



Ten Things Your College Website Must Accomplish

BY ADAM SCHULTZ

In 2008, I started fielding phone calls from staff members of departments and programs at a few of our local universities. The problems they presented to me were usually similar in nature.

These people, who were obviously very intelligent and competent, were struggling to meet specific college program goals such as increasing enrollment numbers or raising specific amounts of money. As hard as they tried, they were only able to get a limited number of people to visit their websites, and most of the people who did check out their websites would not take action. The program directors I spoke with often assumed that the problem lied in site aesthetics. Perhaps it was just too ugly?

I set out to determine the root cause of their problems and find solutions. As I did this, I noticed several trends evolving in this space, and I began collecting case studies. I quickly realized that most college program websites had similar needs for improvement, which led me to develop and test strategies for success.

Fast-forward to 2014. I'm still getting these types of phone calls; in fact, I get even more today than I did back in 2008. Why? Because the need for effective college program website development and marketing has escalated. Program directors are expected to know how to create, structure, maintain, and market college websites, and yet most of them have not

received training specific to these tasks. Internet marketing requirements are changing at lightning speed, and most college program websites aren't set up to perform well in the current environment.

This white paper is specifically for people who are responsible for higher education program websites. If you are trying to figure how to use your website to meet your program goals, you'll want to evaluate your site using this checklist. It is my hope that this paper will help you to identify the reasons why your site isn't producing results and to find solutions that will enable you to meet your goals.

The following are the ten most important things your website must accomplish if you are to remain competitive in 2014:

1. Accomplish Specific Program Goals

Your website doesn't exist just to look pretty; it's there to accomplish very specific, important goals. Most likely, you want your site to perform one or more of the following tasks:

- *Recruit students (increase enrollment)*
- *Raise funds (alumni fundraising)*
- *Engage and/or meet the needs of current students*



However, many academic program websites don't perform as if they are intended to achieve specific goals. This is because they lack a clear focus.

The Trick to Gaining Clarity

The important questions are the following:

- *Are your goals clearly defined?*
- *Does your site clearly reflect those goals?*
- *Most importantly, does your site actually accomplish those goals?*

After you have defined your goals, you need to determine how to measure achievement of these goals. For example, you may need to ask yourself the following types of questions:

- *Is my site attracting students? If so, how many? What caliber of student is it attracting?*
- *Is my site increasing enrollment? At what rate?*
- *Is my site compelling alumni to contribute funds? If so, how much money?*
- *Is my site helping current students find the resources they need? Which resources are they finding, and which resources are difficult to locate? Is the site reducing the need for actual people answering phones and assisting students in person?*

If you don't know the answers to these questions, you may need to install analytic tools like [Google Analytics](#) on your site. The necessary information is within reach; you just need to reach out and take hold of it.

The Power of a Goal-Focused Site

The bottom line is this: your site is only as valuable as the goals it achieves. Your site needs to be inspiring and downright irresistible. To be worth the expenses required to maintain it, your site needs to accomplish tangible results.

2. Appeal to Your Most Important Visitors First

It's easy to get fooled by high traffic numbers. Many webmasters are content to see that their site is getting a lot of pageviews, but the truth is who visits your site is more important than how many people visit your site.

Let's say you are a (DE) Distance Education program director, and your goal is to increase enrollment in your DE program. If you're getting 1,000 page views a month, you need to find out:

- *How many of those views are coming from potential DE program students (or related customers, such as parents of DE students)? How many of those page views are from your existing students?*
- *How many of those page views are coming from students who aren't interested in DE?*
- *How many of those views lasted only a few seconds? Did the viewer "bounce" (leave the page almost immediately)? How many of those views were just from bots, competitors, or other worthless sources?*
- *Once there, did the target student actually find what he or she needed? Did the potential student stay for a while? Sign for a newsletter? A class?*

A 2013 study by Noel Levitz concluded that 69 percent of students report browsing higher education websites as their primary method of gathering college information. If you are a college program director, but you aren't attracting or keeping target students on your site, you're missing out.

Catering to Priority Visitors

To maximize your site's effectiveness, you need to:

- *Identify who your target audience is*
- *Determine what your target audience is looking for on your site*
- *Make sure that information appears front and center on the site*

It sounds simple, but a lot of college sites don't deliver the information their target audience wants to find. In some cases, the information exists, but it's difficult to find on the page or is obscured by insignificant information. If you're not sure what information your target audience wants to find or how to strategically place it on the site, get help from a marketing expert who understands the EDU field. A single consultation can make a significant difference.

First Class Example of a Site Catering to Target Audience: Denver Seminary

It's pretty obvious who the target audience is and what information prospective students will need, right? It's all right in plain sight on [this EDU website](#).

3. Pave a Clear Path for Action

Once you've got the right people going to your site, you need to compel them to stay on your site and take action while there.

Imagine your college site as an art gallery. The first challenge is to get people to walk into your art gallery. The next challenge is to get those people to actually buy the paintings hanging on the walls.

When it comes to effective website calls to action, your site needs to be set up in a student-friendly manner, as follows:

- *The site needs to be structured properly*
- *Key information must be presented clearly*
- *The information on the page needs to be formatted so it's easy to read*
- *The calls to action must be clear, obvious, and compelling*

Structure Essentials

This means that your site needs to be written in a fashion that is easy to scan. Students go to sites looking for specific information, and they expect to find it immediately. If your site is packed with dry academic material that does not have practical or emotional impact, students respond in the following ways:

- *They get the feeling that your program is stuffy and boring, or worse, irrelevant*
- *They become anxious that maybe your program will not help them meet their goals*
- *They get frustrated and move on to another site*

Web Rules of Content Presentation

To engage with students, you will need to:

- *Identify the key information students are searching for*
- *Cut content down to the bare minimum (eliminate fluff)*
- *Highlight key information so students can find it in the first five seconds of scanning the page*
- *Organize information on the page so it is easy to digest*
- *Provide obvious links to deeper information so students know where to click*
- *Make sure pages load quickly so students aren't left hanging*

Clear Calls to Action

Once you've got their attention, you need to tell prospective students what you want them to do next. If you don't provide clear calls to action, you'll lose even the most interested prospects. You need to invite students to take action so you can:

- *Contact them*
- *Follow up*
- *Send more information*
- *Eventually get them to enroll, contribute, or otherwise engage – in other words, to accomplish your end goals*

This means you need to provide calls to action that meet every possible type of prospect, exactly where that prospect is at in the process. The following are example calls to action:

- *Watch a Video*
- *Take a Virtual Tour*
- *Click Here for More Information*
- *Join Our Email Newsletter*
- *Apply for Admission*
- *Get Answers Here*

- *Register for Classes*

To ensure your site accomplishes this goal, evaluate your site for structure, scanability, presence of key information, and presentation of irresistible calls to action.

First Class Example of Clear Calls to Action: [University of Texas Arlington](#)

It's impossible to miss these calls to action. Check out [this stellar site](#) to get inspiration for your program site.

4. Convince the Prospective Student that Your Program Delivers Results

Today's students know people who have started their own businesses in high school. They have parents who are now working second or third careers and say their college degree was not worth the investment. They see rising college costs and wonder if a college degree is worth the expense.

The Proof is in the Statistics

Prospective students expect you to offer proof – solid statistics – that show that your program graduates are better off after attending your program. They want proof that your program is worth the financial investment. Your site needs to answer the following questions:

- *What percentage of your graduates found jobs (in their desired field of employment) in the first year following graduation?*
- *What salary range are your graduates are getting when they do find a job?*
- *What kind of ROI (return on investment) track record does your program have? Will the education pay off? Is this a wise investment?*
- *If your program is trying to fundraise or engage existing students, your site needs to answer questions like:*
- *Why should a student continue with your program? Will you meet this student's needs quickly and effectively?*

- *Why should an alumnus contribute money? How are funds used? What emotional fulfillment will an alumnus get from contributing?*

To accomplish these goals, your site needs to convey the message that your program is:

- *Trustworthy*
- *Respectable*
- *Reputable*
- *Purposeful*

An effective site sports a beautiful design, functions well (no slow loading pages, no broken links), and radiates success. It also advertises its success rate with clear, indisputable statistics.

First Class Example of an EDU Site that Inspires Confidence: [Polk State College](#)

The link to this page touting economic success appears front and center on the [homepage](#) via a slide show. Polk State College wants to make sure its prospective students believe an education from their school will pay off.

5. Make Students Fall in Love With You

Remember that class that completely changed your perspective on a subject? Perhaps you always hated social studies, but your tenth grade world history teacher brought it to life, and suddenly your most dreaded subject became your favorite. That teacher had the powers of a magician, awakening an interest you didn't even realize you had within you.

Today's students expect no less from a higher education website. They expect to be inspired. They want to feel that zing of excitement. They need to be won over.

That's why your website needs to generate enthusiasm and anticipation. You need to forge an emotional connection with the prospective student so he or she can't wait to enroll.

How is this accomplished? By establishing an appealing program brand.

The Magic of Brand

Why is brand important?

Brand is one of those magical things that elicits loyalty. It tickles the senses and stirs the emotions. It makes you feel like driving a BMW actually makes you a richer, more successful person than someone who is driving a Chevy. It makes you feel warm and fuzzy about drinking a Coke instead of a generic can of soda.

- *Your site needs to convey your program's brand so that the student:*
- *Gets an idea of what it would feel like to be part of your program*
- *Begins to get a sense of your community... and longs to become a part of that community*
- *Views your program as something enticingly appealing, whether that be that your program is prestigious, exciting, warm and/or inviting*

Conveying Brand

If you want to see results, you need to give your prospects a taste of the flavor of your program. They want to see it through colors, style, logos, pictures, and videos. They need to feel it through skillfully worded texts and depictions. They need to experience it through interactive forums, videos, and communication.

They need to long to be a part of it. If want them to act, you've got to make them fall in love first.

First Class Example of Excellent Branding: [Biola Undergraduate Program](#)

Take just one look at [Biola's website](#) and you know exactly what kind of feel the college offers: fun, accepting, and eclectic.

6. Ensure a Flawless Tablet and Mobile Experience

You might think you use your mobile phone a lot, but almost **half** of teens **exclusively** use mobile phones or tablets. In a recent study, prospective students reported that **46 percent** of them **ONLY** use mobile devices to search for college information.

That means 46 percent of prospective students don't care how gorgeous your site is on a laptop. What matters is how it looks on a phone or tablet.

Today's students expect:

To be able to find tuition costs, program features, and majors quickly and easily, without having to scroll all around

To never wait a long time for pages to load

To find user-friendly shortcuts so they don't have to search through pages and pages to find the information they need

A beautiful user interface, no matter what type of device they are using

Sites that are not designed to be responsive cause headaches – actual headaches. They chase potential students away. This is not the reaction you want students to have when they visit your program website.

Understanding Responsive Site Design

What does it mean to have a responsive site? It means your site automatically detects what type of device the viewer is using – a laptop, desktop, tablet, or mobile phone – and automatically formats the web page to fit the viewport of the device. That means the site will resize and reformat to look fantastic on every type of device, from an iPad mini to an Android smartphone to a two-in-one tablet. A responsive web design will detect the viewport size and will also change the ways the links on the page function, formatting to provide simplified buttons and other user-friendly functionality.

Is Your Site Responsive?

Not sure if your site is responsive? [Test it here](#) and find out. If you discover it isn't responsive, you'll want to prioritize this change immediately before you lose out on 46 percent of your prospects. Forty-six percent is a number that is far too large to ignore.

[Click Here to Test the Responsiveness of Your Site](#)

7. Dominate Search Engine Results

Let's assume you've updated your site and it is packed with great features and calls to action. Now you need to show up in internet searches so students can find you.

However, it's not good enough to just show up on the internet. Your program needs to show up on the first or second page of Google searches for multiple keywords. Why?

Because 90% of the time, people who search online will not click on anything that does not show up on the first page of their Google search.

Today's students are members of an impatient society. They enter a keyword into their search engine (Google, Yahoo, Bing) and then check out what comes up on that first page of search results. They might click to the second page of search results, but very rarely will they go beyond that first page. How many spots are on an average Google search page? Anywhere between 10-15, depending on how much space the results page takes up.

This is why companies pour thousands and thousands of dollars into something called search engine optimization (SEO) every year. They are competing for those 10 to 15 spots on that first page of Google. That's pretty stiff competition.

Test Your Site's Search Engine Optimization

This won't be an accurate test, since people may get to your site by entering any combination of thousands of possible keywords, but give this a try, just to see what happens.

Open up a browser and enter the keywords "Distance Education Program" (or "engineering program" or "grad school" or whatever is a non-brand-specific way to describe your program) into Google.

Now see what comes up.

Chances are, your site is not on that first page of search results.

Don't enter your brand name (like "Purdue University") as you search. Most students aren't going to be searching for your program by name. You want to show up when they search for related fields or programs of study so you can beat out your competition.

Showing Up in Search Engine Results

SEO rankings are constantly shifting, like sand. Competitors are vying for those primo spots on the first page of Google, using a variety of SEO and online advertising tactics.

Your competitors are also using PPC (Pay-Per-Click) advertising. Open up another Google search for higher education programs and take a good look at the page.

See those top three listings, the ones with the small yellow word "Ad" next to them? Those are not naturally ranked listings; they are paid ads. The ads in the right hand column (again, under the yellow word "Ad") are also paid ads.

These are pay-per-click ads, meaning the sponsor of the ad pays every time someone clicks on the ad.

This is how PPC works: you register with Google, you fund the account with a credit card, and then you pay everytime someone clicks on a relevant term. For example, if you are offering a distance learning

art history class, you might bid on the search term “virtual art history class”. Then you pay every time someone clicks on your ad and is directed to your site.

Pay per click (PPC) ad campaigns can be very effective – or very expensive – depending on how well you understand the marketing space. PPC is a guaranteed way to rank on a search engine, ensuring you will get your ad in front of people searching for those keywords.

Your success level (whether you attract the right people, if they will click on the ad, and, once they click, if they will even be interested in your program) will depend greatly on the following:

- *Choice of keywords*
- *Wording of the ad*
- *How much you are willing to pay*
- *Which search engine you choose*
- *If visitors find when they expect to find when they click through to your site*

If you get PPC advertising right, you can make substantial strides in promoting your higher education program. If you get PPC wrong, you can outspend your annual budget in a month.

Showing Up

This is a very high level overview of how SEO and PPC advertising works. It’s a complicated subject, but an important one. Site structure, content structure, the actual quality of your content, links to and from your site, and PPC advertising strategies are all key elements of effective website advertising. If you find this piece of the puzzle overwhelming, you’ll want to learn from an internet marketing expert. Once you understand how to optimize your site and target your advertising efforts, you’ll see much higher returns on your marketing investments.

8. Track Everything That Matters

It’s not enough to just prop up a website and hope for the best. If you want to get results, you need to measure how well it is performing.

You need to find out:

- *Who is visiting your site?*
- *How long do visitors stay on the site?*
- *Which website pages are engaging students?*
- *Which calls to action are working? Which aren’t?*
- *Which keywords are bringing in traffic?*
- *What actions do visitors take while on your site?*
- *Where is your site traffic coming from?*

Once you know the answers to these sorts of questions, you can test different strategies to find out what the best investments are for your marketing dollars.

Choosing Analytic Tools

What tools do you need to do this? You need analytic tools that will measure how well your site is performing in the following areas:

- *Website SEO*
- *PPC campaigns*
- *Email campaigns*
- *Page visits*
- *Content management system tools*

If you don’t measure the impact of your efforts, you will be pouring time, money, and effort into a strategy based on guesswork.

Which Analytic Tools Are Best?

Most web administrators end up using several separate email, blogging, analytics, SEO, CMS, and CRM tools. None of these solutions share data with each other, and most require hard-to-come-by technology support time to integrate and get to work. That means you’ll need to get IT support as you learn how to use these tools and figure out how to:

- *Generate reports*
- *Interpret reports*
- *Turn those numbers into marketing plans*

This can be very challenging for higher education program directors. In many cases, they do not have the time or skill set to invest in this kind of analytical work. You will save yourself a lot of time and money if you find analytic tools that work together.

Sites That Analyze Themselves

Fortunately, there are now websites that have built in analytic tools that produce customizable reports. These tools can help you measure and manage your marketing efforts, maximizing your productivity.

An Incredibly Important Side Note: ADA Compliance

Because you are an educational institution, you also need to make sure your website is [section 508/ADA](#) (Americans with Disabilities Act) compliant. That means your site needs to be accessible to people with disabilities. If you do not know what the standards are for being ADA compliant, please take advantage of our [free ADA compliance analysis](#).

9. Follow Up With EVERY Prospect

Your site needs to be set up such that you establish connections with site visitors. These connections must enable you to follow up with every prospect, no matter where they are in the engagement process. For maximum efficiency, your website should be equipped with an email autoresponder tied to each call to action.

Prospective student interested in more information? Get them to sign up for an email list or to register to download a FAQ sheet.

First time visitor to the site? Get them enrolled in a retargeting marketing strategy.

Student registering for a campus visit? Schedule a follow up email or call.

Your site needs to have an automated follow up system programmed into it so all site visits are followed up through one or more of the following:

- *Emails*
- *Retargeted ads*

- *A phone call*
- *Physical mail or swag*

Effective Follow Up

For follow up to be effective, it needs to be:

- *Timely*
- *Engaging*
- *Exciting*
- *Well crafted and carefully worded*
- *Inviting, but respectful (not pushy or salesy)*

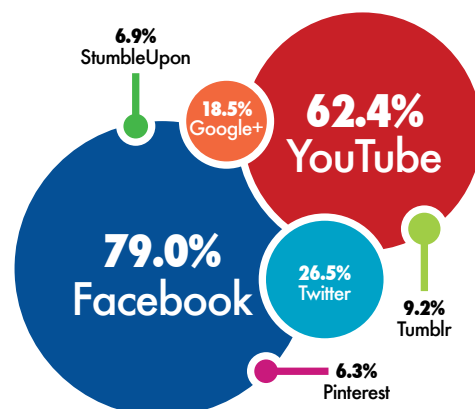
You need to put your program in front of the student again and again, without annoying him or her. Your site should do this automatically, with little or no need for human hours. Look into autoresponder email campaigns to learn how to master this piece of the puzzle.

10. Engage Prospects Via Social Media

Social media is only as successful as it serves the user. In other words, you'll need to develop a social media outreach plan that prospective students would find interesting, fun, and engaging. Social media is not a place for dry material or sales pitches. It's a place to laugh, learn, and play – a whole different type of outreach than the PPC or email campaign.

The Social Playground

College-bound high school students report using these social media sites



Source: NoelLevitz

Prospective students are already using FaceBook, Digg, Kik, Google+, Instagram, StumbleUpon, Twitter, Tumblr, Pinterest, and YouTube. You need to find ways to interact with those same people on those forums. You might even want to think of it as traveling to their playground and asking to be invited into their social circle.

A Different Type of Outreach

Social media is tricky, but effective – if you figure out how to get invited to play. The goal here is to post material that is interesting or entertaining enough that people will want to share it.

Many higher education websites go so far as to create their own insider social media platforms. Prospective students can only access certain parts of the platform, and insiders (registered students) can use all the features to meet other students, study online, share information, post pics, and ask questions. The insider social media platform creates an exclusive community that appeals to current and prospective students alike.

Still not sure how higher education programs can use social media platforms? Check out these [100 colleges who are using social media well](#) for ideas.

Get Social

Today's students expect to find you on social media platforms like Twitter, YouTube, Facebook, and Digg. If you're not there, and if you don't know how to work that space, you will lose out to competitors who are engaging with students on a social level.

Update Your Site to Keep Competitive

Now that you know what your site must accomplish to remain competitive in 2014, you're probably ready to learn more about specific strategies. You've found out what your site needs to do to be effective; now you need to learn how to update your site so it will perform at maximum capability.

Verified Studios has been designing higher education websites since 2008. We've meticulously analyzed site performance, recording what efforts deliver results. Through these years of analysis, we've developed Collegiate Suite, using the knowledge we've gained over the years to produce compelling higher education site templates that deliver exactly what students are looking for.

If you're interested in discussing practical applications of the points mentioned in this white paper, [contact us](#) for a conversation about your website. We can also provide you with a simple analysis, no strings attached evaluation of your site. I truly hope these resources prove useful to you, and I wish you great success with your college program website.

Helpfully yours,

Adam Schultz

Adam Schultz

[Take Advantage of Our No-Cost Needs Analysis](#)