

SECRET SHOPPING SENIOR COMM FLOWS

SPRING 2025

What's inside?

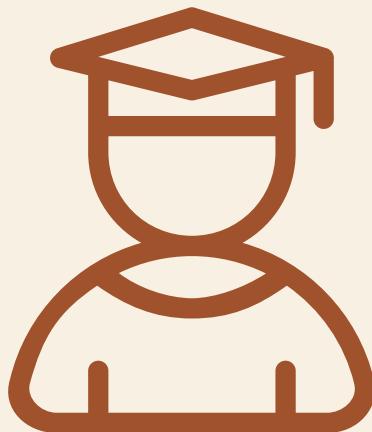
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College selection and our student

Our student is a senior who is just hitting the search in spring. Because it's spring, he expects quick responses, and he feels the rush. He has a 3.5 GPA, is interested in business and art, study abroad, is the first in his family to attend college, and wants to get the most out of the campus experience.

Because the search started at the beginning of February, only colleges still accepting applications were selected. Colleges were selected based on location (in-state, adjacent state, and national) and their type (4-year private, 4-year public flagship, 4-year regional public, community college, or online).



Admissions comm flow benchmarks

There are a lot of ways to look at the comm flow data as a way to benchmark your own work. Below you'll find analysis by the channel, timing, type of institution, location, and selectivity. Some high-level results from responding colleges can be useful:

Median inquiry form length	12 fields
Median comm flow length	78 days
Median first response timing	Within 24 hours
Median touchpoints	18
Median relevant touchpoints	3



Channel breakdown

How did the student receive the touchpoints? As you might guess, email was by far the most common channel.

- Email - 85%
- Phone call - 7%
- Text - 6%
- Postcard - 1%
- Viewbook - 0.7%
- Letter - 0.2%
- Trifold - 0.1%

All but six colleges led with an email as their first non-autoresponder touchpoint, and all six were online colleges. Three colleges asked for preferred contact methods, which gave me hope. Unfortunately, one never responded. Another sent three emails and three postcards in response to my preference for emails. The last sent 20 emails, a postcard, a viewbook, 15 text messages, and called 7 times.



Comparisons by type of college

First, let's look at who was shopped and responded:

4-year public flagship colleges:

10 shopped
9 had inquiry forms
8 responded

4-year regional public colleges:

10 shopped
6 had inquiry forms
6 responded

4-year private colleges:

25 shopped
24 had inquiry forms
19 responded

Community colleges:

11 shopped
7 had inquiry forms
6 responded

Online colleges:

9 shopped
9 had inquiry forms
8 responded



Comparisons by type of college

Regional public colleges and community colleges have an immediate opportunity for improvement just by ensuring that they have a way for prospective students to ask for more information and to do so easily. Ensuring a form is set up and tied to your CRM, or at least is routed to someone who can respond, is a first step. Then, provide touchpoints that speak to the most important things: intended major(s), financial aid, student life, and other interests they indicate.

Public universities were divided by their approach to their comm flows. Regionals sent two-thirds more touchpoints as their flagship counterparts — 15 versus 9. Flagship's most common messages were encouraging a visit (25%), generic lists of info (15%), and academics (13%) while regionals were most likely to send "Apply now" touchpoints (40%), encouraging a visit (25%), or student life emails (5%). Only one of each type addressed either of the intended majors — the most important thing students care about. Only one flagship used print outreach, and two used text messaging; all other communications were through email. Regional public institutions were even more uniform in their delivery; one used a text message, and all the remaining 118 touchpoints were emails.



Comparisons by type of college

Private 4-year colleges were a head-scratcher. While all but one had an inquiry form, only 19 of 24 responded, and only 16 responded beyond a triggered autoresponse. That means that less than two-thirds had any meaningful comm flow for inquiries — students who asked for more information and signaled interest. They sent a median of 18 touchpoints, but one made 89 outreach attempts in 90 days. Print outreach was used by six institutions, texting by four, and three made phone calls.

Every online college had an inquiry form, and all but one responded to the inquiry. The volume of outreach far exceeded any other institution type, with the average online college reaching out 25 times. The intended major and financial aid were both covered by five of the colleges, and outcomes and alumni stories were common talking points. Five of them called an average of eight times each, and four texted as well. Comm flows were not prepared for high school students, as most included touchpoints discussing transferring credits and adult learner information.



Comm flow timing

The time to first response was within 24 hours for 89% of the responding colleges. It rose to 94% for the first 48 hours, and all but one college responded within a week. The delay was likely because they handed off my inquiry to one of their satellite campuses and never responded themselves. The slow responders crossed all five institutional types, revealing no trend in responsiveness.

Of the 47 responding colleges, only 42 sent more information than an automatic response. Of those 42, here are the lengths of their spring comm flows:

Less than 1 month - 8 (19%)
1-2 months - 3 (7%)
2-3 months - 20 (48%)
Ongoing (3+ months) - 11 (26%)

You should check your own results, but an inquiry typically converts within 60 days or not at all. Almost three-quarters of the comm flows were longer than 60 days in this project, and 11 are still sending emails, texting, and calling.



Comm flow timing

Public flagships had a median comm flow of 26 days, community colleges 44 days, private colleges a lengthy 79 days, regional publics only slightly longer at 80 days, and online colleges were the longest, with a median of 84 days, and almost half are still reaching out.

Comm flows tended to be front-loaded — colleges sent 5 touchpoints in the first week (28% of the total) and 12 in the first month (67% of the total). Three colleges, two online and one private, averaged twice daily for the first week. Another college sent 45 of its 89 touchpoints in the first month. None of these four colleges led with personalized and relevant content.



Comparisons by location relative to the student

Location matters in recruitment. Students' informational needs and barriers differ based on how far away they are from a campus. A student who lives nearby will need different information than one further away, one who would certainly need more information about the local area and the community. The community can be a real asset — or a source of anxiety — for students and parents alike, and should be addressed, especially for those who may never be able to visit.

In-state

7 of 9 with an inquiry form responded
37 touchpoints
2 sent information about the local area

Adjacent state

17 of 19 with an inquiry form responded
3 only responded with an autoresponder
14 touchpoints
3 sent information about the local area

National

15 of 18 with an inquiry form responded
3 only responded with an autoresponder
10 touchpoints
1 sent information about the local area



Comparisons by selectivity

Assumptions about selectivity and how that relates to recruitment efforts abound. All selected colleges were still accepting applicants, yet only one college with an acceptance rate below 50% bothered responding to the inquiry. The best comm flows were sent by colleges with a 50-70% acceptance rate. Every college that responded sent personalized and relevant information, comprising 25% of all touchpoints, and they were the least likely to send repeated messages solely to tell the student to apply or visit.

On the other hand, only 18% of touchpoints from colleges with 71-90% acceptance were relevant to the student, and 45% were only application and visit pushes. In fact, 7 of the 19 colleges used more than $\frac{2}{3}$ of their touchpoints just for application and visit messaging. Only 8 colleges sent personalized and relevant information to students at all.



Comparisons by selectivity

<50% acceptance

- 5 colleges
- 4 had an inquiry form
- 4 responded
- 1 communicated beyond an autoresponder

50-70% acceptance

- 10 colleges
- 8 had an inquiry form
- 8 responded
- 17 touchpoints on average

71-90% acceptance

- 25 colleges
- 23 had an inquiry form
- 19 responded
- 23 touchpoints on average

91-100% acceptance

- 21 colleges
- 16 had an inquiry form
- 12 responded
- 13 touchpoints on average



Marketing the 4 Ps

When you're building your comm flow, all of your outreach can fall into one of four categories — three positive and one negative. Your touchpoints can be Promotional, Process, Personalized and Relevant, or (unfortunately) Pointless.

Promotional

Process

Personalized and Relevant

Pointless



Marketing the 4 Ps

Promotional messages highlight something; they're your basic sales touchpoints. Ideally, they are heavy on value and proof points, but the goal is to share something you want the recipient to learn and remember.

Process touchpoints are the steps students must take to enroll, as well as the steps you want them to take. Processes need to be addressed, but it's always helpful to do so in a way that shares what benefit the student will see and connects it to their interests and other information you have.

Personalized and Relevant messages must address the key criteria and sticking points that students face. These are the most important types of messages and the best marketing work you can do.

Pointless messages should be avoided like the plague, much like clichés. Sending information that isn't meaningful or helpful in any way doesn't add value or proof points, or otherwise just sends a message for the sake of doing so is a pointless message.



Marketing the 4 Ps

Inquiries, for whom you have a great deal of information and have asked to learn more, deserve a heavy hand of Personalized and Relevant outreach. Ideally, your senior inquiry comm flow might break down something like this: 40-50% Personalized and Relevant, 30-40% Promotional, and 20-30% Process messages. In spring, when deadlines are tighter, I can certainly make an argument for going more into expressing urgency for deadlines while also providing the relevant information needed to decide to apply.

Here is how the breakdown looked in reality:

45% Process
20% Personalized and Relevant
19% Promotional
16% Pointless

The comm flows were very heavy on process messages. Over a quarter of touchpoints were encouraging an application, and 13% were about visit events. Another 6% encouraged virtual event attendance. All of these could have been paired with information about majors, outcomes, or student life to help entice the recipient to take the action.



Marketing the 4 Ps

The breakdown looked slightly different based on the type of institution as well:

4-year public flagship colleges:

35% Process
25% Promotional
21% Personalized and Relevant
19% Pointless

4-year regional public colleges:

66% Process
15% Personalized and Relevant
11% Promotional
8% Pointless

4-year private colleges:

41% Process
23% Promotional
22% Personalized and Relevant
15% Pointless

Community colleges:

45% Process
31% Pointless
14% Personalized and Relevant
9% Promotional

Online colleges:

47% Process
20% Personalized and Relevant
17% Promotional
16% Pointless



Marketing the 4 Ps

Only 77% of respondents sent anything personalized or relevant, and that's including financial aid information and not just the key criteria identified on the inquiry form. When looking at the key criteria, only 40% of colleges responded with information relevant to the student's interests.

Private colleges and online institutions were the most likely to send personalized and relevant information, though both still fell well short of what would be ideal to serve students. Regional public colleges have the most room for improvement in their comm flows; two-thirds spent the majority of their touchpoints encouraging apps and visits without relevance, and one-third sent no personalized or relevant content.

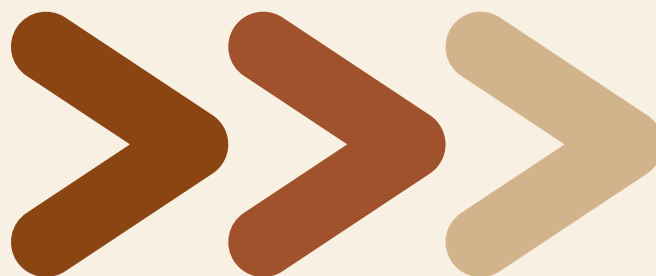
Promotional content varied widely; from a bulleted list of facts and promotion of how many majors are offered to student and alumni stories, or rankings and third-party proof points. Public flagships and private colleges leaned the most on promotional touchpoints to engage students. Promotional content is always so close to being tipped over to personalized and relevant if only it were more targeted to the stated interests or as a way to alleviate concerns.



Marketing key criteria

There are two major types of information that have an outsized influence on college choice: key criteria and barriers. The key criteria are the most important things for that student; the experiences and attributes they must have. Barriers are the things that might prevent them from enrolling; they encompass the real barriers as well as their fears and concerns. No inquiry form or supplemental form asked about barriers or concerns, which would have provided an opportunity for relevant engagement, so those are excluded here.

The inquiry requested information on two majors (when allowed), study abroad, honors program, student life, and first-generation support when able. Other key criteria are always centered around cost, student life, and getting to know the local area, especially for students who are travelling from further away. How did our colleges respond to these key criteria?



Marketing key criteria

Only 70% of colleges addressed any of the five areas and 42% addressed more than one. Only two colleges addressed four areas, and interestingly neither addressed the major.

Majors are the most important factor for students, so it was astonishing that less than one-third of colleges responded with information when the major was known.

	Major	Student Life	Interests	Financial Aid	Local Area
Public flagship	12%	38%	38%	25%	12%
Regional public	33%	17%	17%	50%	17%
Private	32%	32%	21%	68%	21%
Community College	0%	0%	0%	33%	0%
Online	62%	12%	0%	75%	12%
OVERALL	30%	26%	15%	55%	17%



Parent comm flows

Of the 55 colleges with inquiry forms, 17 asked for parent contact information. If you want to communicate with parents, this is the easy way to get that information; either through the initial form or supplemental forms in the comm flow. Of those 17 who had parent contact information, only 8 followed through and used it. Private colleges sent an average of 19 touchpoints to parents (ranging from 8 to 37) and public colleges sent an average of 2 (ranging from 1 to 5). Only one college, a small private institution, had a truly dedicated parent comm flow. The rest were almost exclusively copying the parent on an email sent to the student.

Half of the colleges reached out to parents within 24 hours, though none were outstanding. One was a generic autoresponse, another encouraged an application, and two encouraged visits.



Parent comm flows

Of the 83 parent touchpoints (all emails):

- 36 were solely to encourage an application or visit
- 9 covered financial aid
- 5 were bulleted lists of facts
- 4 showcased student life
- 3 were about expressed interests
- 2 explained support services
- 2 shared outcomes data
- 2 provided information about the intended majors
- 20 were various other topics

The best parent emails were written to them, not just a copied message to their child. Colleges that did that were more likely to have very parent-specific messaging as well, covering support resources, outcomes, and transition support in a conversational tone.



Make the data work for you

As benchmarks, use these to compare the length and layout of your own comm flows to those of your peers or aspirants. More is not better when it comes to touchpoints; more value is.

One immediate takeaway: your comm flow can likely be reduced by 55% right off the bat. The majority of the comm flows asked for an application without other information (26%), pointless messages (16%), or a visit without other information (13%). By instead incorporating application or visit requests with key criteria, you'll be telling the students about something that matters to them and leaving them with a CTA that fits one of your goals for them. Sending an email or text to "just check in" should be eliminated immediately as they add nothing to your relationship-building efforts.



Make the data work for you

Put the recipient at the center of your planning and writing. If you're planning touchpoints around what the recipient needs and wants, whether that's a parent or a student, your outcomes will immediately improve. Too often, the touchpoint is centered around what the institution wants the student to do or highlight (even if it's not relevant) instead. Focus on the key criteria and the barriers in order to respond with information about what you know matters most to them.

Six colleges selected offer direct admission programs through various platforms. What was surprising, however, was that none of them mentioned it in their comm flows. This is a differentiator and a fast track to admission in the spring. This was a huge missed opportunity. If you offer direct admissions, or any specialized pathways or programs, talk about them! If the perceived, or real, lengthy application process is a barrier to students starting, you can fast-track them and let them know you're supporting them.



Make the data work for you

Differentiate your comm flow based on distance. For students who are further away and unlikely to visit you should show them what life is like and alleviate their family's concerns about being far from home and community. Don't tell local students what town is like either, it comes off as generic and sharing a view wildly different from their own experiences can sow mistrust.



How can Clarity EM help you?

Having the data is one thing, but making it work for you is another. Data should unlock curiosity and help inform strategies. Clarity EM will help you make sense of your data to transform it into actionable insights your team can use to enroll more students.

- Data analysis and research
- Surveying projects
- Market research
- Strategy work
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