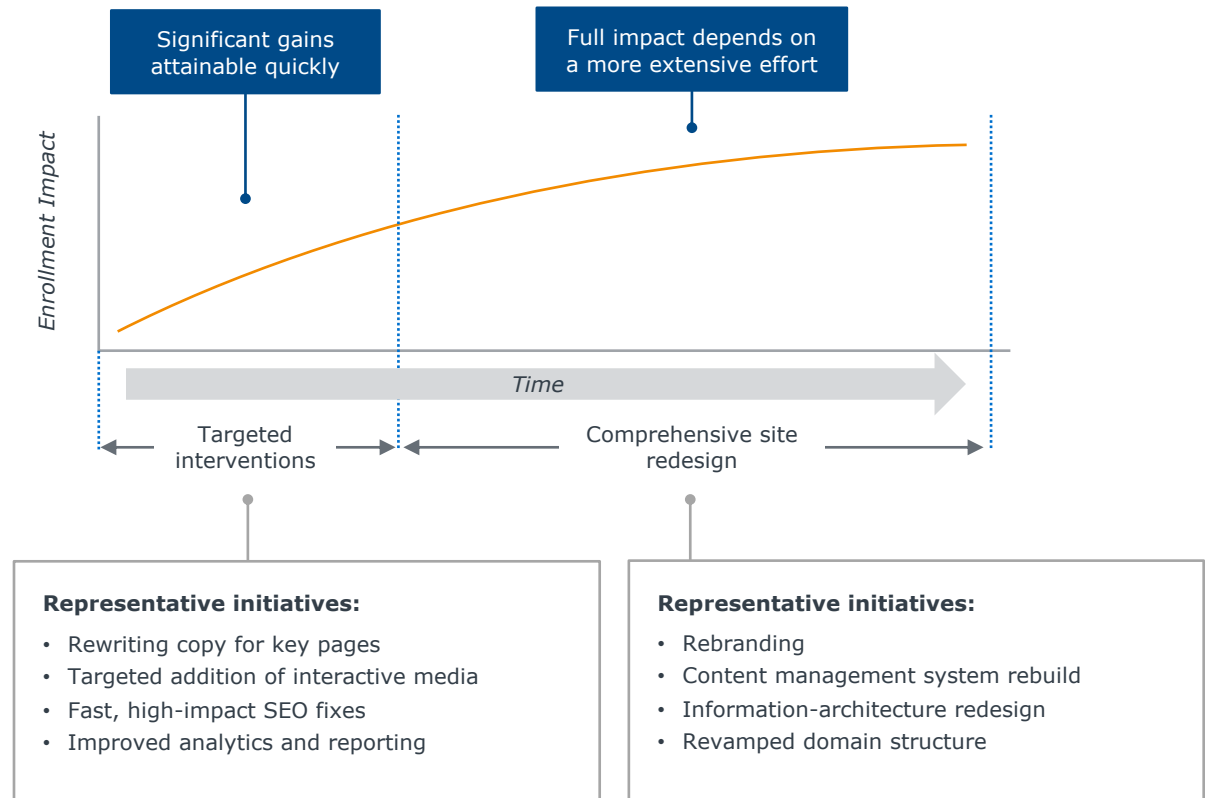
Realizing Full Potential

That said, realizing the full recruitment-marketing potential of a school's website does typically depend on more extensive efforts, including full site rebuilds.

This is because many characteristics of websites that drive audience engagement, including navigability, depend on a site's deep structure—the sort of thing that cannot easily be modified after a site has been designed and rolled out.

Driving Immediate Impact, with an Eye to Longer-Term Improvements

Website Interventions, by Scope and Degree of Enrollment Impact



Source: EAB research and analysis.

Why Search Engine Optimization Matters for Enrollment

Unbranded Search is Prevalent

Students who already know about your school won't have much trouble finding you online. This is because branded Google searches—ones featuring a school's name—reliably show the school's website at the top of the search results.

But a significant portion of traffic coming to college websites originates in search-engine queries that don't feature a particular school's name—"colleges with marine biology programs in Maryland," for example.

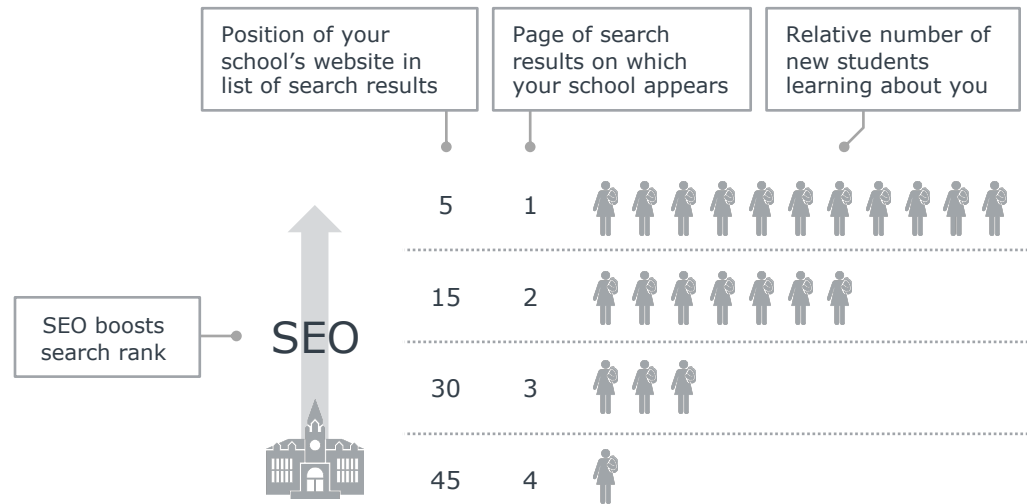
SEO Boosts Visibility

If and where your school's name appears in related search results—and how likely students will be to learn about your institution—is determined by the complex and ever-evolving algorithms search engines use to rank websites. Crucially, this also holds true for the increasingly important "position zero" features in Google, such as its College Search tool.

Search engine optimization (SEO) translates a detailed understanding of how these algorithms work into specific design recommendations that improve a website's search rank.

SEO Gets Your School's Website in Front of New Audiences

A Conceptual Illustration



Benefits Beyond Search Rank

Opportunities Identified via SEO Provide a Blueprint for Improving Your Website's User Experience

	Improves search rank	Improves user experience
Good website navigability	✓	✓
Highly relevant website content	✓	✓
Engaging content formats	✓	✓
Fast page-load times	✓	✓
Mobile optimization	✓	✓

Source: EAB research and analysis.

Are You Helping College-Bound Students Find You Online?

Keyword Optimization

- ★ **We regularly update our keyword SEO**
We perform keyword optimization on content and metadata for our enrollment-active pages at least once every six months.
- ★ **We regularly assess our search-rank performance**
At least once every three months, we track our institution's search rank for key enrollment-related queries, including variations on the searches below.
 - Colleges in our state
 - Colleges in our state offering our most strategically important majors
 - Specific types of colleges in our state (e.g., small liberal arts colleges)
- ★ **We compare ourselves to our competitors**
We compare our search-rank performance for key enrollment-related queries with that of our competitors; we rank at least as high as they do for these queries.
- Our SEO accounts for voice search**
Our keyword research and content optimization incorporate a basic understanding of how voice search differs from traditional text-based search.
- We assess search rank beyond our primary market**
We use SEO tools to simulate searches performed in strategically important geographical markets outside of our region, to understand how our search rank varies by location.

Technical Optimization

- We perform a full SEO audit of our website annually**
Our institution performs a full SEO audit of its website once a year. Each audit generates a "punch list" of specific follow-on work aimed at error corrections and enhancements.

What to optimize for

Understand how your audiences search

In order to figure out how you're ranking on key search terms, you first need to know what keywords students and parents use when looking for schools online.

A specialized toolkit

The best way to do that is via specialized tools designed for that purpose, of which there are many (BrightEdge, for example).

Rules of thumb

The next-best way is to follow some simple rules of thumb. Generally speaking, parents and students most often search for schools based on the parameters listed below:

- Academic programs
- Geographical location
- School's name
- Career opportunities
- Selectivity

Number of checked items on this page:



Self-Test 1: SEO (continued)

Technical Optimization (continued)

★ Our enrollment-active pages have undergone technical SEO

We have taken the following steps to ensure that all our enrollment-active pages are SEO-optimized:

- They are internally linked
- They have a title, metadescription, and H1
- They have alt tags for photos and video
- Their URLs are visible to Google’s indexing bots
- They use breadcrumbs to help with navigation

Our .edu has undergone technical SEO

We have optimized the following SEO-critical technical aspects of our website:

- It has a sitemap
- It has a robots.txt file
- It uses canonical tags
- It uses structured data (i.e., a schema)
- Average page-load time is faster than peer benchmark

Infrastructure

Personnel

★ Our enrollment team has SEO experts

Our enrollment team includes one or several staffers who are proficient in the following aspects of SEO:

- The use of Google Analytics and specialized SEO tools for the identification of SEO-relevant web page errors, including technical errors, navigation problems, and issues related to content quality
- Keyword and share-of-voice analysis
- Assessing web-page load time (ours and that of our competitors)
- How to SEO-optimize website content

Don’t ignore technical SEO

The importance of the back end

Non-experts sometimes equate SEO with keyword optimization, but there’s a lot more to it. Specifically, many behind-the-scenes technical aspects of how your website is structured can have a big impact on how Google’s search algorithms rank pages on your site (and whether they can “see” them at all).

Drivers of SEO performance you can control

Another good reason to pay attention to technical SEO is that many related errors are not that hard to fix once they’ve been spotted.

Furthermore, because many important aspects of technical SEO can be executed at the level of individual web pages, as opposed to the whole website, it represents an area in which enrollment teams can drive improvements without depending on other parts of the organization (insofar as the enrollment team owns enrollment-active pages).

Number of checked items on this page:



Self-Test 1: SEO (continued)

Infrastructure (continued)

SEO tools

★ **Our enrollment team has access to specialized SEO tools**

Members of our enrollment team have access to advanced SEO tools (e.g., BrightEdge, SEMRush, Screaming Frog) that provide us with the following features and capabilities:

- Crawler-based identification of website technical errors
- Prioritized recommendations for correcting website errors
- Assessment of competitive keyword positioning and share of voice
- Templates for creation of search-optimized content
- Ability to simulate searches performed in specific geographical locations
- Competitor-domain analysis
- SEO self-education resources and learning tools
- Google Analytics integration

Make, borrow, or buy?

Underfunding a common problem

Enrollment teams at many smaller schools can't afford to fund their own specialized SEO staff or to acquire the tools needed to do a really good job of SEO.

Drawing on central resources

Since these resources (and the associated SEO capabilities) are more likely to be found at the level of institution-wide marketing and communications departments, enrollment leaders should cultivate close working relationships with those departments' leaders.

Going outside the organization

Alternately, it will sometimes make sense for enrollment teams to acquire the necessary capabilities through contracting relationships with third parties, who, through economies of scale, can often deliver highly expert assistance at a lower cost.

Number of checked items on this page:



Why are Some Schools' Sites More Engaging than Others'?

An Engagement Gap

Even a quick review of college and university websites reveals a lot of variation in quality. Some sites make it much easier to find information that matters most to prospective students. Some appear to be more technically advanced. Some are better at making you want to spend more time with them.

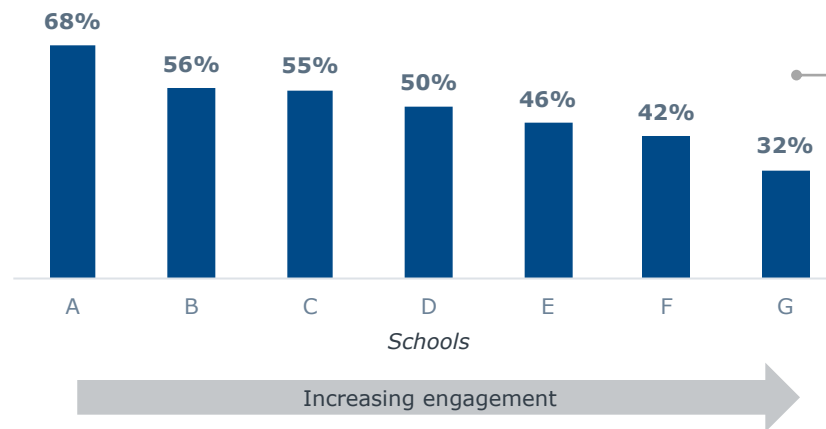
The data bears this out as well. For example, bounce rates vary markedly, as can be seen in the randomly selected group of institutions shown in the chart at right.

A Multifaceted Undertaking

Many factors go into making college websites more or less engaging, which is why this section of this report is the longest. Self-tests on the following pages cover key drivers of engagement, including your site's user experience, content, and visual appearance.

Bounce Rate

For Eight Randomly Chosen Schools' Websites



Bounce rate is the percentage of visitors who leave your site without interacting with it. A high bounce rate means your site is presenting potential users with barriers to engagement.

Many Factors Determine How Engaging Your Website Is

User experience

- Easy to navigate
- Mobile-optimized
- Fast-loading

Content

- Highly relevant topics
- Inspiring messages
- Compelling formats

Visual appearance

- Distinctive visual brand
- Impactful layouts
- Attractive graphic design

Is Your Website Speaking Students' Language?

Topics

- ★ **We focus on what's most important to prospective students**
Our school's website includes pages dedicated to the topics we know to be of greatest interest to students. Most of the time our enrollment team spends on website content focuses on these topics.

- We actively identify content gaps**
We use data on inbound student queries (via website internal search, call center, etc.) to identify gaps in information provided on our website. Our monthly website report shows which topics are generating the most engagement.

- We create customized experiences**
Our website tailors content shown to individual visitors based on their specific interests and funnel stage (as inferred from data we have gathered on them).

Messaging

- ★ **Our school's homepage effectively embodies our brand**
The design of our school's homepage is based on a detailed vision of our school's differentiated value proposition for students; every element of the page works toward conveying that in a clear and compelling way.

- ★ **Our content always puts students at the center**
All content on our enrollment-active pages frames key differentiators of our brand relative to prospective students' concerns, interests, hopes, and aspirations.

- ★ **We never show "unbuffered" cost information**
Information on cost of attendance, financial aid, and other topics that might trigger student concern over debt never appears without value information adjacent to it (including, for example, information on outcomes).

Topics to focus on:

- Summary overview of your institution
- Academic programs and majors
- Admissions
 - Admission requirements
 - How to apply
 - Important dates
- Paying for college
 - Cost of attendance
 - Financial aid
 - Sources of funding
- Outcomes and value
 - Academic success
e.g., four-year completion rate
 - Career success
e.g., national lifetime-earnings rank
 - Student satisfaction
e.g., survey results
 - Social proof
e.g., testimonials giving evidence of value
- Virtual campus tour
- Information for parents
- Information for first-generation families
- Student life and culture
- Campus amenities (residences, dining halls, athletic facilities, research facilities, etc.)

Number of checked items on this page:



Self-Test 2: Content (continued)

Graphic Design

- All pages on our website show an obvious visual kinship**
All of our enrollment-active pages use a common visual language, including navigation, layouts, fonts, and brand standards; they are immediately recognizable as “the same.”
- Our graphic vocabulary follows common website usage**
Icons and other navigation-related visuals that our website uses are consistent with those typically used on most other websites (e.g., a magnifying glass for search).
- Our layouts strike an optimal balance between images and text**
Our enrollment-active pages use photos, graphics, and video to draw users in and direct their attention; text is used to efficiently convey critical information that is not easily communicated through purely visual means.
- Our layouts make effective use of blank space**
Our enrollment-active pages use empty space to produce visual “breathing room,” reinforce hierarchies of importance across the information presented, and enhance scannability.

Formats

Advanced website media

- ★ **We use sophisticated multimedia formats**
Our enrollment-active pages use highly interactive and immersive media that combine different formats (photos, text, video, etc.), leveraging the unique strengths of each and giving users with different learning styles maximum opportunity to engage.

Video

- Our enrollment-active pages include video**
Our enrollment-active pages use video wherever it is a good match with the information we are trying to convey, such as describing physical spaces on campus.

Interactive web content

Recent breakthroughs in website design have made possible entirely new content formats that produce previously unseen levels of audience engagement.

Key characteristics of these formats, which are referred to in this document as “interactive web content,” are as follows:

Features

- Navigable 360-degree photo panoramas (like those in Google Street View)
- Layering of different media types, including photos, text, and video, in a seamlessly integrated whole
- A high degree of user control over how content is presented
- Can be inserted inline on any web page, the same way photos or other common website content formats would be

Archetypal use case

Virtual campus tour

Additional use cases

Highlighting particular features of your institution that you know are important to students and that lend themselves to visual representation (including your academic programs, special campus traditions, student groups and organizations, and your surrounding community)

Demonstrated impact on audience engagement

Thirty-eight percent increase in time on page relative to traditional formats used on .edu

Number of checked items on this page:



Self-Test 2: Content (continued)

Video (continued)

We make sure our videos don't "kill" other content

We avoid using video on pages where the main point we are trying to convey is best communicated in another format, such as text or still images, due to video's tendency to draw attention away from other elements on a page.

Photography

★ **The photos we use convey important messages**

Photos used on our enrollment-active pages are never merely filler or decoration; in every instance they reinforce key messages we hope to convey to prospective students.

★ **Our photos are of consistently high quality**

Photos used on our enrollment active pages are executed to a high technical and aesthetic standard. They show actual scenes from our campus and its surroundings (we avoid stock images) and favor subjects that are photogenic and distinctive to our brand. We avoid visual clichés.

Copy

★ **We tailor copy length to purpose**

Our copy is concise, using only as many words as are required to get our point across effectively. That said, we make effective use of long-form content wherever appropriate (especially for topics where content depth and related SEO benefits are key, e.g., on academic-program pages).

★ **Our copy is considerate**

Our copy avoids unnecessarily using words that large numbers of students or parents (e.g., those from first-generation families) are unlikely to understand, including specialized higher-education terminology.

Additional tips for video

Stay on-brand

While most organizations have clear brand standards for copy, graphic design, and other web page components and media types, equivalent guidance for video can be lacking. Ensure that all aspects of your video—including messaging and visual appearance—leverage your brand.

Make sure your video can be easily found

Smart use of keywords in the title and description of your video can boost the likelihood that it will be found via SEO. And the more important your video is, the more conspicuous it should be on the page—don't bury it behind links and don't forget to prominently feature a play button, to immediately signal that it is a video.

Prevent streaming fails

Is your web server optimized for streaming video? If not, consider using a hosted service to improve speed and up-time. Also pay attention to format; encode your video correctly to avoid long buffer times and choose formats least likely to present streaming barriers.

Match video length to channel

Users will want longer or shorter videos depending on the type of information they're looking for and the channel through which it is delivered. For this reason, straight lifts of videos you've prepared for social channels won't always work on your website without further editing.

Number of checked items on this page:



Self-Test 2: Content (continued)

Copy (continued)

- Our copy effectively embodies our brand**
The tone, style, and messaging of our copy consistently reflects our brand—our copy could be picked out among other schools’ website copy even if identifying details were removed.
- Our copy is search engine-optimized**
Copy for the enrollment-active pages on our site is created by or in collaboration with an SEO expert.
- Our copy is audience-tested**
Our copy is regularly reviewed and rated by students and parents for understandability and interest. Lessons learned from those reviews are incorporated into our website copy-writing guidelines.

Information-gathering forms

- We make information-gathering conversational**
The forms we use to collect information from visitors to our website have a sequential format, whereby questions are presented one at a time, through an interactive user interface.

Process

- ★ **We use a content calendar**
We use a content calendar to ensure that material available through our site at any given time of year matches our users’ needs and supports our recruitment strategy. The calendar provides a framework for content planning, updates, and performance assessment.
- ★ **Revising content on our enrollment-active pages is fast and easy**
New or revised content can consistently be uploaded to our enrollment-active pages in 24 hours or less.

Conversational inquiry forms

A crucial website function

Gathering information from prospective students is one of the most important enrollment-related things your website can do, giving you, as it does, crucial insight into students’ identity and intentions.

How it’s usually done

The forms used by most college websites for this purpose look and work like paper forms, presenting users with a static series of fields to fill out.

A new and better option

Recent advances in user-interface design have produced a new type of website-based information-gathering tool called the “conversational inquiry form.”

Rather than presenting users with a static list of fields to fill out, conversational inquiry forms use a progressive, sequential format in which information is solicited in a series of successive prompts.

Proven benefit

Conversational inquiry forms produce a twofold increase in completion rate relative to standard web forms. They additionally make it possible to capture information from incomplete forms.

Number of checked items on this page:



Self-Test 2: Content (continued)

Process (continued)

We limit who can create content

The ability to create new content for our enrollment-critical pages is limited to a specified set of users who are trained in our content management system and, preferably, users who are proficient in SEO.

Accessibility

★ **Our content meets widely recognized accessibility standards**

Content on all of our enrollment-active pages meet World Wide Web Consortium (W3C) web-content accessibility guidelines (WCAG).

Accessibility in brief

What is it?

Accessibility is the ability of users with visual, hearing, motor, or other impairments to access content on a website.

Why does it matter?

- It is a legal requirement.
- It helps ensure a maximal audience for your enrollment-related content.
- Improving accessibility often leads to a better experience for all users, not just those with accessibility challenges.
- It can improve SEO performance.
- Many would say it is a moral obligation.

Representative best practice

Ensure all images on your website have alt tags, which let users who have trouble seeing know that the images are there and what they show.

Representative challenge

Many .edu host thousands of pdfs, a format that often presents accessibility barriers.

Number of checked items on this page:



Can Prospective Students Quickly Find Important Information?

Site Organization

- Our website is organized with prospective students in mind**
The organization of our school’s website clearly mirrors the interests and priorities of prospective students and their parents.

- We sequester low-relevance content**
Material on our website that has low relevance for prospective students and parents is kept separate from the content we are most eager for them to see, through one or several of the following means:
 - It is kept on an intranet or separate subdomain
 - It is kept within navigation paths clearly marked for other audiences
 - We prevent it from being indexed by search-engine crawlers

Navigability Standards

- ★ **Our most important content is never more than three clicks away**
Pages featuring information that prospective students and their parents care most about can reliably be accessed via three or fewer clicks from any page on the school’s site, on both the desktop and mobile versions of our site.

- Our internal search function is actually helpful**
Our site’s internal-search feature reliably returns results with high relevance; students and parents can quickly find important information using it. Alternately, we use a chatbot to achieve similar ends.

Navigation Features

- ★ **Our site uses both audience- and topic-specific navigation**
All enrollment-active pages on our site prominently feature navigation elements (e.g., tabs, links) specific to key audiences (prospective students and parents) and enrollment-critical topics (e.g., how to apply, academic majors). The appearance and location of these elements are consistent across all pages.

A three-click myth?

An imperfect rule of thumb

Like many useful guidelines, the three-click rule is a bit of an oversimplification. Understanding some of the related nuance can help you apply this standard more effectively.

The rule is based on the idea that requiring users to click many times to find what they are looking for makes browsing tiresome and increases the odds of them becoming disoriented. Alternately, it can be seen as symptom of poor navigation—an indication that users are losing their way.

Some additional considerations

While much of that is true, it is also the case that users don’t pay too much attention to how much they’re clicking, as long as the path to their goal remains clear—which, in turn, depends on having highly legible navigation cues and logical information hierarchies that mirror your audience’s perspective.

An important additional consideration is that shorter click paths often depend on more complex initial navigation menus; striking a balance between the two, rather than simply reducing clicks, is ultimately the best guarantee of good navigability.

Number of checked items on this page:



Self-Test 3: Information Architecture (continued)

Navigation Features (continued)

- ★ **Our site features ubiquitous enrollment-focused calls to action**

All of our enrollment-critical pages prominently feature one or several of the following calls to action (or differently worded equivalents):

 - Learn more
 - Apply
 - Visit
 - Give

- We provide shortcuts to keep users oriented**

Our site uses the following navigation features to keep users from getting lost:

 - All of our enrollment-active pages feature a “home” button that links back to the school’s main page
 - Our website uses breadcrumbs to assist with navigation on portions of the site with deep hierarchical content
 - We use jump links to make long-scrolling pages easier to navigate

- Our website explicitly addresses frequently asked questions**

Our enrollment-critical pages include FAQs; questions addressed in the FAQs are known, via quantitative and qualitative analysis, to be ones students and parents ask most often.

Troubleshooting

- ★ **We take multiple approaches to spotting navigation problems**

We routinely analyze data from the following sources to identify information prospective students and parents are looking for and to identify any problems they are having finding it:

 - User testing
 - Google Analytics data
 - Searches entered into our site’s internal-search feature
 - Student surveys
 - Queries submitted by students (e.g., via direct contact with counselors)

Calls to action are crucial

Your website should be driving conversions

Effective college websites build affinity with prospective students across all funnel stages, from their earliest high school years.

But just as important is the more targeted role they play in converting prospects—moving them from one funnel stage to the next. Few aspects of your website play a more crucial role in that than calls to action (CTAs).

Boost the effectiveness of your CTAs

In addition to including CTAs on most or all of your enrollment-active pages, additional steps you can take to increase the number of students clicking on them include using graphic design techniques to give them additional prominence on the page.

Effective tracking of CTA activity on your site is also important, as it lets you identify opportunities for improvement. The best way to do that is to set up event-tracking in Google Analytics.

Number of checked items on this page:



Is Your Website Equally Engaging on All Device Types?

User-Experience Standards

- ★ **Students can quickly find key content using a phone**
A prospective student looking at our site on a phone can find content on all key enrollment topics in under 30 seconds from anywhere on our site.

- ★ **It is easy to see and interact with our site on a phone**
Pinching and zooming are never required to view content on our enrollment-active pages or to perform actions we are most eager for students to take, including:
 - Requesting information
 - Scheduling a visit
 - Submitting an application

Testing

- ★ **Our user testing covers different device types**
When testing our enrollment-active pages with prospective students and their parents, we ensure that testing is performed on phones, tablets, and desktop devices.

- ★ **We test the mobile speed of our enrollment-active pages**
At least once every three months, we use Google's Mobile Speed Test tool to assess load time for our enrollment-active pages. We use this same tool to benchmark our page-load speed against that of our competitors and to identify specific site modifications we can make to improve performance.

- ★ **We assess our enrollment-active pages for mobile-friendliness**
At least once every three months, we use Google's Mobile-Friendly tool to identify potential shortfalls in the performance of our enrollment-active pages.

No excuse for not testing

Free online tools can be used to produce fast, easy, and powerful assessments of your site's mobile performance (and that of your competitors' sites).

For example, it would take you less than 15 minutes to find out the things listed below using Google's "Test My Site" service:

- Average load time for your site
- How your load time compares to benchmark
- How your load time has trended in the past month
- How your load time compares to your competitors'
- Fixes that would make pages on your site faster

Number of checked items on this page:



Self-Test 4: Mobile Optimization (continued)

Design Process and Principles

- ★ **Our enrollment-active pages focus on essentials**
We ruthlessly pare down material included on our enrollment-active pages to the absolute essentials, to improve ease of navigation on phones and help avoid cluttering mobile layouts. This process is informed by clear criteria we have for which content matters most, and why.
- Our site uses device-appropriate navigation features**
The mobile and desktop versions of our site use navigation features best suited to each, e.g., swiping for mobile devices and hover-based navigation for desktop devices.
- Our approach to website design is multi-device from the outset**
From its very earliest stages, our website design process considers user experience across different device types. It is aware of trade-offs involved in mobile optimization and seeks to strike a balance between what works best on each platform.

Technical Optimization

- The technical buildout of our site follows mobile best practice**
Technical aspects of our site build are in line with generally recognized best practices for mobile optimization, including:
 - Caching
 - Use of a content delivery network (CDN)
 - Image compression
 - Minified code
 - Up-to-date plug-ins, themes, and content management systems

Keep your site distinctive

Responsive design

In the early days of the mobile Internet, mobile optimization was typically accomplished by building two versions of a site—one for desktop devices and one specifically for phones.

The generally accepted standard in contemporary web design is “responsive design,” an approach that aims to make a single website build render equally well on any device.

Converging on sameness

A site’s ability to effectively flex across devices in this way depends on a number of design constraints; for example, content must be stripped down beyond what can be comfortably displayed on a larger screen.

Constraints like these have increasingly led different organizations’ websites to converge on a generic standard—a homogeneity that can undermine your efforts to create a distinctive online experience for your users.

Take the trouble to differentiate

Ensuring that your mobile optimization efforts don’t leave you with a website that looks like everyone else’s requires additional care and attention during the design process. This includes more specifically tailoring how your responsive site renders on different device types.

Number of checked items on this page:



Are You Using Data from Your Website to Improve Student Recruitment?

Website Data Capture and Organization

- ★ **We use Google Tag Manager**
Our team uses Google Tag Manager (or a similar tag-management solution) to improve the trackability of recruitment-related actions students take on our website. This lets us see whether students are following paths to conversion that we are most eager for them to take.

- ★ **We capture website interaction at the level of the individual user**
Our information systems capture data on individuals visiting enrollment-active pages on our website; data on their interaction with our website across successive visits is attached to their record, creating a detailed profile that evolves over time.

- We can connect website data with recruitment-campaign data**
We can connect website-interaction data for prospective students with data for those same students from other recruitment-marketing channels, such as direct-marketing emails, digital ads, and campus visits.

Identifying Prospects

- ★ **We can tell which visitors to our site are prospective students**
We use data and analytics (e.g., pixel tracking) to identify students from our prospect pool among anonymous visitors to our site.

Translating Data into Action

- ★ **Our website data informs our content-creation efforts**
Aggregate data on website-visitor behaviors is used to inform the content we create for our enrollment-active pages; we invest the most time and effort in content that is showing either unusually high or low levels of engagement (capitalizing on the former and troubleshooting the latter).

Why website analytics matter

Two reasons to gather and analyze website data

There are two main reasons you should be gathering and analyzing website data. One, discussed in Self-Test 9 of this report, is that it's the only way you can tell if your website is underperforming. A second reason, addressed in this section, is that the resulting insights can be fed directly back into your recruitment efforts to better engage specific students and your prospect pool as a whole.

Pursuing an increasingly invisible audience

Both types of analyses described above should be considered an indispensable part of your recruitment effort.

The second goal in particular becomes more important with each passing year, as students increasingly rely on self-service information channels—including your website—in their college search. The related fact that at least a third of applicants are now stealth applicants is a compelling reason for you to use website data to learn all you can about your prospect pool.

Number of checked items on this page:



Self-Test 5: Website Analytics (continued)

Translating Data into Action (continued)

- We use website data to refine our approach to particular prospects**
We use website data on particular prospects to refine our recruitment-marketing outreach to them, including admissions counselor interactions.
- We use data to understand how our website influences enrollment**
We can connect data on student website interactions with downstream recruitment outcomes to see which parts of our website play the biggest role in attracting and converting prospects.
- We create customized website experiences**
Our website tailors content shown to individual visitors based on their specific interests and funnel stage (as inferred from data we have gathered on them).
- We use our website data to find latent market potential**
The data we capture on visitors to our website includes location data, and we use that data to help identify geographical markets with untapped recruitment potential.

Tapping latent market potential

Understanding where your audiences are located

One helpful feature of website data is that it can tell you the geographical location of individuals engaging with any given piece of content on your website.

Identifying untapped opportunities

This fact takes on special significance at a time when many schools are forced to look further afield to find new students. Volume of traffic to enrollment-active pages can be analyzed by market, to show you where you might have untapped recruitment potential.

Tapping into larger data sets

This type of analysis becomes that much more powerful to the extent that it can be related to larger data sets spanning other institutions in other parts of the country. Armed with this kind of expanded data, you can assess your ability to draw students from remote markets relative to other schools.

Number of checked items on this page:



Are You Asking Students How You Can Make Your Website Better?

Do We User-Test?

- ★ **We regularly evaluate our website via user testing**
We have key audiences user-test our website's enrollment-active pages at least once per year and whenever major changes to our site are planned.

Scope

- ★ **Our testing focuses on what's most important**
Our testing focuses selectively on aspects of our website we know to have the greatest impact on user experience, including how easy it is to find important information and how engaging the content that presents that information is.
- Our testing is guided by hypotheses**
We use Google Analytics to generate hypotheses about where content or information architecture for our enrollment-active pages might be improved, and those hypotheses inform our user testing.

Audiences

- ★ **Our testing includes parents**
We consider parents of prospective students to be a key audience for our website and therefore involve them extensively in our user testing. The testing we do with them incorporates knowledge regarding how their interests and concerns overlap with and differ from those of students.
- Our testing takes into account demographic differences**
Our testing groups include a representative mix of individuals from different socioeconomic and cultural backgrounds, including first-generation and low-income students.

A no-brainer

Cold feet?

While most enrollment teams understand the importance of user testing, some are reluctant to do it because they think they don't have the necessary expertise, worry that it requires more time than they can spare, or think it calls for specialized tools they don't have.

Practically any testing you do will help

The truth is that you'll likely benefit from any user-testing whatsoever, no matter how limited in scope or informal it is. Efforts as humble as giving a current student some tasks to perform on your site and taking notes on his or her verbal feedback can be extremely enlightening and are certainly far better than nothing.

Number of checked items on this page:



Self-Test 6: User Testing (continued)

Audiences (continued)

Our testing factors in funnel stage

We perform user testing with students at different stages of the recruitment funnel, and the testing prompts we use focus on topics we know to be of greatest interest to students in each stage.

Facilitation

★ We train our facilitators

Our testing is facilitated by individuals who have at least basic familiarity with related best practice, including how to design effective testing prompts.

★ Our testing is versatile

We are flexible and inventive in how we gather user feedback; while we use advanced techniques (e.g., recording website sessions) we also use quicker and easier low-tech approaches (e.g., written notes from conversations with users).

We capture feedback in high-impact formats

The format in which findings from our user testing are recorded include high-impact media such as video (suitable for engaging key website stakeholders, including academic department heads).

Timing and Frequency

★ We treat testing as an ongoing source of insight

While our user testing is most intensive during website redesigns, we do it continuously, across all stages of our website's lifecycle.

A little training goes a long way

While even the most informal user-testing is beneficial, it yields the most helpful results when it is overseen by trained facilitators; even a basic understanding of user-testing best practices can elevate the quality of feedback obtained.

If nothing else, have facilitators read up on the subject. A good place to start is the publication *Don't Make Me Think*, by usability-testing expert Steve Krug.

Some hallmarks of effective testing that they should learn about include:

- Clear goals for what is being assessed
- Well-designed user prompts
- Complete and efficient data capture
- Impactful reporting

Number of checked items on this page:



Behind Every High-Performing Website Is a High-Performing Team

How Excellent Websites Come to Be

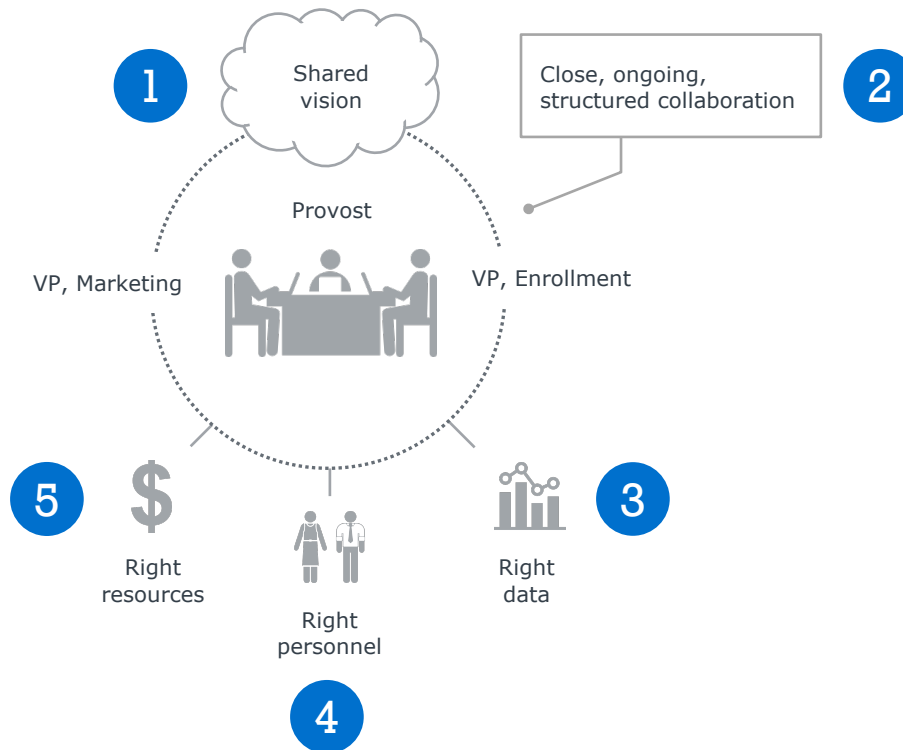
High-performing websites don't happen by accident. At their heart are committed teams of individuals.

It is they who set a compelling vision for the school's site, around which the organization can rally. It is through their efforts that the relevant departments muster the resources required to build and maintain an impactful site. It is they who mobilize and coordinate the many members of the school's community on whom the site's effectiveness depends. And it is they who track and measure the performance of the site to ensure that it is delivering on its potential.

Creating a Solid Foundation

This section looks at steps you should be taking to ensure a maximally effective web team. Specifically, it will help you figure out if you have the right staff, whether you're doing all you can to foster effective collaboration between key departments, whether your technical systems are adequate to the task, and how to tell whether your site is performing as it should.

Five Characteristics of Effective Web Teams



Do You Have the Staff You Need to Ensure Optimal Website Performance?

Institution-Wide Staff

We have full staff coverage for core website capabilities

Our institution has clearly identified personnel responsible for the aspects of website design and maintenance listed below. In cases where multiple individuals are responsible for a single function, their respective purviews and responsibilities are clear.

- Front-end development
- Back-end development
- Content creation
- Content strategy
- Search engine optimization (SEO)
- Website analytics

Enrollment-Team staff

★ **Our enrollment team has the right website expertise**

Our institution can easily and reliably execute the functions listed below in relation to enrollment-active pages on our school's website. If sufficient capacity cannot be secured from institution-level staff, it is provided "locally" by enrollment-team staffers and/or contractors.

- Front-end development
- CRM integration
- Content creation
- Search engine optimization (SEO)
- Content strategy
- Website analytics

How to acquire the necessary capabilities

Web staff can be expensive

Developing the deep expertise required for top-notch website execution requires extensive training and specialization. This means that highly capable web teams can be expensive—enough so that funding dedicated positions will be beyond the means of many enrollment teams.

Borrow when you can

For schools that are large and well-resourced enough to fund such positions at the institution level, and at which the enrollment and marketing teams have close working relationships, enrollment leaders can often "borrow" required capacity from institution-level teams.

Buy when you can't

At schools where such staff positions are lacking at the institution level, or where there are barriers to collaboration between the enrollment and marketing parts of the organization, it may make more sense for enrollment leaders to secure required capabilities by contracting with third parties.

Number of checked items on this page:



Are You Collaborating Effectively Across Departments?

A Shared Frame of Reference

- ★ **Our website has clear goals**
Our school's website has enrollment-specific goals that were developed in partnership with marketing and academic leadership and have been signed-off on by sponsors in senior administration.
- ★ **Our key website stakeholders are in frequent contact**
Marketing, enrollment, and academic leaders meet at least once per month to discuss the website. Enrollment and marketing leaders talk with each other informally about the website at least once per week.
- Our website goals have high relevance for all key stakeholders**
We have a document that frames website goals relative to objectives of the institution as a whole and those of individual departments, including enrollment, marketing, and key academic divisions. This document serves as a common frame of reference for our regular website leadership meetings.
- Our website budget reflects our website goals**
Line items on our website budget map to specific website objectives and, through those objectives, to broader organizational strategic goals, including enrollment goals.

Results-Oriented Collaboration

- ★ **We have a clear decision-making framework**
Our institution has an explicit framework governing editorial oversight for enrollment-active pages on our school's website. This framework describes the roles played by enrollment, marketing, and academic leaders and covers such considerations as who is responsible for soliciting input and making recommendations and who owns the final decision. All key stakeholders are familiar with this framework, and it is used consistently for major decisions impacting the website.

The science of effective decision-making

A recipe for frustration

At many schools, it's not clear what role different stakeholders are meant to play when it comes to editorial oversight of enrollment-active pages on the school's website. This can lead to conflict between stakeholders, thwarting of initiative, and a website that aims to please all parties but does not succeed in serving the needs of any.

A clear division of labor

An explicit framework for decision-making, shared by all involved, can do a lot to avoid these problems. Many approaches of this kind have been developed by management theorists and are widely used by businesses of all descriptions.

To offer just one example, management consulting firm Bain & Company's RAPID® approach is based on clearly identifying individuals responsible for the following aspects of any given decision:

- Offering input
- Making a recommendation based on input gathered
- Agreeing to the proposed course of action
- Making a final decision based on the recommendation
- Performing tasks issuing from the decision

Number of checked items on this page:



Self-Test 8: Organizational Effectiveness (continued)

Results-Oriented Collaboration (continued)

- ★ **Our web team is responsive**
Our enrollment leaders can reliably influence content on enrollment-active pages on the school's website.

- We balance editorial control with agility**
Our institution gives owners of specific portions of the website maximum local control over content creation and updates while also ensuring effective editorial oversight and coordination.

Stakeholder Engagement

- ★ **Enrollment-active content involves stakeholders from the start**
When creating content for enrollment-active pages on our site, we partner closely with key stakeholders (e.g., academic department heads) from the start. They understand what our enrollment leaders want and why (and vice versa).

- The design process for our website is consultative**
Our web team solicited input from the following stakeholders as part of the design process for our institution's website:
 - Enrollment, academic, and marketing leaders and their staff
 - Students—current and prospective, undergraduate, transfer, commuter, and international

- We use evidence to engage academic department heads**
We use data, such as the items listed below, to help secure the cooperation of academic department leaders when making changes to enrollment-active academic-program pages.
 - The percentage of total academic-program-page traffic that comes from the admissions page
 - Benchmarked engagement metrics for academic-program pages, including bounce rate and average time on page
 - Qualitative feedback on academic-program pages gathered from prospective students via user testing and other means

The special case of academic-program pages

Key for recruitment

Information on academic programs, including majors offered, is one of the main things that students and parents look for when visiting school websites. Accordingly, high-performing web teams put a lot of effort into ensuring that academic-program pages are among the best on the school's site.

Conflicting aims

One related challenge is to develop content that is engaging for students but also meets the needs of academic leaders.

Many deans do not naturally think of prospective students as the primary audience for their program homepage; their academic peers or power brokers within the institution are more often top of mind. And the sort of information they're looking to share with those audiences is not often what would get a seventeen-year-old excited about your institution.

Show how you can help

While you're unlikely to ever solve this problem entirely, there's a lot you can do to ensure more effective collaboration with your academic stakeholders. These efforts will be most impactful to the extent that you can show your editorial partners how actions you're proposing will help them meet their goals—including attracting more students to their programs.

Number of checked items on this page:



Do You Know How Your Website is Performing?

Assessing the .edu as a Whole

- We track and report the metrics listed below on a monthly basis**

Traffic Metrics		Engagement Metrics	Technical Metrics
Daily sessions ✓ Total ✓ Unique ✓ % new users	Sources of traffic (<i>% users by channel</i>) ✓ Organic ✓ Social ✓ Email ✓ Display ✓ Direct ✓ Paid search ✓ Referral	✓ Bounce rate ✓ Average pages per session ✓ Average session duration ✓ % returning users ✓ % users retained	✓ Average page-load time ✓ % of pages with critical errors

- Self-benchmarking**
Our monthly reporting on the metrics listed above includes year-on-year comparisons (i.e., current value versus value for the same time period one year ago).
- Peer benchmarking**
Our monthly reporting on the metrics listed above includes comparisons with peer benchmarks.

See the appendix of this report for further guidance on what these metrics mean and how to use them.

Number of checked items on this page:



Self-Test 9: Performance Assessment (continued)

Assessing Enrollment-Active Pages

- ★ **We track and report the metrics listed below on a monthly basis**

Traffic Metrics		Engagement Metrics	Technical Metrics
Daily page views	Sources of traffic (<i>% users by channel</i>)	✓ Bounce rate	✓ Average page-load time
✓ Total	✓ Organic ✓ Social	✓ Average time on page	✓ % of pages with critical errors
✓ Unique	✓ Email ✓ Display	✓ % returning users	
✓ % new users	✓ Direct ✓ Paid search	✓ % users retained	
	✓ Referral	✓ Conversion rate for CTAs ¹	

- ★ **Self-benchmarking**

Our monthly reporting on the metrics listed above includes year-on-year comparisons (i.e., current value versus value for the same time period one year ago).

- Peer benchmarking**

Our monthly reporting on the metrics listed above includes comparisons with peer benchmarks.

See the appendix of this report for further guidance on what these metrics mean and how to use them.

Additional notes on performance assessment for enrollment-active pages

Aggregate versus page-based reporting

The metrics described above may be run for individual pages or for enrollment-active pages in aggregate. The aggregate measure is helpful insofar as it creates a summary measure for your website's enrollment performance. You may wish to additionally run metrics for specific pages that are unusually important for your recruitment efforts (e.g., the main landing page for your most strategically important academic program).

Peer benchmarking: Desirable but difficult

With a few exceptions (e.g., page-load time), the performance metrics listed on this page are not publicly available for other schools' websites, which makes peer benchmarking challenging. One way around this is to participate in data-sharing consortia, e.g., EAB provides detailed comparative data on virtual campus-tour performance to schools with which it partners on that capability.

1. "CTA" stands for "call to action."

Number of checked items on this page:

 ✓

Are your Systems Up to the Task?

Data Connections Across Systems

Our systems talk to each other

We have built out automated data connections between our content management system (CMS) and the other systems we use to gather, store, and analyze data on prospective students, including our customer relationship management (CRM) system. These connections enable us to associate all data on our interactions with a particular student to a single record for that student.

We can flexibly modify connections between our systems

When necessary, we can build out new automated connections between our different website-related data systems or edit existing ones. The cost for us to do so is not prohibitive.

Content Management System (CMS)

Our CMS has built-in content frameworks

Our content management system provides a structured framework for content creation; it constrains the form that new content takes, to help ensure consistency across pages and facilitate repurposing of content.

Hosting Infrastructure

Our hosting approach is a good match with our needs

We have configured our hosting setup (e.g., cloud-based hosting, dedicated-server hosting) to ensure a consistently stable, fast, and responsive website. For example, it can easily scale, using load-balancing or other means, to cope with increases in traffic.

Security

Our website is secured with HTTPS

Our school's website has an SSL certificate, and we have ensured that none of our enrollment-active pages reference non-HTTPS elements.

Two CMS platform options

Open-source versus proprietary systems

The platforms on which content management systems are built fall into two main categories: open-source and proprietary.

"Open source" means that the code on which the system is built can be accessed and modified by a school's own web team or any development partner of their choosing. Examples of widely used open-source systems include Drupal and WordPress.

By contrast, the code on which proprietary systems are built is hidden, in order to protect intellectual property and maintain the integrity of the product.

Which is right for you?

While there's no easy answer when it comes to which approach is best, it is helpful to understand a couple of high-level implications of going either route.

Open-source systems generally allow for more flexibility and transparency, since the source code is accessible to all.

If you go with a proprietary system, you are wedded to that system's developer for the life of your website and will be reliant on that partner for maintenance, modifications, etc.

Number of checked items on this page:



Use This Chart to Tally Your Score

A Category-by-Category Evaluation

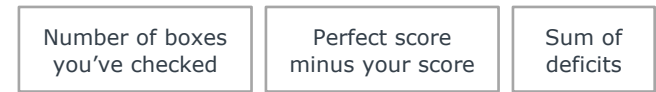
The chart at right provides a structured framework for tallying and interpreting your self-test results.

Use the cells within it to record the number of boxes you were able to check on each page of a self-test—this will give you a score for each page. Then calculate your deficit, which is the perfect score (based on all boxes being checked) minus your score. Next, add up your deficits for each self-test and record the total for each in the “opportunity” column; this will help you identify areas where you have the most room for improvement.

As you put together a plan for tackling these opportunities, keep in mind the starred items within the self-tests, which represent items it makes sense for enrollment teams to prioritize.

A Summary Assessment

You can also use your total score across all the self-tests to generate an overall assessment of your website’s current level of enrollment optimization. See the next page for a legend that will help you interpret your score.



	Page	Perfect score	Your score	Deficit	Opportunity
Self-Test 1: Search-Engine Optimization	15	6			
	16	3			
	17	1			
Self-Test 2: Content	19	6			
	20	6			
	21	5			
	22	6			
	23	2			
Self-Test 3: Information Architecture	24	5			
	25	4			
Self-Test 4: Mobile Optimization	26	5			
	27	4			
Self-Test 5: Website Analytics	28	5			
	29	4			
Self-Test 6: User Testing	30	5			
	31	5			
Self-Test 7: Personnel	33	2			
Self-Test 8: Organizational Effectiveness	34	5			
	35	5			
Self-Test 9: Performance Assessment	36	3			
	37	3			
Self-Test 10: Information Systems Infrastructure	38	5			
Total:					

See next page

A Summary Assessment of Your Website's Enrollment-Optimization

See the "total" cell under the "your score" column in the chart on the preceding page

Your total score	Assessment of your website's enrollment optimization
0 - 35	Transformative potential Your institution has yet to implement many or most of the practices we've found to drive exceptional website performance. You have the opportunity to greatly improve the enrollment effectiveness of your .edu.
36 - 65	Ample opportunity Your institution is functioning at a high level but is missing significant opportunities associated with best practices you've not yet implemented. Significant improvement is likely if/when those practices are implemented.
66-95	Industry-leading performance within reach Your institution is functioning at an unusually high level. Further gains in performance are possible but will require extraordinary levels of focus and innovation to realize.

Appendices

[Appendix 1: Data on Topics of Greatest Interest to Students and Parents](#)

[Appendix 2: Explanations of Website Performance Metrics](#)

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Appendix 1: Data on Topics of Greatest Interest to Students and Parents

Data from EAB Surveys of College-Bound Students and Their Parents

Percentage of Survey Respondents Who Reported Looking for Information on Various Topics When Visiting School Websites¹

Students

Topics Selected by More Than 10% of Students

Majors and minors offered	72%
Financial information	42%
Admissions information	27%
General information about the school	26%
Acceptance rates	14%
Student life on campus	11%

Includes information on scholarships, financial aid, and college cost

Parents

Topics Selected by More Than 10% of Parents

Majors/minors	61%
College costs	48%
General information about the school	26%
Scholarships	22%
Acceptance rates/admission statistics	21%
Campus-visit information	16%
Financial aid	15%
Student life on campus	14%
Athletic programs	11%
Specific classes offered	11%

1. Participants were instructed to select three topics.

Appendix 2: Explanations of Website Performance Metrics

Traffic Metrics

Category	Metric	Definition	Significance
Sessions	Total daily sessions	Total number of visits to your site per day	Year-on-year increase indicates improved website performance. This measure is a helpful adjunct to the unique-sessions statistic (see below)—because it captures repeat visits, it gives an additional indication of the intensity of activity on your site. This metric may be calculated across other time frames as well (weekly, monthly, etc.).
	Unique daily sessions	Total number of different individuals visiting your site per day	Year-on-year increase indicates improved website performance—specifically, success in expanding the audience for your site. This metric may be calculated across other timeframes as well (weekly, monthly, etc.)
	% new users	Percentage of total sessions generated by first-time visitors to your site	High or low numbers can be good, bad, or neutral, depending on context, e.g., a high number could indicate either success in attracting new users or a problem with retaining existing users. This number should therefore be viewed alongside companion statistics that provide necessary context, including the year-on-year trend for unique sessions and percentage of users retained.
Page views	Total daily page views	Total number of times anyone looked at any of a defined set of pages on your site	This statistic can be used to assess the performance of portions of your site, as defined by collections of pages—enrollment-active pages, for example—or your site as a whole. A year-on-year increase indicates improved website performance, especially if that increase is at least as large, proportionally, as the increase in the number of unique page views (see below).
	Unique daily page views	Number of different individuals who looked at any of a defined set of pages on your site	Like total page views, this statistic can be used to assess the performance of portions of your site or the site as a whole. A year-on-year increase in this value indicates improved website performance—specifically, a growth in the size of the audience for the pages in question.

Appendix 2: Explanations of Website Performance Metrics (continued)

Traffic Metrics (continued)

Category	Metric	Definition	Significance
Traffic source	Organic	Percentage of total users coming to your website from search engines	This metric can be used to assess the effectiveness of your SEO efforts, insofar as better SEO results in more organic traffic. Between 30% and 40% of new users make their way to college websites via organic search, making it the single largest source of new audiences for most schools.
	Email	Percentage of total users coming to your website from emails sent by you or others	This metric is most helpful for enrollment teams that make extensive use of email in their recruitment-marketing efforts. For most schools, a small portion of new website traffic originates in emails (approximately 3%).
	Direct	Percentage of total users coming to your website via unspecified means	Google Analytics reports a traffic source as “direct” when data on how a user reached your site is not available. This covers a wide range of possible scenarios, including users clicking on bookmarks, manually entering a URL, linking from non-web documents, and following links shared via untrackable social-media interactions. Direct traffic is typically the second-largest source of new users for college websites (more than a quarter of total).
	Referral	Percentage of total users coming to your site from a link on another website	This metric is not typically given much weight when it comes to college websites, because referral usually accounts for a small portion of overall .edu traffic (around 4%) and is among the more difficult sources to influence.
	Social	Percentage of total users coming to your site from social media	This metric is most important to track for enrollment teams that have made significant investments in social media (including paid advertisements). On average, 7% of new users come to college websites via social media.
	Display	Percentage of total users coming to your site from display advertisements	This metric can help you figure out if your display ads are bringing new users to your site. On average, around 4% of new users come to college websites from display ads.
	Paid search	Percentage of total users coming to your site from sponsored search results	This metric can help you determine whether your investments in paid search are paying off. On average, around 8% of new users come to college websites via paid search.

Note that an increase for one source will necessarily be accompanied by a drop in one or several others, since each source is reported as a percentage of the total. Note also that traffic-source metrics can be calculated for your site as a whole or for portions of your site.

Appendix 2: Explanations of Website Performance Metrics (continued)

Engagement Metrics

Metric	Definition	Significance
Bounce rate	The percentage of users who leave your site without interacting with it	Bounce rate is among the most important engagement metrics to track, because high rates can indicate serious problems with your site. Factors that can lead to high bounce rate include long page-load times and confusing navigation.
Average pages per session	The average number of pages users look at during one visit to your site	This metric is a helpfully broad indicator of how well your site is serving users, reflecting various factors that affect user experience, from ease of navigation to quality of content. Higher numbers indicate better performance.
Average session duration	The average amount of time a user spends on your site during a single visit	Combining this measure with the pages-per-session metric shows you how deeply and broadly users are engaging with a site (e.g., spending a lot of time with a small number of pages or visiting a lot of pages in a shorter amount of time). Higher numbers indicate better performance.
Average time on page	The average amount of time users spend on a specified page	This metric tells you how engaged users are with particular pages on your site. Like the session-duration metric, it can also be combined with the pages-per-session metric to tell you how deep versus broad your user engagement is. Higher numbers indicate better performance.
% returning users	The percentage of individuals visiting your site who have visited it previously	This metric shows how good you are at getting users to come back to your site. Correct interpretation of this metric depends on context, e.g., it may look misleadingly low if you've been very successful in driving new users to your site.
% of users retained	The percentage of individuals who revisit your site across a specified time frame	By way of illustration, an example of the sort of question this metric answers would be "what percentage of visitors to my site this April were also active on the site last April?" This metric is especially helpful in the context of recruitment marketing, since that work aims to engage students across months and years.
Conversion rate for CTAs	The percentage of visitors to your website who click on calls to action	This is among the most important of enrollment-related website statistics, because it tracks actions closely tied to enrollment outcomes—registering for visits, requesting information, etc. This statistic can be calculated using different denominators, e.g., all visitors to your site or individuals visiting particular collections of pages. Which approach is right for you will depend on the design of your recruitment-marketing campaigns.

Appendix 2: Explanations of Website Performance Metrics (continued)

Technical Metrics

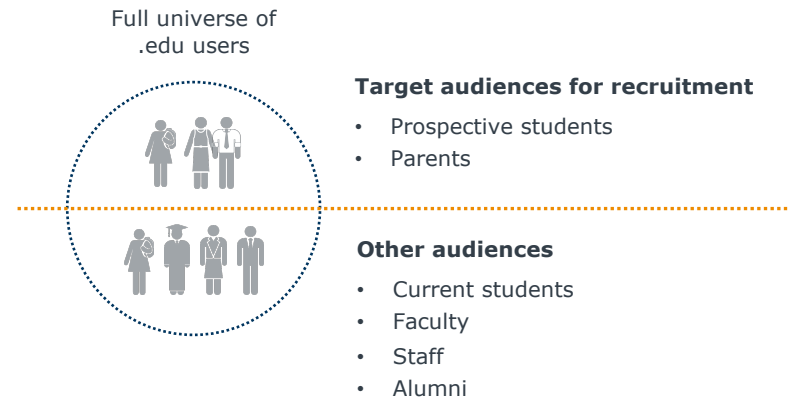
Metric	Definition	Significance
Average page-load time	The average amount of time it takes for pages on your site to fully to load	Average page-load time is a crucial measure of website performance, for several reasons. First, long page-load times will cause you to lose key audiences by increasing your bounce rate—users are extremely intolerant of slow sites. Secondly, average page-load time is one of the parameters used by search-engine ranking algorithms; excessive load time can therefore cause your site to appear lower down in search results. Page-load time can be calculated for your site as a whole, for subsets of pages on your site (e.g., enrollment-active pages), or for individual pages.
% pages with critical errors	The percentage of pages on your site with errors that significantly impact user experience and/or search rank	While there is no industry standard for what constitutes “critical” website errors, it is important for your team to have its own working definition of what falls into that category. Generally speaking, critical errors are ones most likely to put off users and/or negatively impact your search-engine rank. (The two categories overlap significantly.) Examples include broken links, outdated plug-ins, and broken images.

A Note on Audience-Specific Performance Metrics

Many enrollment leaders wonder if it is possible to run website performance metrics specifically for prospective students and their parents (as opposed to current students, faculty, and other users).

There is, unfortunately, no easy way to do that.

This is, however, an additional argument in favor of running performance statistics specifically for enrollment-active pages. Because many of those pages—the admissions page, for example—are being visited mostly by prospective students and parents, measures of how those pages are performing can serve the same purpose as audience-specific cuts that you would like to do but cannot.



Appendix 3: Website Performance Benchmarks

Benchmarks for the School's Website as a Whole

Based on Google Analytics Benchmarks for the Higher-Education Industry Vertical

How active is our site?

		Daily sessions ¹
Institution size (total full-time undergraduate enrollment)	<1,800	<499
	1,800 – 3,000	500-999
	3,001 – 8,000	1,000-4,999
	8,001 - 16,000	5,000-9,999
	> 16,000	>10,000

Where is our traffic coming from?

		All users	New users
Traffic source (% of users)	Organic	38%	34%
	Direct	25%	28%
	Email	3%	3%
	Referral	11%	5%
	Social	5%	7%
	Display	6%	5%
	Paid search	6%	8%

How engaged are our audiences?

			By device type (all traffic)		
	Organic traffic	All traffic	Phone	Tablet	Desktop
Bounce rate	48%	54%	62%	57%	42%
Average pages visited per session	2.59	2.42	2.03	2.21	2.78
Average session duration (min:sec)	2:42	2:30	1:28	2:00	3:17

1. Assumes that website traffic is approximately proportional to school size

Appendix 3: Website Performance Benchmarks (continued)

Benchmarks for the School's Website as a Whole

Based on Google Analytics Benchmarks for the Higher-Education Industry Vertical

Peer Set: <500 Daily Website Sessions

How engaged are our audiences?

How well are we attracting new users?

How well are we retaining users?

Where are our new users coming from?

		Average pages per session	Average session duration (min:sec)	Bounce rate	% new users	% returning users	% of new users by source
Overall		2.15	1:40	59%	65%	35%	NA
By traffic channel	Organic search	2.48	2:11	51%	57%	43%	26%
	Email	1.89	2:09	61%	54%	46%	3%
	Direct	2.14	1:41	61%	71%	29%	26%
	Referral	3.03	2:47	45%	40%	60%	4%
	Social	1.53	0:46	74%	78%	22%	7%
	Other	1.68	0:53	68%	72%	28%	7%
	Display	1.49	0:29	67%	76%	24%	9%
	Paid search	1.90	0:55	65%	75%	25%	9%
By device type	Desktop	2.48	2:10	54%	60%	40%	NA
	Mobile	1.95	1:18	62%	71%	29%	NA
	Tablet	2.25	1:47	55%	65%	35%	NA

Are we making the most of key traffic sources?

How mobile-friendly is our site?

Appendix 3: Website Performance Benchmarks (continued)

Benchmarks for the School's Website as a Whole

Based on Google Analytics Benchmarks for the Higher-Education Industry Vertical

Peer Set: **500-999** Daily Website Sessions

How engaged are our audiences?

How well are we attracting new users?

How well are we retaining users?

Where are our new users coming from?

		Average pages per session	Average session duration (min:sec)	Bounce rate	% new users	% returning users	% of new users by source
Overall		2.19	1:52	58%	59%	41%	NA
By traffic channel	Organic search	2.55	2:23	51%	53%	47%	31%
	Email	2.25	2:00	55%	48%	52%	4%
	Direct	2.09	1:58	56%	65%	35%	29%
	Referral	3.00	3:04	49%	35%	65%	5%
	Social	1.50	0:46	76%	70%	30%	6%
	Other	1.72	1:01	63%	70%	30%	5%
	Display	1.26	0:26	82%	68%	32%	11%
	Paid search	2.02	0:59	61%	71%	29%	9%
By device type	Desktop	2.48	2:30	51%	52%	48%	NA
	Mobile	1.99	1:21	62%	68%	32%	NA
	Tablet	2.16	1:48	60%	60%	40%	NA

Are we making the most of key traffic sources?

How mobile-friendly is our site?

Appendix 3: Website Performance Benchmarks (continued)

Benchmarks for the School's Website as a Whole

Based on Google Analytics Benchmarks for the Higher-Education Industry Vertical

Peer Set: **1,000-4,999** Daily Website Sessions



		Average pages per session	Average session duration (min:sec)	Bounce rate	% new users	% returning users	% of new users by source
Overall		2.55	2:57	52%	50%	50%	NA
By traffic channel	Organic search	2.78	3:03	47%	43%	57%	36%
	Email	1.92	2:49	50%	43%	57%	3%
	Direct	2.55	3:34	53%	57%	43%	30%
	Referral	3.20	4:22	42%	23%	77%	6%
	Social	1.68	1:01	70%	61%	39%	5%
	Other	1.95	1:29	64%	64%	36%	5%
	Display	1.36	0:32	77%	75%	25%	8%
	Paid search	2.31	1:31	55%	64%	36%	7%
By device type	Desktop	2.91	3:55	46%	42%	58%	NA
	Mobile	2.12	1:37	59%	61%	39%	NA
	Tablet	2.30	2:10	56%	55%	45%	NA

Are we making the most of key traffic sources?

How mobile-friendly is our site?

Appendix 3: Website Performance Benchmarks (continued)

Benchmarks for the School's Website as a Whole

Based on Google Analytics Benchmarks for the Higher-Education Industry Vertical

Peer Set: **5,000-9,999** Daily Website Sessions

How engaged are our audiences?

How well are we attracting new users?

How well are we retaining users?

Where are our new users coming from?

		Average pages per session	Average session duration (min:sec)	Bounce rate	% new users	% returning users	% of new users by source
Overall		2.60	3:01	49%	42%	58%	NA
By traffic channel	Organic search	2.66	2:57	47%	39%	61%	41%
	Email	1.81	3:51	36%	26%	74%	2%
	Direct	2.78	3:26	47%	47%	53%	29%
	Referral	3.24	4:11	44%	22%	78%	5%
	Social	1.82	1:34	74%	56%	44%	5%
	Other	1.87	1:33	55%	53%	47%	4%
	Display	1.26	0:43	71%	68%	32%	6%
	Paid search	2.08	1:48	57%	63%	37%	8%
By device type	Desktop	2.94	3:49	43%	33%	67%	NA
	Mobile	2.19	1:41	58%	58%	42%	NA
	Tablet	2.18	2:06	59%	50%	50%	NA

Are we making the most of key traffic sources?

How mobile-friendly is our site?

Appendix 3: Website Performance Benchmarks (continued)

Benchmarks for the School's Website as a Whole

Based on Google Analytics Benchmarks for the Higher-Education Industry Vertical

Peer Set: **10,000 + Daily Website Sessions**

How engaged are our audiences?

How well are we attracting new users?

How well are we retaining users?

Where are our new users coming from?

		Average pages per session	Average session duration (min:sec)	Bounce rate	% new users	% returning users	% of new users by source
Overall		2.63	3:02	52%	39%	61%	NA
By traffic channel	Organic search	2.48	2:58	46%	35%	65%	38%
	Email	1.97	3:14	46%	28%	72%	2%
	Direct	2.06	2:18	54%	47%	53%	28%
	Referral	4.43	5:38	40%	9%	82%	5%
	Social	1.24	0:31	88%	86%	14%	13%
	Other	1.91	2:10	54%	52%	48%	5%
	Display	1.27	0:40	79%	74%	26%	4%
	Paid search	2.86	1:30	65%	67%	33%	5%
By device type	Desktop	3.09	4:00	44%	25%	75%	NA
	Mobile	1.88	1:26	64%	62%	38%	NA
	Tablet	2.17	2:08	58%	52%	48%	NA

Are we making the most of key traffic sources?

How mobile-friendly is our site?



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