



Discussions focused on smaller-scale research

The Importance of a Strong Campus Visit: A Practice Brief Outlining Collaboration Between Admissions and Facilities Management

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Over the past several decades, an alarming trend has impacted public universities in the United States. How states fund their public universities has been volatile at best (Delaney and Doyle 2018), but the default has been a continued decline of support (Klein 2015). Consequently, universities have increasingly been dependent on other revenue streams, not least of which is tuition (Boris 2013). When this shift is coupled with a decrease in the number of students graduating from high school (Bransberger, *et al.* 2020; Grawe 2018) and, more recently, the increased questioning of the value of higher education (Salhotra 2022), it creates a chal-

lenging landscape for higher education leaders. Never has it been so important for colleges and universities to think like a business. Strategic thought and action need to be at the forefront of campus decisions so institutions can attract and enroll enough students to meet budget needs.

This landscape sets the stage for the basis of this practice brief. While there are many aspects of recruitment, a positive campus visit experience is one that cannot be overlooked. The campus tour is often the first time prospective students physically interact with campus, and they use it to get a sense of place and

space, and statistics show that students who visit campus are more likely to apply and enroll (Ruffalo Noel Levitz 2019). Providing a positive experience requires commitment from all campus entities. However, disproportionately, the responsibility falls to two areas—admissions/enrollment management, the area that typically coordinates the campus visit, and campus facilities management, the group responsible for landscaping, custodial, buildings, and maintenance. How these entities work together can make or break the overall campus visit experience—and, consequently, will significantly impact an institution’s ability to meet its enrollment goals.

The purpose of this practice brief is to provide a road map of how admissions/enrollment management and facilities management can provide a positive campus visit experience to prospective students and their families. It is based on research outlining the importance of the campus visit and how facilities and the overall physical space can impact student views of an institution. Beyond, it takes an environmental/systems approach to how two areas that are likely not under the same hierarchical reporting lines can work together to achieve an institutional goal.

Importance of the Campus Visit

Visiting campuses is a quintessential part of the college search process for many students and families. So much so, that it has been captured as a right of passage by movies and television shows. For example, *College Road Trip*, a 2008 film, focused on one student as she and her family visit various colleges and universities (College Road Trip 2008). However, the campus visit experience is not simply an activity filled with comedic hijinks, it is an important part of students’ decision-making process.

Despite the influx of technology and the ability for students and families to learn more about institutions instantly via their computers and smart phones, the campus visit continues to play a significant role in students’ decision on where to enroll. This may be because an in-person visit evokes the emotional and psychological component of the decision-making process (Secore 2018). Regardless, the campus tour is both

the most trusted source of information and the most influential piece of “information” that students use in their decision on where to apply and, ultimately, enroll (Pampaloni 2010; Syed and Johnson 2021).

The campus visit experience is not just important to students and their families, it is essential to campuses too. At public, four-year campuses, students who take a campus tour are 64 percent more likely to apply and 50 percent more likely to enroll when compared to the overall population (Ruffalo Noel Levitz 2019). These differences are hard to ignore and reflect why many higher education leaders spend considerable time and other resources focused on how to get students to visit campus.

While these statistics are impactful, simply getting students to step foot on campus is not enough. They also need to have a positive experience during the visit. This includes strong customer service and positive interactions, items typically overseen by the admissions office. However, it does not start—or end—there. The backdrop of any campus visit experience is the campus itself, which is why facilities management needs to be equally involved.

Campus appearance plays a role in the campus visit experience. This includes landscaping, buildings, and interior and exterior upkeep of these facilities, as well as what features these areas include. Research has shown that facilities impact where a student decides to enroll (Andrew, *et al.* 2016; Czekanski and Branhill 2015; Pauline 2010). Even more specifically, campus appearance is a factor that students consider in their college search process, indicating it could be used as a perception of the quality of the institution (Eckert 2012). Perhaps this is because of the emotional response that the physical environment can invoke.

We understand that their [sic] is a “head” part of the decision and a “heart” part of the decision and that it is very much about a “feeling” they get when on campus. Many decisions are made on the look and feel of a campus before the prospective student even meets a college official or any student ambassadors. (Secore 2019, 34)

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When someone asks students what made them choose the college they selected, it is not uncommon for the response to be along the lines of, “When I visited campus, I just knew; it felt right.” Although vague, such statements support that students are looking for a sense of belonging (Secore 2018). This is true of all students, but can be especially important to students of color or those who identify with other marginalized populations. Museus, *et al.* (2020) acknowledge the importance of safe and validating campus spaces as a way to engage students from underrepresented racial and ethnic backgrounds. Students from marginalized populations need to know that they will be welcome and supported on campus, and campus spaces that allow them to be themselves and that celebrate their backgrounds and culture is one aspect of creating this environment. When included as a part of a campus tour, having and highlighting those facilities and spaces could be the item that starts that feeling of belonging.

For many reasons, the campus tour is an important part of the college selection process, and campus leaders would be astute to ensure the visit experience is positive and, ideally, exceeds prospective student expectations. This will require many areas of campus to work together. While not isolated, two of the primary departments that need to be committed to the quality of the tour are admissions/enrollment management and facilities management.

Environmental/Systems Framework

Using an environmental lens can provide additional insight, depth, and understanding on how admissions/enrollment management, facilities management, and other departments can work together to craft a strong campus visit experience. According to Gonzales, *et al.* (2018), the environmental perspective views organizations as they are situated within larger networks of entities and stakeholders. In turn, an environmental framework provides insight into the complex external economic, social, and cultural conditions and their impact on an organization’s form and goals. Higher education institutions need to maintain or develop a distinct image to create a competitive advantage in an increasingly competitive market (Ivy

2001). It is important to consider the history of the university, the context of the community in which it resides, and other external influences (*e.g.*, competitor campuses and demographic trends) to better address the needs for success.

A university is a complex organization that lives and grows within a community that reaches far beyond its own campus. To maximize efforts toward creating a strong campus visit experience for prospective students and their families, it is important to consider all the stakeholders involved in the process and its environment. Hendrickson, *et al.* (2013) suggests that the environment is generally composed of the actors, organizations, and other entities an organization interacts with to survive and accomplish its goals. It is within this context that we must try to understand how each organization is part of an overall system and is influenced by its surroundings and environment.

Hendrickson, *et al.* (2013) explain that one cannot fully understand an organization without also recognizing the environment in which it operates. For most campuses, admissions/enrollment management is responsible for organizing and executing campus tours for the university. According to Hendrickson, *et al.*, for colleges and universities, the environment significantly affects how they operate and how and where resources are obtained and will have an impact on the ways the organization structures itself.

Planning for campus visits will ultimately require prospective students (and, usually, their families) to have a face-to-face event held on the campus of the host university. The campus itself will be the center of attention for the campus visit experience, coupled with the ‘faces’ of the university providing the tour. Hendrickson, *et al.* (2013) explain that no organization is self-sufficient; all depend on the types of relations they establish with the larger systems of which they are part for survival. A successful goal for coordinating a successful campus visit would involve an effective program, beautiful campus grounds, impressive campus building spaces, and a flawless process throughout the visit experience. For example, there are three building types that are important and influence prospective students’ decision-making process:

academic-oriented facilities, residence halls, and open space physical environments (Reynolds 2007).

Many different departments are involved with campus visits; however, for this brief, the focus is on admissions/enrollment management and facilities management. Often, these two departments do not reside under the same leadership; however, it is necessary for them to work together to accomplish the goal. To ensure a successful outcome, a strategic planning approach that collaborates with various campus constituents is necessary. Awareness of priorities and goals of campus visits will inform how to better plan campus infrastructure and spaces, with consideration of how operations (maintenance/custodial/landscape) can interface and support a successful collaborative process and partnership.

Beyond the individual institution, each campus is also a part of a larger system of higher education and the college search process for prospective students. It is important that the university understands the external environment in which it resides. According to Gonzales, *et al.* (2018), internal work is influenced by external conditions and forces, and organizations are part of a wider environment that influences the organization. Students often visit more than one campus and will compare their experiences and what they see at each location. Impressions and images are shared from word of mouth, experiences, and marketing activities of the institutions (Ivy 2001). These experiences may also be shared between friends (with prospective students and families) through means of networks and social media. Universities need to be informed and understand what other universities are doing and have knowledge of other campus environments to better compete and prepare their own campuses.

With declining demographics, it is important that admissions/enrollment management and facilities management are aware of what other campuses are doing in order to stay competitive and relevant. For example, are other campuses building new facilities or investing in campus beautification projects that exceed or compete with your own campus? Being aware of the environment can inform how and where to place institutional priorities to stay competitive in the marketplace.

To assist the environmental/systems framework, it is critical for the organization to be mission driven. Hendrickson, *et al.* (2013) share that colleges and universities that use their mission and values to drive decisions have a greater likelihood of success. Considering the external environment and landscape, the university should have a distinctive mission that refers to the values, purpose, philosophy, and educational aspirations that distinguishes it from others (Hendrickson, *et al.* 2013). When developing strategic plans that align with the university mission, leaders must scan the external landscape as well as the internal workings of their institution to ensure that the future direction of their institution will be in alignment with its core values (Hendrickson, *et al.* 2013).

Admissions/enrollment management and facilities management engaging in shared governance will advance working relationships toward a common goal. For example, developing a campus master plan with the campus visit in mind allows for special and unique features to be incorporated and dedicated for the purpose of welcoming prospective students. Additionally, scheduling and planning tours around construction zones can be avoided, and special cleaning teams can be dedicated to tour routes in preparation of the tour times.

Collaborative strategic planning can significantly inform future campus projects to help support the campus visit outcome. According to Chaffee (1985), an organization is expected to continually assess external and internal conditions, which lead to adjustments in the organization to its relevant environment creating opportunities and risks on one hand, and organizational capabilities and resources on the other. With diminishing public funding from the local, state and federal level, university budgets are dominated by non-public monies and by savings (Boris 2013), and success is often measured by student recruitment and retention.

Ensuring admissions/enrollment management and facilities management are well prepared and partnering strategically will help strengthen the campus visit experience and lead to positive outcomes. Higher educational institutions, like any other organizations, are realizing the significance of customers in their strategic decision-making process (Sapri, *et al.* 2009).

Figure 1

Sample Campus Visit Experience Working Group



Research indicates a positive association between the built environment (*e.g.*, buildings, landscaping, and the upkeep of those items) and students’ campus tours, with institutional characteristics and facilities having a direct correlation with a student’s decision, both initially and after enrollment (Reynolds 2007).

Recommendations

Given the importance of the campus visit experience and the recognition of and knowledge about the environmental framework, it is obvious that admissions/enrollment management and facilities management need to work together within both internal and external systems. There are many ways for this to occur. However, the initial recommendation is to establish a committee or working group that consists of people from admissions/enrollment management, facilities management, and other departments who are key stakeholders in the planning and execution of a successful campus visit experience. Beyond admissions/enrollment management and facilities management team members, likely colleagues to include would represent

marketing, parking services, academic colleges, technology, and housing and dining, among others.

When thinking about the makeup of the committee, it would be natural to turn to departmental leadership. However, while leadership may know what needs to be done, they are unlikely to be familiar with the limitations and roadblocks that are encountered on a day-to-day basis. It is important for this group to consist of people who are most acquainted with the work—those on the front line. This is a recommendation provided by Kotter (2014) in his book *Accelerate*, which focuses on how to effectively lead change within an organization. Kotter recommends having leadership provide the “charge” for the group (in this case, a best-in-show campus visit experience that aligns with institutional mission and vision) and then empowering the group to develop the processes, with routine reports back to leadership. In turn, leadership is responsible for helping to remove barriers to ensure the plan can come to fruition. An adaptation of the *Accelerate* model created for this specific situation is provided in Figure 1.

The recommended model includes people from many areas around campus who support the campus visit experience and process. However, the model also recognizes that admissions/enrollment management and facilities management are the primary players in how prospective students and their families experience campus during their visit. Consequently, admissions/enrollment management and facilities management would have multiple members on the committee. The intent is to ensure proper representation of the various sub-areas within those departments that play a role in the campus visit experience. From facilities management, that includes landscaping, maintenance, custodial, and design/build, the area that is responsible for building renovations and new construction. Admissions/enrollment management would have members who oversee the logistics of the campus visit and overall recruitment, as well as tour guides, who are typically currently-enrolled students. While this gives facilities management and admissions/enrollment management larger representation within the group, it is not disproportionate. Rather, this model recognizes these areas carry the most weight in how prospective students experience campus during their visit.

Ultimately, this approach recognizes the various entities that make up the “system” that is the campus visit experience. It encourages discussion about how adjustments to one part of the campus tour may impact other parts of the system and, when those impacts are not reasonable, it permits discourse on alternatives. The approach also permits people to have ownership of evolving the campus tour and, in turn, take the ideas and decisions back to their department and to other colleagues. Effectively, those on the committee become champions and cheerleaders for the campus visit experience.

Work Group Tasks

Once the group is established and senior leadership has given them the charge, the first initiative for the committee would be to evaluate the current tour. This assessment should include both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Determine application, admission,

and enrollment rates of prospective students who take a campus tour. Consider survey data provided by campus tour guests, including perspective on campus facilities and appearance. When possible, compare all of this to national benchmarks and best practices. Additionally, conduct an informal qualitative analysis from the represented departments to identify what is working well and where pain points with the current visit experience occur. This will establish a common understanding among committee members and a baseline for future assessment.

Once that foundation is established, the work group can begin crafting an improved campus visit experience. It is important to note that while this would be done as an initial procedure, an effective campus visit experience is an iterative process. It constantly needs to be evaluated and adjusted as campus, students, and the outside environment change and evolve. For this reason, the remaining recommendations are not provided as steps to follow in a precise order. Instead, the items are parts of an ensemble, with some aspects of the collection being more or less visible at different times of the process.

Tour Route

Given the importance of campus facilities and appearance in students’ college decision process, it is important to have visitors navigate the best possible path as they experience campus. Starting from which entrance they use to drive onto campus, consider all items on the tour route, and make sure they are well maintained, are welcoming, and provide the best backdrop possible. This includes guest parking, the presentation room and space, and tour route path and stops. Plan tour routes to avoid eyesores such as loading docks and dumpsters, and landscape and maintain the route. Select buildings to provide talking points that support the university mission, highlight unique or desirable features, and consider guest needs (*e.g.*, mobility, sense of belonging, etc.). Once the tour route is identified, walk it daily using a critical lens. This would be a key role for facilities management, who are best positioned to immediately respond to maintenance, cleanliness, or landscaping needs.

Identify Areas of Strength and Improvement

Of course, part of developing the tour route will result in highlighting areas that are campus strengths and avoiding areas that need improvement. However, there may be areas that need to or should be included on a tour that are less than ideal. Acknowledge and make note of these items, as they likely will become the project list for maintenance, renovations, and other improvements. The committee can help prioritize these items and, if needed, adjust the tour route while the projects are being completed.

Design with the Campus Tour in Mind

While buildings and spaces are built for current students and other campus community members, that does not mean prospective students and visitors should not be considered in the build or renovation processes. The committee can help identify features within spaces that can enhance the campus visit experience. For example, RNL + Render, a campus visit consulting firm, encourages the use of “wallestate” around campus (Kallay and Joyce 2020). In short, wallestate refers to the use of displays both inside and outside of buildings that help tell the institutional story. Student and alumni spotlights, campus accolades, and student resources and activities are common items that can be shared. However, equally important to what is shared, is where it is located. It needs to be in a prominent spot that can serve as a stop on the tour route. This means it needs to be positioned so it makes sense for the overall tour route while also providing room for a group to stop and be out of the way of traffic flow.

Beyond wallestate, consider how to design spaces to promote campus activity and a sense of belonging. This allows prospective students to get a sense of campus life. Whether a student center, place where students hang out, or affinity space such as those commonly provided for LGBTQIA+, multicultural affairs, or first-generation-in-college populations, placing those resources so that they can be included in the campus tour is important for the overall institutional message and so students from those populations (and their allies) know they will be welcomed and supported.

Measure and Evaluate

While it is important for the campus visit workgroup to start with evaluating campus tour effectiveness, evaluation does not start and end there. Evaluation must be a continuous process to prevent campus complacency and to ensure the campus visit continues to provide guests with a positive tour experience. The committee should work together to develop a post-visit survey to capture guest thoughts about the overall experience and items that support the institutional mission and brand. For example, a survey could have an item that asks “which three words would you use to describe ‘X’ campus?” Ideally, the results would show that guests leave with the exact message you want them to know; if the survey indicates otherwise, then the committee knows attention needs to be spent on how to reinforce the institutional brand.

Other forms of evaluation are more qualitative. First, committee members can tour other campuses, especially those of major competitors. This is a way to recognize the larger environment and how the external system may impact their own campus visit outcomes. If a competitor’s campus is more attractive, has desirable features, or is promoting a message that you cannot match or surpass, that knowledge can inform decisions made by the workgroup.

Qualitative evaluation can also come via focus groups with prospective students and their families. This is a way to gain broader and deeper understanding of how a campus visit experience is resonating with prospective students. For example, if a survey item indicates something is concerning, a focus group could provide more understanding of why visitors are answering the survey the way they are. Additionally, a focus group may also be used to generate ideas. Perhaps there are campus amenities that students want and they are not finding on campus—or elsewhere. This could become an opportunity to create something that provides a competitive advantage.

Conclusion

Constructing and executing a strong campus visit experience is not a small endeavor. However, given the importance of the campus visit to both students

and institutions, it is a necessary one. Colleges and universities will benefit from using an environmental/systems approach when developing the visit experience. Recognizing that admissions/enrollment management and facilities management are primary stakeholders and including other key departments will ensure that prospective students and their families have a positive visit experience. The goal is to provide visitors with a thorough understanding of what makes the institution unique and that the student will be welcomed and supported.

The purpose of this practice brief is to outline how typically unrelated departments can work together to achieve this goal. It provides an overall approach to structuring the collaboration as well as specific items that should be considered and addressed. Only through collaborative efforts will campuses provide visitors with a strong and positive campus visit experience, which is imperative if an institution wants to mitigate the risk of decreased enrollment and/or grow their market share amongst competitors.

EDITOR'S NOTE

College and University welcomes articles from practitioners who implement these recommended practices and would like to share about what they did, the process they followed, and their results.

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