
The Promise and the Pathway: Marketing Higher Education to Adults

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Abstract

This study analyzed the content of college and university Web site home pages to determine the frequency of marketing messages that might persuade adult learners to enroll at the institution. The findings suggest that colleges and universities in this study do not have adult-oriented marketing messages and are giving scant attention to the decision-making needs of prospective adult learners on their Web sites. The marketing generally appeals to career prospects rather than helping adults make decisions about their futures. The potential of Web marketing to help adults is not being realized. As a result, Web marketing presents the promise of higher education without helping prospective adult learners take the first steps down the pathway. Suggested Web site message improvements include designing messages that appeal to the needs and interests of adult learners; welcoming adult learners through textual content, visual displays, and ease of access to information; demonstrating how an institution will address adult learners' issues and interests; and convincing prospects that they will achieve their goals by completing their education at the institution.

Introduction

Adult learners, defined as those 24 and older, have been emerging as a significant component of the constituents in higher education and make up nearly half of the participants in formal learning (Creighton & Hudson, 2002; Kazis et al., 2007). While that percentage is encouraging, the United States Employment and Training Administration estimates that 37 million adult learners are interested in postsecondary education but unable to attend because of institutional and situational barriers to enrollment (Kazis et al.). Due to those barriers, adult enrollments in residential institutions of higher education are projected to decline as the first decade of the 21st century closes (Kazis et al.).

Decreased adult participation in higher education may be due in part to economic forces affecting the workplace. Globalization, changing technology, and profitability demands affect the workforce (O'Toole & Lawler, 2006). Although adults are enrolling in short-term vocational certificate-generating programs to improve job possibilities, 60% of the U.S. adult population does not possess a postsecondary credential (Kazis et al., 2007). Enrollments in the near future may not be increasing in higher education residential programs, yet trends suggest that enrollments may increase in more flexible, adult-focused institutions (Maehl, 2000).

Recruiting Adult Learners

Adult learners who decide to further their education must search for an institution that meets their specific needs (Broekemier, 2002; Brown, 2004). Brown found that more than half of the adult learners considering postsecondary programs used Web sites to find information about university programs of study. Kittle and Ciba (2001) found that between 1997 and 2001 recruitment of students by colleges and universities through the use of Web sites increased from 40% to 100%. However, Stokes (2006) suggests that educational institutions have not

adapted recruiting materials to the needs or interests of returning adult learners. Stokes considers the working adult population to be invisible on campus. Even though traditional 18- to 22-year-old full-time students comprise less than 20% of the participants in higher education, recruitment efforts are directed toward them rather than toward adult learners (Stokes, 2006).

Recruitment efforts directed toward adults could focus on their hopes and aspirations. Marketing materials represent an outreach effort on the part of the institution to meet the unspoken and sometimes unrealized needs of the adult learner. Recruitment materials can provoke dreams of what might be possible (Dominice, 2000). Materials can begin the internal and external dialogue on the *why*'s of returning to school, which are sometimes more important than the *how*'s.

Marketing can help adults uncover their motivations for choosing an educational course of study or institution. Adult-oriented materials should help adults raise questions about returning to school that must be addressed before one assumes that the answer to the question is, in fact, to return to school. Brown (2004) notes the ambiguity in the adult and continuing education market as in any other market: "The client has the freedom to choose the product best suited to his or her own needs, which means that he or she will analyze those needs through the filter of the kinds of adult education opportunities offered and the ways they are presented" (p. 107).

How adults make the decision to return to higher education is a complex process involving family, employers, expectations for the future, and a host of other factors (Stein & Wanstreet, 2006). Adult learners typically face multiple issues when deciding to continue their education by attending formal college and university programs. Institutions interested in the adult learner might address in their recruitment materials those issues of most concern to working adult students. The Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (2000) lists principles of effective practices for adult-focused institutions. Practices include using various promotional channels to reach the adult learner at convenient venues, assisting adults to recognize the barriers to enrollments as well as considering the strengths the adult may have as a learner, and helping adults decide on the match between personal goals and the ability of the institution to deliver on those goals. Incorporating those variables in marketing may help adults with their decision-making process and communicate an interest in serving this population.

Web Marketing for Higher Education

Klassen and Sitzman (2000) note that colleges and universities of every size and characteristic have created Web sites to attract prospective students. An institution's Web site is second only to campus visits as the most important source for researching colleges (Schneider, 2004). Yet some schools fail to communicate their brand personalities distinctly (Opoku, Hultman, & Saheli-Sangari, 2008), while others may not be targeting their marketing toward the different groups they hope to attract (Schneider, 2004; Beesley & Cavins, 2002). This results in missed opportunities to establish relationships with learners because they are unable to visualize themselves at a particular institution.

In a study of marketing methods for attracting online learners, Pentina and Neeley (2007) suggest that institutions should offer specialized information about the options available to prospective learners individually. In addition, availability of advisers who are oriented toward working with adult learners is a factor adults will consider when deciding to enroll and select a specific degree-granting program (Stein & Glazer, 2003). Shaik (2005) considers advisers to be part of a recruitment strategy that supplements Web marketing efforts to recruit adult learners because they can help build a long-term relationship.

Brown (2004) suggested that through adult-learner-focused marketing, an institution can create a relationship with the adult learner and begin to shape the decision process by raising questions about the access and availability of learning experiences, the ways in which learners can be creative in completing learning experiences, and even questions that the adult learner has not raised to a conscious level. In that vein, Stewart and Pavlou (2002) suggest that the interactive nature of Web marketing may produce new, unanticipated goals that will drive consumer behavior.

Researchers have just recently begun to study Web marketing for higher education (Adams & Eveland, 2007; Kittle & Ciba, 2001). Kittle and Ciba noted movement over time on the part of colleges and universities to establish relationships with prospective students by taking advantage of the interactive potential of the Web. In their three-year study of home pages of more than 1,300 higher education institutions, schools began using the Web to initiate more contact with prospective students. Such two-way communication can increase mutual understanding and focus an institution's marketing efforts on those whom it identifies as its primary audience (Yeon, Choi, & Kioussis, 2005).

The decision to enroll in higher education is a major commitment requiring high-quality information to facilitate the process. Web marketing that meets or exceeds a potential learner's expectations regarding the institution and the anticipated educational experience adds value to the decision-making process (Razzouk, Seitz, Lamude, & Kapekci, 2005). For example, in the context of predicting enrollment in a workforce development credentialing program, Stein, Trinko and Wanstreet (2007) identified six variables: length of time out of school; possibilities for intellectual, personal, and career opportunities; institutional support; synchronizing learning and earning; reflective learner; and match with an academic reputation. Messages that address those issues would seem to resonate with potential adult learners. In a content analysis of 134 university Web sites, the most common marketing images were intended to convey pictures of "people like you," and the most common messages from online programs related to personal or career success (Adams & Eveland, 2007, p. 73). While those represent two of the factors Stein et al. (2007) identified as important to the decision-making process, other adult-focused messages were ignored on the institutions' Web sites.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to analyze Web site marketing content to ascertain how colleges and universities match their messages to the needs of adult learners. The project is designed to answer the following research question: What are the Web site messages used by colleges and universities that are specifically intended to persuade adult learners to enroll?

Method and Procedure

For purposes of this exploratory study, a quantitative content analysis of Web pages from 24 colleges and universities with a presence in Central Ohio was used to determine frequencies of messages to prospective adult learners. The researchers determined the nine counties to be included in the study as those identified by the Ohio Department of Development as the Central Ohio Region. Using the listings and maps of colleges and universities from the Ohio Board of Regents and the online Yellow Pages, the researchers identified 24 accredited, degree-granting institutions of higher education in Central Ohio. The 24 institutions consisted of four public and 14 independent colleges and universities (as defined by the Ohio Board of Regents) and six others from the online Yellow Pages that were not listed in either category by the Board.

A coding procedure and template were developed and adopted for this study. After training, two coders worked independently. Each coder accessed the home page Web site of each institution included in the study. Each home page Web site of each institution was scanned for references to adult learning, including continuing education, adult education, or comparable references targeting adults. If the home page contained a link to information for adult learners, the coders accessed that link and coded the resulting Web page as the adult education landing page. If the home page contained no reference to adult learners in either text or photographs, the coders conducted a search of the Web site using the home page search facility and the terms *adult*, *adult education*, and *degree completion* in that order. Any landing pages accessed as a result of the search that included information about degree programs were coded as the adult education landing page. Table 1 shows the definitions of the data units used in this study.

Table 1

Data Units

Unit Type	Unit Description
Sampling unit	Home page Adult education landing page
Meaning unit	Statements (include subject (inferred or implied) and predicate) Photographs Headlines (do not have to be statements) Links Slogans
Recording unit	Marketing messages identified on the coding template
Analysis unit	Frequency of marketing messages tailored to adults

Reliability testing on the Web home pages was conducted using Krippendorff's (2004) alpha (α). Interrater reliability among the two coders working independently was $\alpha = .47$. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion with one of the researchers. Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, Koole, and Kappelman (2006) point out that a complex coding scheme, such as was used in this study, may have a negative effect on reliability. They suggest that negotiated coding, in which raters discuss and debate interpretations to determine whether they can come to an agreement, may be useful in exploratory research, such as this study. Another way to potentially increase interrater reliability would be to print copies of all Web pages to reduce inaccuracies resulting from Flash technology that regularly changes the Web page content, as occurred in this study.

Web site messages were analyzed according to the following descriptive categories from Stein and Wanstreet (2006): (a) possibilities for intellectual, personal, and career opportunities; (b) institutional support; (c) synchronizing learning and earning; (d) reflective learner; and (e) match with an academic reputation.

Instrument

Researchers used a coding template developed in Excel Spreadsheet to record, tabulate, and analyze Web site observations of nine message evaluation components. Table 2 shows the descriptive criteria used to identify and evaluate Web site messages in five of the nine components. Other components were evaluated by determining whether adult learners were identified in Web site text and Web site photographs, whether the Web site text connected the idea of learning to feelings, and whether the Web site text identified the likely impact on adult issues as a result of degree completion.

Table 2

Message Categories and Descriptive Criteria

Categories	Descriptive Criteria
Possibilities for intellectual, personal, and career opportunities	<p>I think I will be able to finish the program.</p> <p>Furthering my education suits my image of myself as a professional.</p> <p>My career opportunities will increase.</p> <p>The program will challenge my intellectual ability.</p> <p>I think participation would be personally satisfying.</p> <p>The program will improve my mastery of content.</p> <p>Getting a degree will fulfill a personal obligation.</p> <p>I think I can attend classes regularly.</p> <p>The courses are interesting.</p> <p>The available courses are useful and practical.</p> <p>Even with all of my other commitments to my family, community, and employer, I have the time to devote to this.</p> <p>I enjoy studying.</p>
Institutional support	<p>The amount of time required to finish the course is reasonable.</p> <p>Courses are offered at a convenient location.</p> <p>Other students like me are in the program.</p> <p>The institution has technology support readily available.</p> <p>The process to enroll is relatively easy.</p> <p>The institution has a library with convenient hours.</p> <p>The institution will accommodate special needs I may have.</p>
Synchronizing learning and earning	<p>My employer provides assistance financially and with time off to attend class.</p> <p>My boss, co-workers, and friends encourage my participation.</p>
Reflective learner	<p>I have confidence in my learning abilities and will be successful in school.</p>
Match with an academic reputation	<p>The program will give me a recognizable credential.</p> <p>The credentialing program has a good reputation.</p>

Findings

The analysis of home pages from 24 institutions' Web sites indicated that the most frequent reference to adults was in photographs of adult learners. More than half of the institutions presented photos to which prospective adult learners could ostensibly relate (see Table 3). The most common message in text was related to possibilities for intellectual, personal, and career opportunities (38%). One-third of the institutions sought to attract adults to the text in some way, such as indicating the word *adult* on a link. Nearly 30% of the institutions touted their institutional support.

Institutions generally disregarded the remaining messages that would appeal to prospective adult learners. This includes connecting the idea of learning to feelings, which was in evidence on only four Web sites; providing a match with an academic reputation (three Web sites); identifying the likely impact on adult issues as a result of degree completion (two sites); and synchronizing learning and earning (one site). No messages address the internal, reflective issues adults struggle with; namely, their confidence in learning abilities and successful completion. Most messages conveyed what the institution or the degree would do for the prospective learner and not what the adult would have to do to prepare for academic engagement (Stein & Wanstreet, 2006).

Messages directed to prospective adult learners were primarily cognitive (i.e., information about career opportunities, institutional support, and academic reputation), with little or no use of messages that appealed to emotions or attitudes (e.g., connecting learning to feelings, likely impact of education on adult issues).

Table 3

Nature and Number of Enrollment Messages Targeted to Prospective Adult Learners

Nature of Message	Number of Institutions (N=24)	Percentage of Institutions
Adult learners identified in photographs	14	58
Possibilities for intellectual, personal, and career opportunities	9	38
Adult learners identified in text	8	33
Institutional support	7	29
Text connects the idea of learning to feelings	4	17
Match with an academic reputation	3	13
Text identifies the likely impact on adult issues as a result of degree completion	2	8
Synchronizing learning and earning	1	4
Reflective learner	0	0

The institutions in this study ran the gamut from large residential universities to adult-focused colleges with flexible entry and exit points. Two universities with an online presence in Central Ohio conveyed the highest number of messages (six) designed to appeal to prospective adult learners. Residential institutions, whether large or small, employed few to none. In general, as the number of potential adult-focused messages increased, the number of institutions employing them on their home pages decreased (see Figure 1).

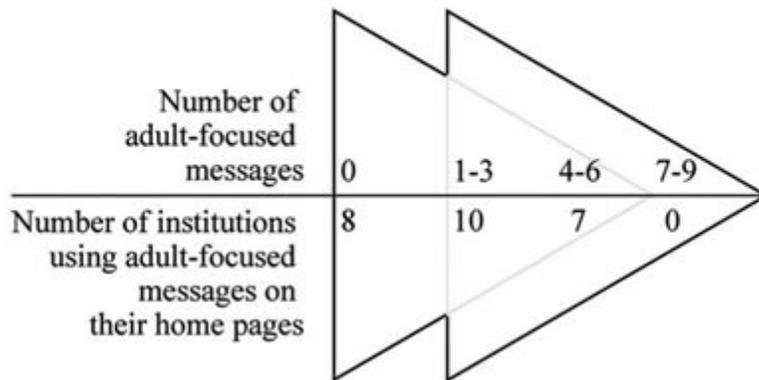


Figure 1. As the number of potential adult-focused messages increased, the number of institutions employing them on their home pages decreased.

Conclusions and Implications for Practice

Broekemier (2002), Brown (2004), and Stein et al. (2007) suggest that adults make decisions about pursuing their educational goals based on their perceptions of the likelihood that their needs will be met and their issues addressed. In spite of a robust literature base, Web marketing materials do not reflect what the research suggests about adult decision-making related to higher education (Stein & Wanstreet, 2006). This study suggests that colleges and universities are giving scant attention to the decision-making needs of prospective adult learners on their Web sites. The marketing generally appeals to career prospects rather than helping adults make decisions about their future. The potential of Web marketing to help adults is not being realized. As a result, Web marketing presents the promise of higher education without helping prospective adult learners take the first steps down the pathway.

Marketing efforts aimed at adult learners should be designed to appeal to their interests by demonstrating a welcoming presence through textual content, visual displays, and ease of access to information that addresses relevant needs and issues. Messages should demonstrate how an institution will address relevant issues and interests, and convince prospects that they will achieve their goals by completing their education at a particular institution.

Cognitive and affective messages should be reflected in Web site marketing to aid prospective learners' decision-making. Specifically, institutions should connect prospective learners with those who are already enrolled so they can discuss how to juggle the demands of learning, earning, and living. Web sites should provide a checklist to assess the prospective learners' readiness to begin an academic program; links to job projections in particular career fields; stories about how current students worked through the decision-making process to enroll successfully; discussion groups around issues such as child care, elder care, and wellness; and chats to discuss how to approach their family and employer about their future plans.

In addition, accessibility of Web site information is essential for adult learners, as for any audience. Information for adult learners should be included on the institution's home page or be easily accessible with a clearly labeled hyperlink. If a prospective adult learner cannot readily locate relevant information needed to help meet her/his goals, then the learner is likely to assume the information does not exist and may decide to search a more adult-focused institution's Web site. Prospective learners who view an institution's Web site should be able to conclude that their needs will be met by the institution.

College and university administrators who wish to compete for the enrollments of adult learners may want to appeal to them in ways that will persuade them that the institution can and will help them achieve their educational goals. In this limited study, institutions continue to recruit students as if the needs of working adult learners are the same as those of 18- to 22-year-olds. This study suggests that institutions can improve the use of their Web sites as marketing tools for adult learners by designing messages that appeal to the needs of adult learners and the issues they face when deciding to invest their time, energy, and money in higher education. In that way, institutions will light the pathway toward the promise of higher education.

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