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Running Head: ASSESSING THE OCCURRENCE

The Rochester Institute of Technology

Department of Communication

College of Liberal Arts

Assessing the Occurrence and Value of Interactive Features on Admissions Web sites:

What Students and Admissions Professionals Say is Most Important

by

Katherine Robert

A Paper submitted
In partial fulfillment of the
Master of Science degree
In Communication & Media Technologies

Degree Awarded:
January 6, 2009

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ASSESSING THE OCCURRENCE AND VALUE OF INTERACTIVE FEATURES ON
ADMISSIONS WEB SITES: WHAT STUDENTS AND ADMISSIONS PROFESSIONALS
SAY IS MOST IMPORTANT

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Abstract

This study assessed the importance of interactive features on admissions Web sites by surveying admissions professionals and Rochester Institute of Technology students. The presence of these features on admissions' Web sites was content analyzed. Admissions professionals rated a prospective student link, an online application, internal links, an online tour/visit registration, and active e-mail addresses as most important. Students rated application status, requesting information by a mailing address and e-mail, internal links, and a consistent main menu as most important. The most present features were links within the admissions site, graphics, links outside of the admissions site, active e-mail, and cookies. Students and admissions professionals differed significantly regarding a prospective student link with admissions professionals rating this feature significantly higher.

Keywords: Admissions Web sites, Interactivity, Internet, Interactive features, College Web sites, College admissions, Student recruitment

Assessing the Occurrence and Value of Interactive Features on Admissions Web sites:

What Students and Admissions Professionals Say is Most Important

The Internet began as a strictly one-way process from sender to receiver. Many subsequent technologies however have transformed this process, making the medium much more interactive. With the introduction of interactivity the receiver of the communication was no longer an “audience” receiving the information, receivers became “users” who could create their own content and initiate the interactions (Sundar, 2004). While interactivity previously was considered a naturally occurring characteristic of interpersonal communication, an early researcher of the topic, Sheizaf Rafaeli (1988) clarified that it is more currently associated with new media and the Internet.

Rafaeli and Sudweeks interpret interactivity as progressing along a continuum beginning with declarative one-way communication, to reactive two-way communication where one side can respond with the other, to fully interactive communication (1997). Fully interactive communication requires that future messages consider previous messages, including how these messages reacted to previous messages.

The Internet is built upon hypertext markup language (HTML) that delivers information through the use of text and graphics at the demand of the user. HTML has been built upon to allow for additional features, especially multimedia features, such as audio and video downloads, as well as features that allow for two-way communication such as synchronous chat and asynchronous forums. Many companies and organizations recognize and take advantage of the new opportunities the Internet offers. Interactive features especially are believed to allow for better ways to reach users and keep them coming back for more.

Traditionally, colleges employed brochures and other print materials to reach and recruit prospective students. As early in the history of the Internet as 1995, most colleges recognized the shift to digital media and were already present on the Web (Columbia University, 1995). Even then it was noted that a digital presence was a relatively inexpensive way to reach potential students, donors, and even faculty. Today, it is almost impossible for colleges and businesses to imagine not being present on the Internet with a Web site. Studies have shown that the college Web site is one of the most importance sources of information for prospective students during the college search (Stoner, 2004). One reason is that Web sites are available any time of the day on demand. However, a mere presence on the Web is not enough; interactive feature are now required. Most admissions officers have realized how strong a marketing tool Web sites can be. Those who have responded by creating sites that are easy to access and provide well-written and appropriate content, while offering interactive features and services that connect prospects with real people, are seeing significant results (Stoner, 2004).

The National Research Center for College & University Admissions (NRCCUA) annually ranks admission Web sites of more than 3,000 postsecondary institutions based on the functionality and design of the site and how the site provides information to potential students in order to turn them into applicants. Their 9th annual Enrollment Power Index study revealed that three admission Web features have become expected by potential students and are therefore considered necessary (NRCCUA, 2007). The three most important interactive features include instant messaging and live chat rooms for prospective students to communicate with current students and admissions officers in real time; an online schedule of campus visit dates; and on online admission application system which allows applicants to track their status. However, with

all of this college and admissions driven information at hand about the importance of college Web sites, researchers have only recently given attention to studying the perceptions of the users of college and university Web sites (Pooock & Lefond, 2003).

Research Questions

Much of the research on college and university Web sites has focused on the design of the sites only. While it is important to know how to design a Web site that visitors find functional and easy to use, it is also important to know what specific features users believe are most important. Additionally, some research has addressed what students feel is the most important on an admissions Web site. However, while students are a very important group to target, admissions officers still play a key role in the process. They most often stand between the potential applicants and the Web site itself if they are in the role of designing the site and determining its content. Therefore, the first research question asks, what interactive features of the Web site do admissions officers say are most important for making a Web site to attract students and turn them into applicants?

Previous research has investigated what prospective students report is most important about university and college Web sites pertaining to design and usability (Pooock & Lefond, 2001; Ng, Parette & Sterrett, 2003; Pooock & Lefond, 2003; Pooock & Bishop, 2006); however, little systematic research has focused on the specific features themselves, especially interactivity. Therefore, the second research question asks what interactive features do prospective students say are most important for making college application decisions? By obtaining both what students and admissions officers feel are important features, the data can then be compared. And

so the third research question asks what is the difference between what prospective students and what admissions officers say are the most important interactive features?

While it is helpful to know what students say they feel is most important, that does not necessarily mean that those features will be present on the Web site. A sample of Web sites can then be examined to evaluate whether those items of most importance are actually present. Responses from the second research question, what interactive features students say are most important, can then be compared to the features on the Web sites. As a result, the fourth research question asks to what extent are the interactive features, noted as most important by student, actually present on admissions Web sites?

Rationale

With the new features offered by the Internet, the possibilities for connecting Web site visitors more personally with the actual site content is rapidly expanding. Whereas before one may have only been able to visit a site and find information, it is now possible to communicate with someone across the country instantaneously. Interactivity is an exciting new area that has attracted my attention. Further, I myself had a difficult time finding the right school. While interactivity will not solve the difficult choice of selecting the right school, I think it can make the process much easier and more efficient.

The transition between high school and college is usually a difficult one for most students. With over 3,000 regionally accredited colleges and universities in the United States to choose from, the college selection process can be a very tedious and stressful one (EducationUSA). The Internet is a great resource for students to find information about colleges. However, little attention has been focused on colleges and universities; only in recent years have

researchers looked at the perception of the users of college and university Web sites (Pooock & Lefond, 2003). However, we know that these sites are large sources of information for high school students in their college search (Pooock & Lefond 2001). As a result, it is vital to understand how to best develop Web sites by understanding which features are most important so that institutions can attract and connect with potential students. This study adds further insight into the Internet, and more importantly, interactivity in order to understand how admissions Web sites can be used to allow students make a better, more educated and informed decision.

Much of the research on college and university Web sites has focused merely on what students feel is most important in terms of the content, organization, and functionality or usability. As noted before, research is just beginning to address the perceptions of users of admissions sites. This study contributes to the body of research already conducted on admissions Web sites by examining not just what students think but also those who work within admissions, and comparing the two.

While the growth of the Internet is learning toward of a trend of personalization enabled through interactivity and customized content (Williams, 2000), much interactivity research has focused on the for-profit sector, specifically marketing and advertising. However, interactivity is also important in the non-profit sectors, including admissions Web sites. This study contributes to the growing collection of research on interactivity by applying it to admissions Web sites. Findings may show the importance of interactivity in higher education, and provide further insight into understanding how colleges and universities can best take advantage of new, interactive technology.

Interactivity

Early attempts at defining interactivity have been quite diverse, as there is not a single definition. Some have categorized the various definitions and studied interactivity in terms of the process, the features, perception, or a combination of the three (McMillan & Hwang, 2002). Ha and James (1998) argue that interactivity should be defined as “the extent to which the communicator and the audience respond to each other’s communication needs” (para. 1). Similarly, Steuer (1992) defines interactivity as “the extent to which users can participate in modifying the form and content of a mediated environment in real time” (p. 84).

Stromer-Galley (2004) also noted that interactivity refers to two separate phenomena. First, is a social interaction between people through the use of mediated channels; this is referred to as interactivity-as-process. Research studying this phenomenon looks at human interaction such as observed interaction in chat rooms, for example, self-disclosure and flaming. It can also focus on the user’s experience regarding the interaction, or the effects that the interaction has either on such things as relationships or attitude change. Second, is an interaction that focuses on the user’s interactions with the technology. Important aspects of study include how features of the technology allow users to interact with the system, the time or speed to finish a task, subjective measures of users’ understanding of or experience with the features, and the influence of the features on perceptions, or even the effects that the features may have on cognitive processing. Measurement concentrates on the users’ experiences such as the quality and presence of certain features including multimedia, click polls, hyperlinks, feedback forms, and how users make use of the features (Stromer-Galley, 2004). Many other researchers have also used features as a way to operationalize interactivity (Stout et al., 2001; Ha & James, 1998), adding others such as e-mail links, feedback forums, and chat rooms (Sundar, Kalyanaraman, & Brown, 2003).

The presence of these features is evidence of interactivity; thus, the greater the number of such functions on a site, the greater its interactivity.

Interactivity is one of the processes that make up the relationship between customization and attitudes (Kalyanaraman & Sundar, 2006). Increasing customization allows for better interactive exchange, which can have a positive effect on how the user perceives the source of the content. Perceived interactivity increases as the level of customization of the site increases. Therefore, interactivity and customization can be used not only to attract awareness to the site, but more importantly to build loyalty (Kalyanaraman & Sundar, 2006). Perceived interactivity is also positively correlated to attitude toward the site (Wu, 1999; Hwang & Lee, 2003). Two interactive features in particular, responsiveness and navigability can be used to improve perceived interaction (Wu, 1999). Also, features that allow for involvement with the subject of the site itself have a significant influence on the attitude toward the site (McMillan, Hwang, & Lee, 2003). Interactivity can also have an influence upon information processing. When a site is more interactive, there is an increase in elaboration (Sicilia, Ruiz, & Munuera, 2005). Users on interactive sites process information more comprehensively, and information is processed more favorably. Further, an increased level of interactivity on a site has a positive effect on user's perceived satisfaction, effectiveness, efficiency, value, and overall attitude toward the Web site (Teo, Oh, Liu, & Wei, 2003). The research supports that interactivity can add a great deal of value to a Web site. In terms of an admission Web site, interactivity can build a relationship with prospective users by attracting them and building loyalty with them. Further, if more interactive features are present on the site, it will be processed more favorably and possibly the school itself as well.

Three elements are also identified that are regularly present in other literature (McMillan & Hwang, 2002). The first is the direction of communication, which highlights the significance of allowing for two-way communication as well as providing for feedback, and interpersonal activity through the use of discussion boards and chat rooms. Next is user control; the Internet allows for more tools and content that takes into account user choice and input. Lastly, time in terms of how fast messages can be sent and processed has an effect on the perception of interactivity. Also important is how quickly users can find what they are looking for. The three elements also overlap quite frequently.

Liu and Shrum (2002) proposed another approach to defining interactivity with a three dimensional definition of interactivity, which incorporates three types of interaction: user to machine, user to user, and user to message. They define interactivity as “the degree to which two or more communication parties can act on each other, on the communicative medium, and on the messages and the degree to which such influences are synchronized” (p. 54). They also include three dimensions: active control, two-way communication, and synchronicity. Active control is voluntary action that has a direct influence on the user’s experience. Since the Internet is a nonlinear network of linked content, users can customize the information flow and move between locations. Two-way communication allows for reciprocal communication between users as well as between users and whoever is controlling the site, for example a company. This also allows for easy, instant feedback both giving and receiving. Two-way communication also makes online transactions possible. Synchronicity has to do with the extent to which users can send messages and receive immediate feedback. Users are also able to customize pages in terms of content and layout.

Typically, the Web is studied in terms of two complementary but different perspectives: a system-centered perspective and a user-centered perspective (Stout, Villegas, & Kim 2001). A system-centered perspective focuses on how to best design the technology, and examines the interactive traits of the medium. A user-centered approach examines the interaction that occurs between humans and the technology. Since this study will be examining the importance of interactive features in relation to the actual presence these features in order to create more effective admissions sites, a system-centered perspective will be utilized.

Interactivity on Web sites can be applied to many different sectors, including health information. Interactive tools such as chat rooms, e-mail, and hyperlinks offered by the Internet can be a unique means of health promotion. These interactive tools can be used to increase learning on health-related Web sites. In analyzing health related Web sites, Stout, Villegas, and Kim (2001) focused on the interactive traits of the medium and examined the presence or absence of features and tools. A list of interactive tools was compiled, and then organized into meaningful groups. Nine dimensions of interactivity were developed. The first is accessibility, such as design elements for individuals with disabilities, users with computers or software that might not be up to date, and elements that make for easy interaction with the site. The next dimension is navigation including search engines, site map, and links. Another dimension is time including slow downloading graphics and a registration process to access the site. Personalized content is another dimension including personalized pages and messages. Next is delivery of the message including audio, video, and text only. Data entry and use is the next dimension including feedback, surveys, and the ability to input, view, and update personal data. Another dimension is entertainment including games and quizzes. Promotions include the use of special

offers and sweepstakes. The last dimension is the formation of relationships, which allows for two-way communication such as a registration process, a newsletter, and the ability to contact other Web users as well as the Web master and a site moderator.

Considering their proposed definition of interactivity, Ha and James (1998) form five dimensions of interactivity: playfulness, choice, connectedness, information collection, and reciprocal communication. According to Ha and James, the interactive device must be made available and visible on a Web site, so the measurement of interactivity of the site is determined by the presence of each interactive device for each dimension of interactivity. Playfulness includes games and curiosity arousal devices such as a question and answer format. Choice is based on color, speed, and language. Connectedness involves how connected information is pertaining to the product, company, third-party, or other area of interest to the visitor. This includes hyperlinks both outside the site and within. Information collection measures the presence of monitoring mechanisms such as registration for the site and site counters. Reciprocal communication is measured in terms of ways the visitor can communicate with the owner of the site, such as e-mail the Webmaster or customer service representative, a toll-free telephone number, order or purchase mechanisms, surveys, and other areas for communication such as chat rooms.

Further, McMillan (2002) identified two important aspects that develop interactivity perceptions, the direction of the communication process and the control over that process (Downes & McMillan, 2000). Using these two dimensions, McMillan developed a four-part model in cyber-interactivity. It consists of monologue, which contains one-way communication with low receiver control. The sender creates the content and distributes it to the audience.

Feedback also falls under one-way, but allows receiver to have a small role of participation in the process. However, this does not necessarily mean that the sender will respond. Responsive dialogue allows for two-way communication, however, the sender still has most of the control over the process. In mutual discourse there is also two-way communication, allowing for more control from the user. McMillan clarifies that all participants must have the ability to both send and receive messages. McMillan also suggests that perception-based models are more suitable for measuring relationships between interactivity and other perceptions factors including attitude toward the site. Also, just because the medium is capable of interactivity does not mean that it will be taken advantage of. It is also made apparent that all when individuals examined sites with the same set of guidelines, their ratings on the two dimensions of interactivity were very different.

From these two dimensions Ferber, Foltz, and Pugliese (2007) suggest a modification to McMillian's model of cyber-activity. McMillian's model only accounts for two-way communication, which includes interpersonal as well as public communication. However, Ferber, Foltz, and Pugliese, argue that there is a distinction in that two-way communication is mainly interpersonal through such things as e-mail; however, this does not allow users to communicate to all of the other site users. It is recommended that the model should also include three-way communication with the intention of influencing other users, and providing a means for public deliberation. The model is applied to political websites to further citizen's activity and engagement in political discourse. The updated six-part model allows for controlled response, to allow users to participate in discussion, however the site would still have high control over the content. This is done through such features as a poll or a bulletin board. The

model also includes public discourse, which is where the users have the control over the content. Sites have low control in that they may only remove comments that violate some site norms. Public discourse is accomplished through such things as chat rooms or forums. In terms of roles, in controlled response, the site is a receiver of the users content. The users become participants if they provide information to the site, for example a poll response. There is a great shift in public discourse, whereas the site takes on the role of participant along with the users involved.

Admissions Web sites

By 1998 just about every major university had an informational Web site (Smith, 1998). From 1997-1999, the major differences to sites noted were in their content, there was more of it and it was improved (Kittle & Ciba, 2001). Further, sites showed increasing amounts of interactivity as well as two-way communication. Interactive features were online tours, interactive campus maps, search engines, a campus visit e-mail or hyperlink, and site indexes. At this point, many college and university Web sites were participatory, and many were taking full advantage of the interactive potential the World Wide Web had to offer.

A survey of senior level admissions and enrollment officers conducted by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (2008) found that of the electronic or Web-based tools they employ in recruitment and communications, an admissions office Web site was present among 98% of those surveyed. Further, 56.2% said they had a virtual campus tour, 43.6% said they used current student blogs and 6.5% use faculty blogs, 36.7% employ online chats, 35.8% use instant message, 23% allow users to personalize the site to their preferences, 17.1% use Webcams, 15.4% use podcasts, and only 5% said they used e-mail.

Previous literature on college admissions Web sites can be divided into two different approaches. The first examines the perspective of the students, what they feel makes up an effective site and what they want on a site. The other perspective is from the admissions: what do they believe students find most important or effective, or how they believe they can best reach prospective students as well as the community. Additionally the review identifies three different audiences: traditional four-year, two-year, and graduate students.

Admission Perspective

In order to create effective Web sites, college and university admissions staff must know the needs and desires of prospective students. Based upon earlier research findings on characteristics of effective Web sites, Poock and Lefond (2001) present four major points. First, content is very important. Second, the organization of the content is also important since content is only as good as users can easily find information. Third, there has to be a focus on the needs of the target audience; which impacts the content and organization. Lastly, graphics were found to be not as important as other features of the sites; too many could take away from the usefulness of the site.

When prospective students visit a college or university Web site, they often look beyond the admissions page. The content and characteristics of the site itself can have a significant impact on the power and importance of the sites as public relations tools (Kang & Norton, 2006). In a content analysis of Web sites from a sample of the 129 best national universities in the United States, they were found to have excellent usability with simple design, minimal navigation menus, high navigation speed, and the use of site maps. Each displayed a great deal of

information about the school, especially pertaining to admissions. While the sites had e-mail and feedback forums, many of the sites did not take advantage of the full strength the Internet offers in terms of communication capabilities, such as chat rooms, online polls, and online surveys.

Studies have also looked at the use of the Web in building an effective community college Web site (Poock & Bishop, 2006). Similarly to other studies, the organization of the site and the content were very important to users. However, this study found that only half of the respondents accessed the community college Web site during the admission process. Further, sites should be well organized and visually intuitive. Students want to locate information quickly; therefore, information on the site should be organized by target population and function. Graphics should not take up a large amount of space. However, if used they should properly reflect both the school and its population. Interested students desire information about classes, schedules, programs and majors, and admissions information, while current students are more interesting in information pertaining to course offerings, current events, and contacting staff and faculty.

Prospective Student Perspective

Using the four important points discussed before in order to survey prospective high school students, Poock and Lefond (2001) revealed that Web sites should be organized in a logical way that is easy to follow and that is focused on the prospective individual. High school students are experienced with the Web and so effective sites should be designed around a strategic plan (Poock & Lefond, 2001). Further, since high school students are not familiar with all of the specific college and university terminology, home pages should have links organized by group (current students, prospective students, etc.) and audience-specific terminology should

be applied. Also, graphics should only be used strategically. Several factors can hinder browsing including slow downloads, elaborate graphics and pictures, not providing desired content, ineffective search functions, and excessive levels of information. Several things can be done to increase the likelihood of application: first, the application form should be easy to find. Next, the prospective student sections of the site should be designed with a strategic purpose. Information should be included that is tailored to individual application, this can be done because the Internet is not as costly as mail. This can have a great impact on specific applicants. Finally, money should be invested in market research; this will help colleges and university find factors unique to them.

It is also important to understand how graduate students perceive Web sites, since this may contrast from the way high school students do. The Web site characteristics in order of importance are organization or site architecture, ease of navigation, content, download speed, organization by target audience, friendliness/first impression, with not as much emphasis on graphics (Ng, Parette, & Sterrett, 2003). Visitors will most often perceive a site to be user-friendly if they experience a positive first impression. Ng, Parette, and Sterrett also suggest that graphics should not be overused. Many respondents say they visited the site solely for admission content and not environmental content.

Other research has also looked at the use of the Web in college admissions for the recruitment of graduate students. Poock and Lefond (2003) examined the characteristics of effective graduate school Web sites. Through survey and focus groups, participants rated content as the most important, followed by organization of the Web site, having the homepage organized by functional areas, download speed, and easy access to the online application and instructions.

Time is also an important factor; if users cannot find the information they are looking for within three clicks, or fewer than two minutes, they will be more likely to give up their search. Poock and Lefond (2003) suggest that for prospective students, graduate sites should contain information about programs, faculty, application procedures, teaching assistant benefits, and cost of attendance. Sites should not be crowded with extra information, as graduate students seek information and not entertainment (Poock & Lefond, 2003).

The literature review reveals that much of the past research has focused on how to make an effective Web site to attract prospective students. As many of the studies have reported, some aspects of the site are more important than others. Overall, content and organization seem to be the most important features to the students. In both cases, students and admissions feel that graphics should be used wisely and should not take away from the site. Prospective students want to be able to find the information they are looking for quickly. Several differences are apparent between the various audiences. Whereas most students wanted an online application to be easy to find, most community college students did not use the Internet to apply to the college. Graduate students seemed to be more similar to four-year students; however, organization and navigation are more important to them. Ease of navigation was rated more important than content for graduate students.

Much of the research has also focused on prospective students themselves. While it is of great importance to understand what students are looking for on a college or university Web site, it is also as important that admissions departments are using this information and reflecting it back in the Web sites. Also, many of the samples were convenience samples and not random. Further, the studies did not look past importance of the features, as to use or meaning, and

interactive features were not taken into consideration. Between the two studies that considered interactivity on the admissions Web sites, there were contrasting findings. Kang and Norton (2006) noted that many of the sites in their study did not take full advantage of the communication capabilities that the Internet offers, however Kittle and Ciba (2001) found increasing presence of interactivity including two-way communication.

Method

To answer the previous research questions, two survey instruments as well as a content analysis were used. Both survey instruments were pre-tested before the study was conducted. The first, intended for admissions professionals, was pre-tested with a small group of professional in a higher education admissions office. The second survey, intended for students, was pre-tested with a small group of high school students. Feedback and suggestions were used to edit the survey to ensure its validity, so that the each dimension is clear and understandable. This will also make sure that the operationalizing of interactivity is correct in order to properly answer the research questions.

Samples

Based on data collected from a college search on *U.S. News and World Report* (<http://www.usnews.com/usnews/edu/college/tools/search.php>) a population of 1,821 colleges and universities in the United States was sampled (not including US territories). Each institution was assigned a number, and then a random number generator was used to select which institutions to survey. A random sample of 250 schools was drawn from the total population. Admissions e-mails were obtained from each institution through their Web site. In some cases general admissions e-mails were used, in others personal e-mails were used, for example the

Dean of Admissions. In the case that an institution did not have a Web site, another number was drawn from the random number generator.

Surveys were distributed via e-mail to admissions professionals and admissions offices (see Appendix A). This will guarantee that only one survey is filled out at each institution. In addition, each survey asks the respondent to list which institute they are currently employed at, this will aid in determining who has sent back the survey. Surveys were conducted through RIT's Clipboard application. The link for the survey was provided in each e-mail, directing the respondent to the proper Clipboard page. Responses were saved directly to the Clipboard System to be accessed by the researcher. The e-mail provided the link as well as a cover letter to inform respondents why their participation is needed and what the purpose of the study is (see Appendix B).

In order to survey students, a convenience sample was drawn from the College of Liberal Arts at Rochester Institute of Technology. A total of 49 students responded to the survey. Since most students at RIT have recently gone through the college search process, RIT offers a valuable population. The survey was distributed to students via e-mail along with a cover letter (see Appendix D), and an online survey was employed using the RIT Clipboard system (see Appendix C). The Web site address link was included in the e-mail, along with a cover letter. The total sample of both groups, students and admissions, consisted of both males and females of various ages, races, religious groups, and nationality groups.

Both surveys contained a table of 32 interactive features that may be found on the admissions Web site of a higher education institution as well as several demographic questions. Respondents were also given additional space to include comments if they wished to do so. A

cover letter was also provided, which informed the respondents that the survey is intended to gather results for a study of interactivity on admission Web sites (see Appendix D). The cover letter also informed respondents that all of the information will be confidential, and that their name will in no way be linked to the results. Contact information was also given to respondents if they were interested in learning the results of the study after completion; this also served as an incentive for participation. The end of the surveys gathered basic demographic data to describe the sample.

Importance of Interactive features

Data were obtained through a sample survey of respondents' self-reported evaluations. Respondents in both groups were asked to rate their valued importance of a table of interactive features present on admission Web sites. This is done to answer the first research question, to determine what admissions professionals feel are the most important interactive features. This will also answer the second question, what students feel are the most importance interactive features.

In order to operationalize importance of interactive features, a series of features was listed: items 1-32 on the survey. Features were taken from previous studies as well as items unique to this study. These features were used to represent interactivity. Respondents were asked to rate how important they feel each feature is to an effective admissions Web site using a Likert scale of ordinal level data: either unimportant (coded as 1), of little importance, moderately important, important, very important (coded as 5).

Dimensions and variables were drawn from previous studies discussed in the review of literature, especially Stout, et al (2001) Kittle and Ciba (2001), Ha and James (1998), and Kang

and Norton (2006). Interactive features used in this study also included unique items and features not yet studied. The following dimensions were used to group the variables addressed in the surveys: navigation, personalized content, delivery of messages, communication, and feedback. Variables under navigation included internal/external links, search engine, site map, frequently asked questions, consistent main menu, a prospective student link, and pull-down menu. Personalized content included site registration, online registration for a campus visit/tour, online application, and online application status. Audio, video, text only, graphics, pod casts, and RSS feeds were grouped under delivery of messages. Communication included instant messaging (with current students of admissions officers), message boards, blogs, chat room (with current students, admissions officers, or other prospective students/applicants), and virtual tour. Feedback included survey, e-mail Webmaster, request information (either through e-mail or by inputting mailing address), and cookies. To survey the importance of the different dimensions of interactivity, 32 items were assessed.

Table 1: *Dimensions used to group the variables of interactivity*

Dimension	Variable
Navigation	Internal links External links Search engine Site map FAQ Consistent main menu Prospective student link Pull down menu
Personalized content	Site registration Online registration for campus tour/visit Online application Application status
Delivery of messages	Use of audio Use of video Text only Use of graphics RSS feed available Pod casting
Communication	Instant messaging With current students With admissions officers Message board Blogs of current students Chat room With current students With admissions officers With other applicants/prospective students Virtual tour
Feedback	Survey Contact Webmaster (active e-mail) Contact admissions (active e-mail) Request more information E-mail Mailing address Cookies

The data from each groups' responses were then used to determine what admissions professionals say is most important. Since each individual feature is independent of the others, all responses were averaged in order to determine the importance of each feature listed on the survey. The same was also done with the students' responses. The averages were then used to compare what admissions officers say is most important to what the prospective students say is most important. The data from the students' report were also used to compare what students say is important to what is actually present on the Web sites.

Demographics

The last several items on the survey instrument asked demographic information about the respondents in order to describe the sample. Numbers two and three on both surveys asked respondents their sex and age. On the survey given to students, age was collected along with year in school, number four on the survey, to ensure that they were students. Respondents were allowed to choose first year, second year, third year, fourth year, or fifth year or higher/graduate student.

On the survey given to admissions professionals, number four on the survey asked respondents to list their current job title. This was done in order to describe the sample as well as to verify that respondents are in the target group, admissions professionals, so that their information could be used in the study. The next question, number five, asked respondents to indicate which institution they are current employed at. This was done in order to ensure that only one individual at each institution responded to the survey. The last question on the survey, number six, asked admissions officers what type of institution they are employed at. Responses

include: a four-year institution, two-year institution, vocational training school, or other (graduate).

Content Analysis of Admissions Web sites

A quantitative content analysis was also conducted in order to answer the fourth research question, whether the interactive features students say are more important, are actually present on the sites. A sample of 115 institutions was randomly drawn from the total population of sites listed in the *U.S. News & World Report*. Each school was assigned a number, and a random number generator was used to select the sample. Schools without a functioning Web site were discarded. The entire site was not evaluated due to the fact that this study focuses on the features present, and not the usability. A site's homepage and admissions page, as well as a possible prospect student page, were examined. Dates of the coding were taken in order to document when the site was viewed in the case that a site was altered after the study was conducted.

The Web sites were coded according to the variables as laid out previously in the survey of interactive features. Two additional variables were also added to the list of features during the coding process: a toll-free 800-telephone number for the admissions office (grouped under communication) as well as e-mails for individual admissions counselors (grouped under feedback). The Web sites were split between two coders who were informed of the coding process using the coding booklet (see Appendix E). The booklet was read prior to the coding of the Web sites, so each variable was clearly understood. Ten of the Web sites were coded by both coders and compared to assess inter-coder reliability. Any differences noticed were resolved during this process. Responses were then recorded on the Content coding sheets (see Appendix F).

Web sites were coded based on their absence or presence of the features that were used in this study to operationalize interactivity of admissions Web sites as following Ha & James (1998) and Stout et al (2001). The presence of a feature will indicate the presence of interactivity, so the more features present, the more interactive the site. If a feature was present it was coded as 1, if a feature was absent it was coded as 0. If a feature was not working properly it was also coded as 0. Credit was given for a feature that was linked to another site as long as the school set up that feature. For example, some schools had videos on their site through YouTube, which the school itself created. If a school merely provided a link to a feature, for example a link to the Common Application, then credit was not given.

An area for “other” was also included so that the list is exhaustive. If an interactive feature was present that was not included in the list, or if an interesting feature was present, the coders made note of it in the allotted space. After the completion of the content analysis, the data were summed for each dimension and each of the variables. The results were then used to determine which features were most frequent. Students’ responses were also used to compare which features were said to be more important in relation to the actual occurrence of the features on the Web sites. This answered the last research question of whether what students feel is most important is similar to what is present on the Web sites.

Results

Research Question 1: What interactive features of the Web site do admissions officers say are most important for making a Web site to attract students and turn them into applicants?

Seven admissions professionals responded to the survey; all were male. The respondents were between the ages of 28 and 60. All of the respondents were currently employed at four-year colleges or universities.

Of the features that were rated by respondents, a prospective or interested student link and an online application were the most important according to admissions professionals, 100% rated this feature very important. Nearly as important are internal links connecting to pages within the site, the presence of graphics on the admissions site, as well as the ability to e-mail admissions, request more information by providing a home mailing address, and register online for a campus visit or tour were most important. As Table 1 shows, each of these features was rated either important or very important by 100% of the respondents.

Further, the ability to request information by e-mail and a frequently asked questions section, as well as a functional search engine, site map or site index, and consistent main menu navigation, were rated as important or very important by 85.7% and 85.8% of respondents, respectively. The presence of the video on the site, a user-controlled virtual tour, and the ability to check one's application status online were each rated by 71.5% of the respondents as either important or very important. Rated as moderately important are the ability to instant message current students, at 85.7%; podcasts, cookies, and text-only option all at 71.4%; blogs at 57.1%, and a pull-down navigation menu at 42.9%. Instant messaging with admissions officers was rated by all of the respondents as either moderately important or important. The presence of audio was rated by 85.8% as moderately important, important, or very important, and a message board feature was rated by 84.9% of respondents as moderately important or important.

On the other hand, surveys on the admissions page were rated as least important. Both of these features were rated as either unimportant or of little importance by 57.2% of the respondents. External links connecting to sites outside of the admissions page were not viewed as important, rated by 85.8% of respondents as either of little importance or moderately important. Respondents were somewhat split on features including a site allowing a visitor to register and log-on, an active e-mail to contact the Webmaster, chat rooms to connect with current students, chat rooms with admissions officers, and chat rooms with other applicants/interested students, as well as RSS feeds.

Table 2 : Admissions Importance of Interactive Features					
Interactive Feature	Admissions Importance Rating				
	Unimportant % (n)	Of Little Importance % (n)	Moderately Important % (n)	Important % (n)	Very Important % (n)
Links that connect to other parts of the site	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	28.6 (2)	71.4 (5)
Links that connect to an outside Web site	0 (0)	42.9 (3)	42.9 (3)	14.3 (1)	0 (0)
Search engine	0 (0)	0 (0)	14.3 (1)	42.9 (3)	42.9 (3)
Site map	14.3 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	42.9 (3)	42.9 (3)
Frequently asked questions	0 (0)	14.3 (1)	0 (0)	71.4 (5)	14.3 (1)
Consistent main menu	14.3 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	42.9 (3)	42.9 (3)
Prospective student section	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	100 (7)
Pull-down navigation menu	14.3 (1)	0 (0)	42.9 (3)	28.6 (2)	14.3 (1)
Site registration and log-in	14.3 (1)	28.6 (2)	28.6 (2)	28.6 (2)	0 (0)
Online application	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	100 (7)
Check status of application online	0 (0)	0 (0)	28.6 (2)	14.3 (1)	57.1 (4)
Register online for a campus visit or tour	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	28.6 (2)	71.4 (5)
Audio	14.3 (1)	0 (0)	28.6 (2)	28.6 (2)	28.6 (2)
Video	14.3 (1)	0 (0)	14.3 (1)	42.9 (3)	28.6 (2)
Text-only option	0 (0)	0 (0)	71.4 (5)	28.6 (2)	0 (0)
Graphics	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	57.1 (4)	42.9 (3)
RSS Feeds	28.6 (2)	0 (0)	28.6 (2)	42.9 (3)	0 (0)
Pod casts	14.3 (1)	0 (0)	71.4 (5)	14.3 (1)	0 (0)
Instant messaging with current students	0 (0)	0 (0)	85.7 (6)	14.3 (1)	0 (0)
Instant messaging with admissions officers	0 (0)	0 (0)	57.1 (4)	42.9 (3)	0 (0)
Message board	14.3 (1)	0 (0)	42.9 (3)	42.0 (3)	0 (0)
Blogs	0 (0)	14.3 (1)	57.1 (4)	28.6 (2)	0 (0)
Chat rooms to talk with current students	14.3 (1)	28.6 (2)	28.6 (2)	28.6 (2)	0 (0)

Chat rooms to talk with admissions officers	14.3 (10)	28.6 (2)	14.3 (1)	42.9 (3)	0 (0)
Chat rooms to talk with other applicants or interested students	14.3 (1)	42.9 (3)	28.6 (2)	14.3 (1)	0 (0)
Virtual tour of the school	14.3 (1)	0 (0)	14.3 (1)	42.9 (3)	28.6 (2)
Surveys	14.3 (1)	42.9 (3)	42.9 (3)	0 (0)	0 (0)
E-mail the Webmaster about the site	0 (0)	42.9 (3)	14.3 (1)	28.6 (2)	14.3 (1)
E-mail an admissions officer	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	28.6 (2)	71.4 (5)
Request more information by e-mail	0 (0)	0 (0)	14.3 (1)	14.3 (1)	71.4 (5)
Request more information with home address	0 (0)	0 (0)	0 (0)	42.9 (3)	57.1 (4)
Cookies	28.6 (2)	0 (0)	71.4 (5)	0 (0)	0 (0)

Further by examining the average importance for each feature (see Table 2), admissions professionals rated a prospective student link, an online application, internal links, an online tour/visit registration, and active e-mail addresses for admissions as most important respectively. The features rated least important were (beginning with the least) as follows: surveys, cookies, a chat feature with other applicants/interested students, a chat feature with current students of the school, and site registration/log-in.

Table 3: Interactive Features in Order of Importance (From Most to Least)

<i>Admissions</i>	<i>Students</i>
1. Prospective Student Link	1. Application Status
2. Online Application	2. Request Information-Mailing Address
3. Internal Links	3. Request Information-E-mail
4. Online Visit/Tour Registration	4. Internal Links
5. Active Admissions E-mail	5. Consistent Main Menu
6. Request Information-E-mail	6. Active Admissions E-mail
7. Request Information-Mailing Address	7. Search Engine
8. Graphics	8. Online Application
9. Search Engine	9. Prospective Student Link
10. Application Status	10. FAQ Section
11. Site Map	11. Online Visit/Tour Registration
12. Consistent Main Menu	12. Virtual Tour
13. FAQ Section	13. Graphics
14. Virtual Tour	14. Text Only Option
15. Video	15. Site Map
16. Audio	16. Pull Down Navigation Menu
17. Instant Message- Admissions	17. Instant Message- Admissions
18. Pull Down Navigation Menu	18. Active Webmaster E-mail
19. Text-only Option	19. Message Board
20. Instant Message- Current Students	20. Video
21. Message Board	21. Chat feature- Admissions
22. Blogs	22. External Links
23. Active Webmaster E-mail	23. Site Registration/Log-in
24. RSS Feed	24. Blogs
25. Podcasts	25. Chat Feature- Current Students
26. Chat feature- Admissions	26. Cookies
27. External Links	27. Instant Message- Current Students
28. Site Registration/Log-in	28. Chat Feature- Other Applicants
29. Chat Feature- Current Students	29. Audio
30. Chat Feature- Other Applicants	30. Surveys
31. Cookies	31. RSS
32. Surveys	32. Podcasts

Research Question 2: What interactive features do prospective students say are most important for making college application decisions?

Of the 49 research participants who responded to the student survey, the majority, 73.5%, were female. The participants were between the ages of 18 and 54. The greatest percentages of the participants were 18 and 21. The range of year in school was from first year to fifth year/graduate students with the greatest percentage of participants in their fifth year+ or graduate students, a total of 40.8%.

As noted in the previous Table 3, students rated application status most important, followed by request information by providing a mailing address, request information by e-mail, internal links, and a consistent main menu. The five least important features starting with the least are: podcasts, RSS feeds, surveys, audio, and a feature enabling chat with other applicants/interested students.

Table 4: Importance of Interactive Features					
Interactive Feature	Student Importance Rating				
	Unimportant % (n)	Of Little Importance % (n)	Moderately Important % (n)	Important % (n)	Very Important % (n)
Links that connect to other parts of the site	0 (0)	2 (1)	20.4 (10)	20.4 (10)	57.1 (28)
Links that connect to an outside Web site	6.1 (3)	46.9 (23)	34.7 (17)	8.2 (4)	4.1 (2)
Search engine	2.0 (1)	2.0 (1)	22.4 (11)	20.4 (10)	53.1 (26)
Site map	6.3 (3)	20.8 (10)	22.9 (11)	29.2 (14)	20.8 (10)
Frequently asked questions	0 (0)	8.2 (4)	24.5 (12)	34.7 (17)	32.7 (16)
Consistent main menu	0 (0)	0 (0)	18.4 (9)	34.7 (17)	46.9 (23)
Prospective student section	0 (0)	8.2 (4)	16.3 (8)	28.6 (14)	46.9 (23)
Pull-down navigation menu	2 (1)	20.4 (10)	38.8 (19)	24.5 (12)	14.3 (7)
Site registration and log-in	22.4 (11)	22.4 (11)	38.8 (19)	8.2 (4)	8.2 (4)
Online application	2.1 (1)	4.2 (2)	20.8 (10)	20.8 (10)	52.1 (25)
Check status of application online	0 (0)	2 (1)	6.1 (3)	22.4 (11)	69.4 (34)
Register online for a campus visit or tour	2 (1)	10.2 (5)	20.4 (10)	32.7 (17)	34.7 (17)
Audio	30.6 (15)	28.6 (14)	24.5 (12)	10.2 (5)	6.1 (3)
Video	18.8 (9)	22.9 (11)	31.3 (15)	18.8 (9)	8.3 (4)
Text-only option	2 (1)	10.2 (5)	46.9 (23)	28.6 (14)	12.2. (6)
Graphics	4.1 (2)	6.1 (3)	34.7 (17)	38.8 (19)	16.3 (8)
RSS Feeds	28.6 (14)	32.7 (16)	32.7 (16)	6.1 (3)	0 (0)
Pod casts	39.6 (19)	29.2 (14)	29.2 (14)	2.1 (1)	0 (0)
Instant messaging with current students	28.6 (14)	28.6 (14)	22.4 (11)	16.3 (8)	4.1 (2)
Instant messaging with admissions officers	16.7 (8)	18.8 (9)	25 (12)	27.1 (13)	12.5 (6)
Message board	16.3 (8)	22.4 (11)	34.7 (17)	22.4 (11)	4.1 (2)
Blogs	17 (8)	38.3 (18)	27.7 (13)	8.5 (4)	8.5 (4)
Chat rooms to talk with current students	24.5 (12)	30.6 (15)	26.5 (13)	16.3 (8)	2 (1)
Chat rooms to talk with admissions officers	20.4 (10)	24.5 (12)	24.5 (12)	24.5 (12)	6.1 (3)

Chat rooms to talk with other applicants or interested students	26.5 (13)	30.6 (15)	22.4 (11)	20.4 (10)	0 (0)
Virtual tour of the school	0 (0)	6.1 (3)	30.6 (15)	34.7 (17)	28.6 (14)
Surveys	28.6 (14)	32.7 (16)	28.6 (14)	8.2 (4)	2 (1)
E-mail the Webmaster about the site	18.4 (9)	22.4 (11)	26.5 (13)	16.3 (8)	16.3 (8)
E-mail an admissions officer	4.1 (2)	0 (0)	12.2 (6)	32.7 (16)	51 (25)
Request more information by e-mail	2.1 (1)	0 (0)	10.6 (5)	36.2 (17)	51.1 (24)
Request more information with home address	0 (0)	0 (0)	8.2 (4)	34.7 (17)	57.1 (28)
Cookies	27.1 (13)	27.1 (13)	29.2 (14)	12.5 (6)	4.2 (2)

Research Question 3: What is the difference between what prospective students say are the most important interactive features and what admissions officers say are most important?

In order to determine the extent to which admissions officers' differed from students in their self-reported importance of each feature, Mann Whitney U tests were conducted. The results of the tests revealed a significant difference between students and admissions professionals for the feature of prospective student link. Admissions professionals rated this feature significantly higher than students ($U = 80.5, p = .013$). Admissions professionals also rated the feature of online application as significantly more important ($U = 87.5, p = .022$). Admissions professionals also rated online visit/tour registration as significantly more important ($U = 92.5, p = .039$), as well as audio ($U = 83.5, p = .025$), graphics ($U = 82, p = .019$), and podcasts ($U = 79, p = .017$). The difference between both groups on the feature of video was not significantly different; however, it approached significance with admissions professionals rating it as more important ($U = 93.5, p = .054$). Students and admissions professionals did not differ significantly on the other variables. However, all of these results must be interpreted cautiously in light of the small sample size of admissions officers.

Research Question 4: To what extent are the interactive features, noted as most important by students, actually present on the Web sites?

According to the content analysis of the admissions Web sites, Table 4 shows that links connecting to pages within the admissions site (most present), graphics, links connecting to pages outside of the admissions site, an active admissions e-mail, and cookies were the five most present features. The five least present features beginning with least present were a message board, chat rooms for prospective students to connect with other interested students, chat rooms

to connect prospects with admissions officers, chat rooms to connect prospects with current students of the institution, and instant message capability for prospects to IM current students.

Table 5: Presence of Interactive Features on Sites (Ranked from Most Present to Least Present)					
Feature	Present (n)	Not Present (n)	Feature	Present (n)	Not Present (n)
Internal links	107	0	Video	57	50
Graphics	107	0	Contact webmaster (active e-mail)	57	50
External Links	106	1	Prospective Student Link	51	56
Contact Admissions (Active E-mail)	102	5	Application Status	42	65
Cookies	97	10	Pull-down Menu	40	67
Online Application	95	12	RSS Feed	40	67
Search Engine	94	13	Blog	31	76
Request more information (mailing address)	89	18	Virtual Tour	31	76
Request more information (e-mail)	88	19	Instant Message-Admissions Officers	19	88
Consistent Main Menu	76	31	Pod casts	9	98
Site Map	74	33	Survey	8	99
Visit Registration	72	35	Text-only Option	6	101
Toll-free 800# Admissions	72	35	Instant message (current students)	6	101
FAQ	68	39	Chat Room (current students)	6	101
E-mail Admissions Reps	68	39	Chat Room (Admissions)	6	101
Site Registration/Log-In	65	42	Chat Room (Other prospective students)	5	102
Audio	60	47	Message Board	3	104

Students' rating of the importance of features was compared with the actual presence of the features on the sites in the sample. Spearman's Rho tests were conducted to test for correlation between the data. The relationship between the two variables was significant for the feature of site map ($r = -.29$, $p = .044$). Since site maps were only present on 74 of the 107 sites, but ranked by 72.9% of respondents as moderately important, important, or very important; the more important the students rated site maps, the less they appeared on the sites. No other significant correlations were found between the frequency of the features on the sites and the students ranking of the features.

Discussion

This study examined the importance of interactive features on admissions web sites, as well as the differences between two groups: students and admissions professionals. A content analysis was also conducted on a sample of admission web sites to determine the presence of the features. These data were also used to examine the relationship between students' importance of feature and their actual presence on web sites.

The first research question sought to examine what interactive features admissions professionals feel are more important for making an effective admission Web site and turning prospective students into applicants and ultimately students. The ranking of the features reveals that admissions professionals feel features directly related to turning prospects into applicants are most important. These are all features that provide important information to interested students: a prospective student link, online application, admissions e-mail, request information, and application status (in order of importance). This is understandable because the ultimate goal of admissions is to obtain a large number of applicants and entering students, so it clearly makes

sense why they would want these features present on their sites for prospective students. Other features ranked high in importance (FAQ section and virtual tour) also directly educate prospects about the school and the admissions process. The FAQ section is most likely considered especially because it allows immediate answers to common questions prospects may have. These findings are consistent with past research by Poock and Lefond (2001), which found that content is more important followed by organization of the site/content because proper organization is necessary to find the content.

Admissions professionals also seem to prefer e-mail communication, which was ranked above request information with a mailing address and chat features (chat rooms, instant messaging, and message boards), which were for the most part ranked low. While chat and mailing both take time, e-mails are very quick which is beneficial to them as well as students.

Navigational features were next important for admissions professionals including the following: internal links, search engine, site map, and consistent main menu. These navigation features allow site visitors to find their desired information quickly, allowing them to learn about the school and other admissions information. Admissions professionals also value online visit registration as an important tool; this feature may be easier to plan and arrange student visits rather than have someone take phone calls to do so.

Conversely, more entertainment type features such as RSS feeds, podcasts, and blogs were not considered as important. These features are also fairly new and may explain their lack of importance. Other older entertainment features, video and audio, were ranked moderately important. Surprisingly, survey was the last ranked feature. While surveys may not be the top priority of admissions professionals, they can provide very valuable information that is both free

and fairly easy to obtain. Prospective students are coming to these sites for their admissions information, so they are already a captive audience spending time at the site. To maximize on this, surveys could inquire about what things visitors would like to see on the site and what they feel is most helpful. Some schools did take advantage of this feature by surveying students who had visited their school about their experience.

Cookies were also ranked at the end of the list, which is also surprising because cookies provide useful information for tracking who is visiting the site. This could provide admissions with useful information about the type of prospects visiting the site and what other sites they visit. Site registration/log-in was also ranked low in importance, but again by allowing students to make a log in or personalize the site, their needs can be better catered to, and their visitation to the site can be tracked. While this study did not inquire into the reasons behind the ranking, an explanation may be that some of these features are expensive and time-consuming to manage.

The second research question examined what interactive features students rated as most important for an effective admissions Web site. The ranking of the features reveals that features directly relating to applying to the school were rated very highly, specifically the ability to check one's application status and apply online. It is interesting to note that while an online application feature and status were at the top of the list, site registration/log-in was ranked towards the bottom. Most of the sites that had an online application or status checker did so by allowing an applicant to create a site username and password. Just outside of the top 10, students seemed to value features that let them directly interact with the school either instantly with a virtual tour or by registering online for a physical visit.

The ranking of the features also reveals that students value navigational tools highly. Features such as internal links, a consistent main menu, a prospective student link, and a search engine all ranked high in importance for students. Other navigational tools such as site maps, pull down menus, and external links were somewhere around the middle of the list. This finding is consistent with past research by Poock and Bishop (2006) and Ng, Parette, and Sterrett (2003) who found that students want to locate information quickly, and navigational tools make that possible. Poock and Lefond (2001) and Ng, Parette, and Sterrett (2003) also support that students want the admissions site to be organized by target audience and logically focused on prospects with specific links. This study found that students rated a prospective student link high; in this way students can be automatically directed to information that is valuable and relevant to them. The past study also found that students believe an ineffective search tool can hinder their browsing, and the present study found that a search engine feature was ranked very highly.

Poock and Lefond (2003) found that graduate students rated content more important than organization; however, the present study did not examine content on the sites. They did find, however, that students in their study valued information over entertainment. That finding is consistent with this study, which found that features such as video, as well as audio, surveys, and podcasts (which were all ranked in the bottom four) were considered less important. Further, features allowing students to request information either through e-mail or a mailing address as well as an active admissions e-mail contact and a FAQ section were all ranked extremely high in importance.

Graphics were listed between the top and the middle of the list. While past studies found that students felt graphics should not be overused (Ng, Parette, Sterrett, 2003) or overemphasized

(Poock & Bishop, 2006), this study did not examine any variance between sizes of graphics, only their importance in general. One could conclude by combining present findings with past research, that while graphics should not take up the majority of the page they are still moderately important to prospective site visitors. They may provide valuable information to prospects including the type of student body at the school and what the campus looks like. Chat features were not ranked very highly on the list. However, of the chat features, those that allow for communication with admissions counselors were ranked more important than chat features to communicate with current students or other prospective students/applicants. The text-only feature was only rated as moderately important. The probable explanation for this is that most students attending RIT have high-speed Internet access. Text-only feature may only be important for those with a slow Internet connection, so they can still access the site and receive all of the important information on it.

The third research question compared the importance ratings between students and admissions professionals. There were several significant findings. Admissions professionals ranked the prospective student link higher than students did, which is somewhat surprising because one would think students would value such a feature in helping them locate the proper information. Admissions also rated the online application feature significantly higher than students. While students would certainly value this feature, admissions professionals would also because it is easier for them to manage the amount of applications received. Admissions professionals also rated online visit/tour registration significantly more important than students. This may be for a similar reason; it may be easier for them to manage the amount of visits electronically than by phone. Graphics were also rated more important by admissions

professionals than students, which may be related to past research (Poock & Lefond, 2001; Ng, Parette, Sterrett, 2003), which found that students did not want the emphasis placed on graphics. Audio and podcasts were also rated higher by admissions professionals which may be for the same reason, students desire information before entertainment when visiting an admissions site (Poock & Lefond, 2003).

There were no significant findings with the other features, however comparing the ranking between the two groups reveals that students rated navigational features more important, while admissions officers seemed to rank navigation features next in importance behind direct admissions and application information. Both groups rated entertainment features like chat, instant messaging, and podcasts lowest in importance. These features are considered more extras and not as significant as specific admissions content.

The fourth research question examined the relationship between students' importance ratings of features and their actual presence on Web sites. This required a content analysis of a sampling of Web sites. The results of the analysis revealed that navigational features were most present including links, a consistent main menu, and a search engine. Other features directly related to applying for and learning about school were also most present including an online application feature, active e-mail for admissions, and a request information tool. These findings are consistent with Kang and Norton's (2006) study, which showed that most admissions sites had excellent usability, including features like a site map.

The features least present were communication related such as message boards, chat features, instant message features, blogs, podcasts, and feedback tools such as surveys. Kang and Norton (2006) also found that while many sites had e-mail, they did not take advantage of many

of the communication capabilities of the Internet including chat rooms and surveys. Both of these findings are consistent with the present study. Kittle and Ciba (2001) however, found that sites showed increasing amounts of interactivity including two-way communication. While the present study supports the finding of increasing interactivity in terms of virtual tours, search engines, and site indexes, increasing two-way communication was not present as instant messaging, and chat room features were not heavily present on the sites in the sample.

The survey conducted by *the Chronicle of Higher Education* (2008) asked upper-level admissions officers what features they most used in recruitment. The findings of the present study are not consistent. The present study found that approximately 29% of sites had virtual tours, compared with over half for the survey. Further, 36.7% of admissions officers reported that they used online chats and 35.8% used instant messaging; however, this study found that only nearly 6% of sites had admissions, students, or prospective student chat features and only 6% had instant messaging with students and 18% had instant messaging with admissions. The survey also reported that 15.4% used podcasts, while this study found that only 7% had podcasts. One finding was more similar pertaining to blogs: 43.6% of the survey used blogs while this study found that only 29% had blogs. One very noteworthy finding is that only 5% in the survey said they employed e-mail; however, the present study found that nearly all of the sites had an active admissions e-mail and over half (64%) listed e-mails for admissions representatives/counselors.

There were also several other features found during the coding process. Many sites offered a Spanish translation tool either of the entire site or a section. Several sites also hosted a unique feature that allowed an alum, current student, guidance counselor, or site visitor to

request a student. Some sites also had a call back feature or other contact feature where a visitor could input their telephone number, e-mail, text message, or even screen name to be contacted by a representative of the admissions office. Many sites offered a Web cam feature in addition to a virtual tour to allow a visitor to explore an area of the campus. Many sites also had an “Ask” feature in which the user could type a question and receive a response, or e-mail their question if an answer was not available. Many sites that did not have an instant message feature for students listed e-mail contacts. Meet-a-student or faculty sections were also quite frequent. E-newsletters were also seen on several sites, including one that was written by current students specifically for prospective students. A few schools also hosted a social network for applicants or admitted students. Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace accounts were also linked on many admissions sites. One site allowed prospects to create their own customized brochure online. Several sites also had a scholarship calculator tool so students could determine their anticipated aid, and one school offered a university cost comparison tool.

In direct comparison to the students’ ranking, a significant finding was only present with the feature of sitemap. The feature did not appear as frequently; however, it was ranked highly for students. While not statistically significant, other observations can be made. Students ranked navigational features very highly, and the majority of these features were also ranked highly on the list of present features including internal and external links, search engine, consistent main menu, and site map. Other features ranked highly for both include an online application, admission e-mail, and request information. Also similar, communications features (chat, instant message, message board) were ranked low in importance for students, and these features were also not very often found on the sites.

Conversely, a prospective student link was a feature rated highly for students but was lower on the list for presence. One possible explanation for this is due to the specific coding of the sites. Many sites had a link titled “future students,” however this leads one to assume that a student has applied, been accepted, and plans to attend the school. A student in this position would be seeking different information than a prospective student. While this study did not inquire into whether students perceived it in this way, coders did not give credit for schools with future student links for the above reason. Past research shows students want information specifically tailored to various audiences (Ng, Parette, Sterrett, 2003; Poock & Lefond, 2001), and accepted students and interested students are two different audiences. Graphics were present on all sites; however, students only ranked them as moderately important. This could be attributed to reasons explained previously. While graphics are important, they should not make up the majority of sites, as they only provide a small amount of information. Another difference is that application status was only present on 42 of the sites, 39% of the sample, while it was rated as most important for students. Many schools still use traditional methods of communication, mail or telephone, to convey this information; however, the results of this study show that students feel this feature is very important.

Conclusion

While past research has examined what students feel is important pertaining to sites as well as what admissions professionals feel students want on a site, there is an absence in the literature in comparing the two groups. This study hopes to provide insight into this area by comparing how both groups perceived importance in one study. Additionally, interactivity has been examined in terms of the effect it can have upon users’ attitudes and perceptions of the site.

Further, there has been conflict in past research pertaining to the presence of interactive features. I believe the method chosen, a content analysis of a random sample of admissions Web sites, offers a valuable contribution to the literature. Additionally, I believe the combination of surveys and content analysis provides useful insight into the difference between prospective students' and admissions professionals' perceived importance of interactive features.

Limitations

As with all research projects, this proposed study has several limitations, which may impact the results and the extent to which information may be concluded. First, the sample intended to survey the high school students' population is not representative. The results may be used to discuss what the sample reported, but since it was not a random sample, the results cannot be generalized to all students. The results are limited only to the respondents surveyed. Also, the sample was college students, and while they have all fairly recently gone through the college search process, they may not have the same opinions as high school students. Further, both samples may not have understood the features, in fact one student did comment at the end of the survey that they did not know what a few of the features were. This would certainly impact the results; one cannot rate importance of something they do not understand. Short descriptions of each, such as that used on the content coding sheet, may have helped. Additionally, there were only seven responses for the admissions survey. Such a small sample certainly reduces the extent to which the data can be used to generalize all admissions counselors.

Furthermore, the survey instrument only asked the respondents to rate the importance, but it did not inquire into why each feature was or was not considered important. Further, data

collected through the survey instruments are soft data. Since respondents are asked to self-report this information, we must rely on their accurate and truthful responses. Self-reports data are subject to such effects of primacy-recency, memory, time, and pressure to be consistent.

A limitation pertaining to the content analysis is that the content or message itself was not examined. In only investigating whether a certain feature is present or not excludes the quality of the feature. Merely having the feature is important, however, some features may be better or easier to use than others. Also, with the content analysis there is the potential for human error in the coding of the Web sites. While the codebook was created to reduce uncertainty, there is still the possibility for subjectivity.

Heuristics

While acknowledging the limitations of this research study, it is also important to consider the benefits of this study. One major benefit is that this study may inspire future work. While some research has already been conducted in the areas of interactivity and admissions Web sites, further study is necessary to understand the value of interactivity on these sites. This study took a quantitative approach, however, further research would benefit from more of a qualitative approach. Interviews could be conducted both with high school students during their college search as well as admissions professionals in order to really understand the value and use of interactivity features.

This study only revealed information about the importance of features, it did not consider how they are used or to what extent they are used, and why. As mentioned in the discussion of limitations, additional research could also examine the Web sites in terms of the quality of the features, not just their presence. Much of the research is concerned with defining the features that

make up an interactive site, but what is so important about features if they are not being used or if they do not add any value? Ferber, Foltz, and Pugliese (2005) feel that perhaps the value of interactivity is “being seriously blown out of proportion” (p. 409). They argue that interactivity should not be looked at in terms of an end goal itself, but as a “means” to a more important goal. No matter how interactive the medium is, the process is not as significant as the effect or the outcome. Any further research would benefit college admissions departments trying to reach prospective students, as well as those students themselves in their attempt to find the right college.

Another possible study, as mentioned previously, could look into why students and admissions counselors feel specific features are or are not important so as to get a better understanding of what they desire on a site. Certainly another study could be conducted with a larger sample of admissions professionals, although the present study attempted to contact nearly 200 schools, a larger sample would provide much more valuable information. Another area for study should use true prospective students (high-school students) as their sample because of the age range of this study. More traditional students may, and probably do, have a different opinion of interactive features than older non-traditional students. Further, a valuable study could be conducted comparing students in different areas, for example urban versus suburban, to determine if there are different needs for various types of students. A site with too many interactive features could possibly be of little value to a student without high-speed Internet access or a personal computer.

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Appendix A: Survey Instrument for admissions professionals

Interactivity & Admissions Websites

Below is a list of features that might be present on college and university admission Web sites.

1. Admissions Professionals Survey

Instructions: For each, please indicate how important you feel each feature is for your college's Web site, by choosing the appropriate box.

	Unimportant	Of Little Importance	Moderately Important	Important	Very Important
Links that connect to other parts of the site	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Links that connect to an outside Web site	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Search engine	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Site map	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Frequently asked questions (F.A.Q.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Main menu that stays consistent on every page	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Prospective or interested student section	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Pull-down navigation menu	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Site registration and log-in	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Online application	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Check status of application online	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Register online for a campus visit or tour	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Audio	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Video	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

	Unimportant	Of Little Importance	Moderately Important	Important	Very Important
Text-only	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Graphics	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
RSS Feeds	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Podcasts	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Instant messaging with current students	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Instant messaging with admissions officers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Message board	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Current student blogs	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Chat rooms to talk with current students	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Chat rooms to talk with admissions officers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Chat rooms to talk with other applicants or interested students	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Virtual tour of the school	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Surveys	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Email/Contact the Webmaster about the site	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Email an admissions officer or representative	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Request more information about the school by email	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

	Unimportant	Of Little Importance	Moderately Important	Important	Very Important
Request more information about the school by giving mailing address online	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Cookies	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Finally, for statistical purposes only, please answer four questions about yourself.

2. What is your present age?

3. What is your sex?

☐

Male

☐

Female

4. What is your current job title?

5. At which institution are you currently employed?

6. Please describe this institution by selecting the following (choose all that apply):

☐

Four-year college or university

☐

Two-year college

☐

Vocational training school

☐

Other (graduate)

7. Please use this space for any additional comments you may have:

Appendix B: Cover Letter to admissions officers

Dear Admissions Professional:

Today, it is nearly impossible for an institution of higher education not to be present on the Web. As a result, it is important to understand what makes an effective admission Web site, so that prospective students can be adequately engaged and converted to applicants. As an admissions representative, you are part of a small group whose opinions matter on this subject.

Understanding what features make up an effective admission Web site is significant information that would appeal to any college or university. While research has previously looked at what features may or may not be present on such Web sites, research has neglected the importance of not only what students think, but admissions professionals as well. This study hopes to investigate into this area as well as provide information to assist admissions departments in building more effective Web sites.

Please complete the brief survey at: <https://clipboard.rit.edu/take.cfm?sid=70758C1A>

All responses will be completely confidential. Results will list only the names of the institutions that have responded along with demographic information including the survey takers gender and age in order to describe the sample as a whole. Information regarding the type of institution will also be included, as well as the institution name to verify who has returned the survey. Job title is also requested to ensure that the survey taker is currently working in admissions, however that information will not be in the results. Survey takers identities will only be known by the researcher, and at no times will those identities ever be revealed.

The results of this study will be presented to the RIT community in part completion of a master's thesis, and may be presented at a future academic conference. If you would like to receive a copy of the results, please send an e-mail to kmr8059@rit.edu. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to e-mail or call (315) 345-4689.

Thank you for your time and assistance!

Sincerely,

Katherine Robert

Appendix C: Survey Instrument for students

Interactivity & Admissions Websites- Students

Below is a list of features that might be present on college and university admission Web sites.

1. Importance of Interactive Features

Instructions: For each, please indicate how important you feel each feature is for an effective Web site, by choosing the appropriate box.

	Unimportant	Of Little Importance	Moderately Important	Important	Very Important
Links that connect me to other parts of the site	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Links that take me somewhere outside of the Website	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Search engine	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Site map	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Frequently asked questions (FAQ)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Main menu that stays consistent on every page	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Prospective or interested student section	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Pull-down navigation menu	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Site registration and log-in	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Online application	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Check status of application online	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Register online for a campus visit or tour	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Audio	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

	Unimportant	Of Little Importance	Moderately Important	Important	Very Important
Video	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Text-only	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Graphics	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
RSS Feeds	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Podcasts	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Instant messaging with current students	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Instant messaging with admissions officers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Message board	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Blogs	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Chat rooms to talk with current students	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Chat rooms to talk with admissions officers	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Chat rooms to talk with other applicants or interested students	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Virtual tour of the school	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Surveys	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Email/Contact the Webmaster about the site	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Email an admissions officer or representative	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Request more information about the	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

	Unimportant	Of Little Importance	Moderately Important	Important	Very Important
school by email					
Request more information about the school by giving mailing address online	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Cookies that track my activity and remember my information	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Finally, for statistical purposes only, please answer the following questions about yourself.

2. What is your sex?

☐

Male

☐

Female

3. What is your present age?

4. What is your present year in school?

☐

First year

☐

Second year

☐

Third year

☐

Fourth year

☐

Fifth year or higher/Graduate student

5. Please use this space for any additional comments:

Appendix D: Cover Letter to students

Dear Students,

One of the first places prospective college students turn for information during their college search is the Internet, and more specifically college admissions Web sites. No doubt you yourself went through this process just a short time ago before you made the decision to attend RIT. This makes you part of a small group whose opinions matter on this topic.

This purpose of this study is to examine students' importance of interactive features on admissions Web sites in order to determine what makes up an effective site and recommend how sites may be improved in order to provide students with the best possible information so they may make an informed college choice.

If you would like to participate in this survey please click on the link below.
<https://clipboard.rit.edu/take.cfm?sid=1016D1A8>

Participation is optional. Due to consent reasons, only students at least 18 years of age may participate in this survey. By filling out and submitting the survey you consent that you are at least 18 years old. The survey will only take about 5 minutes to complete. All responses will be completely confidential. Your name will never at any time be included in the report or associated with the results. There are no risks associated with participating in this research.

The results of this study will be presented to the RIT community in part completion of a master's thesis. If you would like to receive a copy of the results, please send an e-mail to kmr8059@rit.edu.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to e-mail me at kmr8059@rit.edu.

Thank you for your time and assistance!

Sincerely,

Katherine Robert

Appendix E: Coder Booklet

Directions: This coding booklet should be read before coding the Web sites. The variables to be coded are grouped under five dimensions and explained below. Coders should locate the institutions Web site, and evaluate the following criteria located on the admissions Web site. The entire site **does not** need to be evaluated.

*If a site has more than one feature in one area (e.g. one chat room allowing for chat with current students, other applicants, and admissions), then that site would receive credit for all of the available features.

1) Navigation:

- Internal Links: Presence or absence of links that connect to other pages within the Web site.
- External Links: Presence or absence of links that connect to outside pages not connected to the current Web site.
- Search engine: Presence or absence of a search tool either limited to the current Web site or inclusive of the World Wide Web.
- Site Map: Presence or absence of a Site Map or Site Index.
- Consistent Main Menu: Presence or absence of a main menu that is regularly available across pages.
- FAQ: Presence or absence of a Frequently Asked Questions page on the site.
- Prospective student link: Presence or absence of a banner or menu option leading to a page for interested students or prospective applicants, including undergraduate, graduate, transfer, etc.
- Pull-down menu: Presence or absence of a drop down menu indicating navigation choices for the site.

2) Personalized Content

- Site Registration: Indicates the presence or absence of the process where the user has to ability to register to use the site or access a specific area of the site.

- Online application: Indicates the presence or absence of the ability to apply to the institution online.
- Application Status: Indicates the presence or absence of the ability to check one's application status online.
- Online registration for campus visit/tour: Indicates the presence or absence of the ability to schedule a campus visit or tour directly online.

3) Delivery of messages

- Use of audio or streaming audio: Located in any location on the admissions page.
- Use of video or streaming video: Located in any location on the admissions page.
- Use of text only
- Use of graphics: Located in any location on the admissions page.
- RSS Feeds: Indicates the presence or absence of RSS feeds.
- Pod casts: Indicates the presence or absence of pod casts.

4) Communication

- Instant messaging with current student: Indicates the presence or absence of the ability to engage in an instant message conversation with a current student. Credit given for screen names listed.
- Instant messaging with admissions: Indicates the presence or absence of the ability to engage in an instant message conversation with an admissions representative. Credit given for screen names listed.
- Message board: Indicates the presence or absence of a message board.
- Blogs: Indicates the presence or absence of blogs of current students.
- Chat room (current students): Indicates the presence or absence of a chat room allowing visitors to chat with current students of the institution.
- Chat room (admissions officers): Indicates the presence or absence of a chat room allowing visitors to chat with admissions representatives.

- Chat room (applicants): Indicates the presence or absence of a chat room allowing visitors to chat with other interested students/applicants.
- Virtual tour: Indicates the presence or absence of a tour of the campus or buildings allowing the user to interact and control the view, not merely a picture tour.

5) Feedback

- Survey: Indicates the presence or absence of opportunities for visitors to participate in survey(s), which may discuss any topic.
- Contact Webmaster: Indicates the presence or absence of an active e-mail link to contact the maintainer of the site.
- Contact admissions: Indicates the presence or absence of an active e-mail link to contact an admissions representative.
- Request more information (e-mail): Indicates the presence or absence of a feature allowing visitors to request further information by giving their e-mail.
- Request more information (mailing address): Indicates the presence or absence of a feature allowing visitors to give their home address to receive further information about the institution.
- Use of cookies: Indicates the presence or absence of cookies.

Other/comments:

- If any additional features are present on any of the sites, whether it is believed to be interactive or merely interesting, please indicate what that feature is and where you found it on the admissions site

Appendix F: Content Coding Sheet

Institution name: _____

Date coded: _____

Web site address: _____

Coder name: _____

Feature	Present	Not present	Feature	Present	Not present
Internal links			Pod casting		
External links			Instant messaging with current students		
Search engine			Instant messaging with admissions officers		
Site map			Message board		
FAQ			Blogs		
Consistent main menu			Chat room (current students)		
Prospective student link			Chat room (admissions officers)		
Pull-down menu			Chat room (other applicants)		
Site registration			Virtual tour		
Online application			Survey		
Application status			Contact webmaster (active email)		
Online campus/tour registration			Contact admissions (active email)		
Presence of audio			Request more information (email)		
Presence of video			Request more information (mailing address)		
Text only option			Cookies		
Presence of graphics			800# for admissions		
Presence of RSS Feed			Email admissions Counselors		

Other/comments: