

A Review of the Effectiveness of College Campus Visits on Higher Education Enrollment

Randy D Case

Ph.D., RRT-NPS

Abstract: *Colleges and universities throughout the United States continually strive to meet the expectations and needs of their students in an effort to increase enrollment and retention numbers. As one of the most utilized recruitment efforts performed, some have questioned the necessity and benefits of campus visits and tours. Over the years, research has been conducted to determine the effectiveness and success of campus visits throughout numerous colleges and universities. In addition, in recent years, many colleges have incorporated the use of advanced technologies and capabilities that have allowed the development of technology-based campus visits and tours. As evidenced by numerous studies, and in comparison to other enrollment and recruitment efforts, campus visits continue to be one of the most advantageous and beneficial recruitment efforts to a college campus. This paper will investigate the current research as it pertains to the overall development, benefits, and advantages of college campus visits, as well as current trends being utilized by universities to increase their use of technology-based campus tours.*

Keywords: Enrollment, Campus Visits, Campus Tours, Recruitment, Retention

What Makes a Great Campus Visit?

College campus visits are one of the most beneficial and influential factors for prospective students when determining which college or university they would like to attend [1]. Providing students an exceptional experience during their campus visit is one of the primary goals and objectives associated with this recruitment strategy. Therefore, admissions administrators and staff are continually seeking expert consultation and recommendations to improve their university's campus visit experience [2]. As mentioned by Basko, the actual campus visit or tour is only one of the many components of a successful and influential recruitment effort [3]. The information, emails, and mail-outs students receive, containing information about a campus visit, are often viewed as the first impression of the university to students and their families [3]. Prospective students may also pay attention to the campus visit scheduling, communication, parking, and follow-up. These details may seem miniscule in the grand scheme of a campus visit; however, to prospective students and their families, these fine details could be the difference when deciding between several different universities [3]. Basko states, "you can offer a world-class campus tour, but if a family is greeted rudely or spends 30 minutes circling the campus to park, that great tour gets lost" [3].

Organization is also considered an essential component of a well-developed campus visit. Whether students are touring dormitories, classrooms, student centers, or any other area of the campus community, providing a well-organized and seamless campus visit is imperative [2]. Campus administration and staff who are responsible for developing and organizing campus visits must remember several key aspects to maintain orderliness during these events. According to Basko, utilizing current student ambassadors, who are well-versed in the offerings of the university, is one step to providing a well-organized campus visit [3]. Additionally, providing students with a well-rounded and organized campus visit allows prospective students the opportunity to acquire the information needed to persuade them to attend that college [2]. In addition, the university

needs to consider minimizing the amount of walking that prospective students and family members will encounter during their visit. Basko suggests utilizing facilities that are close in proximity to other essential campus visit locations to reduce the time spent traveling from one event to the next [3].

How do Campus Visits Increase Enrollment?

One of the greatest benefits associated with college campus visits is the prospective students' ability to explore the university campus and activities. According to Goenner et al., students considering enrolling in a university often look to see what organizations and associations the university provides [4]. To truly capture the attention of a prospective student, colleges must make an effort to provide some form of connection that will engage the student [5]. According to Johnston, prospective students that find connections and links with other students during a campus visit are more inclined to enroll in that college or university [2].

Campus visits also provide students with the ability to investigate the majors and programs the university offers. With a significant percentage of enrolling first year students already declaring a major, the ability to explore and examine what each school has to offer within a program you are interested in is extremely beneficial [1]. In fact, prospective students typically enroll in colleges and universities that provide a series of majors or programs that interest the student [1]. Providing potential students with information and evidence of what a school has to offer within a specific program is typically helpful in the student's decision-making process. As stated by Salah et al., if a student has already declared a major, they will often explore the technologies and capabilities of those specific degrees within several different colleges to determine which school can provide them with the greatest opportunities [6].

Another beneficial aspect of university campus visits, is the fact that these visits and tours can give prospective students the opportunity to observe the general campus environment and surroundings. According to Hope, consultants and admission experts for higher education often encourage

universities to ensure that their campus provides a welcoming aesthetic and inviting curb appeal [7]. Simple campus additions, such as signage, parking areas, grounds, and general cleanliness are often correlated with a student's first impression and general satisfaction with the university [7]. In addition, parents of prospective students often value campus visits due to their ability to investigate the overall safety and well-being of their children if they were to attend that specific college. Although not all students visiting college campuses include their parents, a large percentage of parents or guardians join their children for college visits and tours [8]. Peterson discuss the fact that many parents place value in evaluating the general feel and safety of their child's college campus [8]. Reports of campus crimes, measures taken to decrease the risk of violence, and university campus police actions are often requested by parents [8]. Research has found that college campuses providing an up-front evaluation of their campus safety regulations generally receive increased parental approval and satisfaction rates [8].

How has Advanced Technology Changed Campus Visits?

In correlation with campus visits, advanced technologies and capabilities have allowed colleges and universities to develop technology-based campus visits and tours. The addition of virtual tours has allowed universities the ability to reach a much higher number of potential students. Over the past ten years, many colleges and universities have implemented the use of virtual campus tours as an option to explore the university campus [9]. Generally speaking, as technology has advanced throughout the past decade, colleges and universities began recognizing the need for alternative forms of campus tours. As discussed by Liberto, the utilization of virtual campus tours has rapidly grown in popularity simply because it is another option and tool to increase enrollment [10].

Colleges and universities have found several benefits associated with the use of virtual campus tours. First, virtual campus tours allow students from long distances, the opportunity to explore a university campus without the need to travel [11]. According to Carlson, travel barriers and limitations are a continual struggle colleges and universities experience when attempting to recruit new students [9]. Prospective college students often find the financial burdens and time requirements for travel associated with campus visits as obstacles they are unwilling to overcome [10]. The addition of virtual campus tours eliminates the difficulties associated with travel while still allowing a potential student the ability visualize and experience what a college has to offer. In addition, virtual campus tours allow prospective students to recognize the university's use of advanced technology, which may assist in their decision to enroll [11].

Although the use of virtual campus tours has proven to be quite successful, there have been several negative outcomes associated with the use of these advanced technologies. Virtual campus tours may only provide a generic feel for the campus. Prospective students are typically researching potential schools and visiting campuses in an effort to gain understanding and an overall impression of the campus [12]. Virtual campus tours may not provide prospective students with the true atmosphere and impression of the university [6]. Additionally, virtual campus tours may also give false

impressions of what the school may offer or provide to potential students [7]. According to Hope, virtual campus tours are generally beneficial and helpful to potential students [7]. However, the fact that universities ultimately decide what they want to display on their virtual tours, limits students' accessibility to the college campus. As research indicates, virtual tours are beneficial. However, live campus visits are far superior and often correlate with increased numbers of enrollment when compared to virtual tours [7].

How do Campus Visits Compare to Other Enrollment Strategies?

Throughout the years, colleges and universities have developed numerous tactics and strategies to recruit and retain students. Numerous research studies and surveys have been conducted over the years to help determine which of these recruitment strategies are the most advantageous and beneficial to colleges and universities. Within these research studies, campus visits and tours appear to be more advantageous in regards to enrollment, when compared to other forms of recruitment [9]. In addition, universities and colleges are finding that both students and faculty find tremendous value in campus visits. A study by Carlson found that faculty and staff believed that universities should improve enrollment management services including engagement activities and campus visits [9]. As described by Carlson, the universities within this specific study were surprised by the research findings [9]. Although the colleges and universities were aware of the students' desire for improved recruitment strategies, they were shocked at the faculties' desire to invest more in the enrollment management services [9]. Additionally, a study by Ming found that a higher number of students chose their specific college based on their campus visit versus any other factor [12]. In similarity, Cohen conducted a random survey of 1,100 high school students who had already chosen and applied to the college or university they wanted to attend [13]. From the survey, Cohen found "visits to colleges, were, by far, the most important factor in a student's decision about where to apply" [13].

Research has also shown an increase in student enrollment, retention, and participation associated with students who took part in a pre-selection campus visit [14]. Several studies have demonstrated and proven that students who participate in a college campus visit typically create a connection with the university and the campus community. A study by Goenner et al. found a direct correlation with the overall success and retention of students that actively participated in their college campus visit [4]. As previously mentioned, the ability to visit the college campus and develop a more accurate perception of the school, often creates a connection between the student and that particular college. This connection is often a deciding factor in the student's choice of school. In addition, if a strong connection and association is developed with the school, the student is more likely to remain an active member of the campus community, which is an important retention objective [9]. In fact, Peterson discuss a survey of over 10,000 students in which a large percentage were found to have a correlation between their participation within their campus and their initial campus visit [8]. Within this study, students were able to make connections with different peer groups, societies, and associations during their campus visits,

which created influential relationships and powerful networks that linked the student to the university [8].

In addition to the previously mentioned research studies, several other studies have been conducted which demonstrate how different characteristics and attributes of students and how those, in conjunction with campus visits, may play a role in a student's choice of university. Peterson conducted a second survey to determine the influences of enrollment between urban students and rural students [8]. Within this study, Peterson determined that college students in both urban and rural areas were greatly influenced by college campus visits [8]. However, the influences of the campus visits were different for each group. The students located within the urban environments were more driven to attend colleges and universities that provided state of the art technology and a variety of social organizations and societies [8]. The students within the rural environments were more concerned with the location of the campus in proximity to their current residency. These students valued the different types of programs available at each school as well as the general feel and atmosphere of the campus. Within this study, the authors concluded that students from both rural and urban environments valued the use of campus visits and tours. Hope also discusses the differences seen between large campuses and small campuses in reference to their abilities to provide adequate services to improve enrollment numbers [7]. It was determined that a large percentage of prospective students found tremendous value in the efforts each school took to recruit students. Based on surveys, Hope concluded that many students chose colleges based on the initial perception they received during their campus visits [7]. Colleges and universities that implement more tactics and strategies to improve enrollment, were found to be more successful during events such as campus visits [7]. Factors influencing students during campus visits ranged from campus beauty and grounds to the quality of food served during orientation meetings and events [7]. It was also determined that larger schools typically have larger budgets to utilize towards recruitment measures. However, smaller schools that placed a significant importance on recruitment strategies were found to have considerable enrollment improvements as well [7].

Conclusion

Throughout the history of higher education, colleges and universities have utilized numerous recruitment and retention strategies to increase enrollment. One of the most valuable strategies is the utilization of campus tours and visits. Although some have questioned the necessity of campus visits, research has proven that many students find tremendous value in touring college campuses. As technology has advanced, the formatting of campus tours has also developed. The use of virtual campus tours has grown in popularity among numerous colleges and universities. In addition, when compared to other recruitment strategies, campus tours and visits continue to be one of the most beneficial and successful tactics for enrollment growth.

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