STARTLING ADMISSIONS

WHEN IT COMES TO ATTRACTING STUDENTS, COLLEGES ARE SPOTLIGHTING FAR MORE THAN ACADEMICS

The undergraduate admissions page on the Web site of Saint Michael’s College in Colchester, Vt., features the usual assortment of information important to would-be freshmen: academics, financial aid, details on how to arrange a campus tour and apply to the school. Scroll down a bit further and you’ll find something else — a picture of four undergrads decked out in ski gear and snowboards promoting the college’s Ski & Ride Program. Through the wildly popular program, launched two years ago, all of Saint Michael’s 1,900 students

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOHN KRAUSE
receive a free season pass to Smugglers’ Notch, a ski resort 50 miles from campus. The school even throws in free bus rides to “Smuggs” on weekends. “It has tremendous marketing appeal,” says Anne Conaway Peters, director of marketing at Saint Michael’s. “We make sure all our prospective students know about it.”

Welcome to college recruiting in the 21st century. Gone are the days when a university could lure high-caliber students solely on the strength of its academic programs and low faculty-to-student ratio. Today, colleges around the country are heavily promoting other aspects of campus life to attract top prospects. And in many cases, they’re adopting sophisticated marketing tactics to do so. “The business of college admissions has changed so rapidly,” says Conaway Peters. “Today we’re marketing to students like the for-profit world does.”

You don’t need an advanced degree to understand what’s driving the trend. Roughly 17 million students currently attend about 4,200 colleges and universities in the United States, according to the Department of Education (DOE). By 2014, enrollment is expected to climb to 19.5 million. In theory, that would suggest colleges could market themselves less aggressively because they’ll have a wider talent pool to choose from. But according to Chris Muñoz, vice provost for undergraduate enrollment at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, that growth in enrollment will be fueled by a higher proportion of college hopefuls graduating from high school with less academic preparation than previous generations. That’s going to quicken the chase for the best and the brightest, who are becoming increasingly astute buyers of higher education.

With tuition and room and board at a four-year private university averaging nearly $33,000 a year, according to the DOE, today’s students — and their parents footing the bill — are expecting more than simply an engaging learning environment. “Colleges are selling the complete experience,” says John Maguire, chairman of Maguire Associates, a research-based higher-education consulting firm in Bedford, Mass. “It’s not enough to have academic challenges. Now the marketing includes the social life, the athletic complexes, the suites in the dorms.”

Or, in the case of Rice University, the free rides on Houston’s public transportation system. Rice’s Metro U. Pass, introduced last year, lets students ride the city’s light-rail trains and buses for free throughout the academic year. It’s part of the school’s Passport to Houston program, which also includes free admission to local cultural attractions like the Museum of Fine Arts and the Houston Zoo, as well as $10 discount tickets to Houston Grand Opera. The Passport program fits the needs of today’s student, says Julie Browning, dean of undergraduate enrollment at Rice. “Their expectations of a social life go way beyond the parties and sporting events on campus,” she says. “They want to shop, they want to eat ethnic foods, they want the diverse experiences of living in a major metro area.”

Other large schools try to promote an intimate, everyone-knows-your-name feel to interest students. Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, for instance, boasts more than 30,000 students, but undergrads in the school’s five Residential College programs might hardly know it. Each college centers around a different theme, from information technology to public policy issues facing Louisiana. Students in the programs live together in LSU housing,
take classes together, and share common interests." It makes a large research institution feel smaller," says Robin Kistler, senior marketing strategist with LSU’s Office of Public Affairs. "The kids love it. They make friends instantly."

To get its message across, LSU will mail some 30,000 promotional DVDs about the school to prospective students this year. In fact, the age-old tradition of admissions counselors manning a booth at a high school’s "college night" is quickly being supplanted by more high-tech communications. Nearly half of students today get information about colleges from the Internet, according to a study by GDA Integrated Services, a marketing research and consulting firm that serves universities. And they’re not just reading the course catalog. College admissions sites now feature blogs written by current students, message boards where prospective students (and their parents) can post questions to each other and college staff, and instant messaging, so teens can talk to an admissions counselor whenever the mood strikes.

Case Western Reserve’s Muñoz has witnessed the effects of online marketing firsthand. Last year, more than 9,400 would-be students registered on Case’s admissions Web site, nearly double the number for 2004. Teens who registered could personalize the Web site by answering questions about their interests, "chat" live online with admissions counselors, and even create a customized itinerary for a campus visit. Half the registered students applied to the 2005 fall freshman class, and of those who were accepted, 29 percent enrolled (compared with an overall enrollment rate of 24 percent). "Once you pay for the technology and the content, the Web site is one of the lowest costs in student recruitment," Muñoz says. "Plus, we’re speaking to our market in a way they’re accustomed to."

In today’s competitive landscape, it’s not enough to focus on filling next year’s incoming class. Universities are looking for ways to prime the applicant pool for years to come. Some are sending out brochures to high school freshmen and sophomores. Others are boosting their profile in the local community. The University of St. Thomas, for instance, spends $100,000 a year to advertise itself on billboards along major Houston highways. A marketing study recently found that awareness of the school has grown considerably, with 25 percent of those surveyed citing the billboards as their source for information. "We wanted to get rid of the best-kept-secret syndrome and become known as the school that we are," says H. Ken DeDominicis, vice president for institutional advancement.

To that end, St. Thomas also actively encourages public use of its campus, located in the heart of Houston’s museum district. Local corporations are invited to use the school’s facilities for lunch meetings, and it’s not uncommon, DeDominicis says, to find young mothers pushing strollers through the Philip Johnson–designed campus. Will those babies grow up to be St. Thomas students? DeDominicis laughs, then adds, "Maybe I should give them some school pins to wear."

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