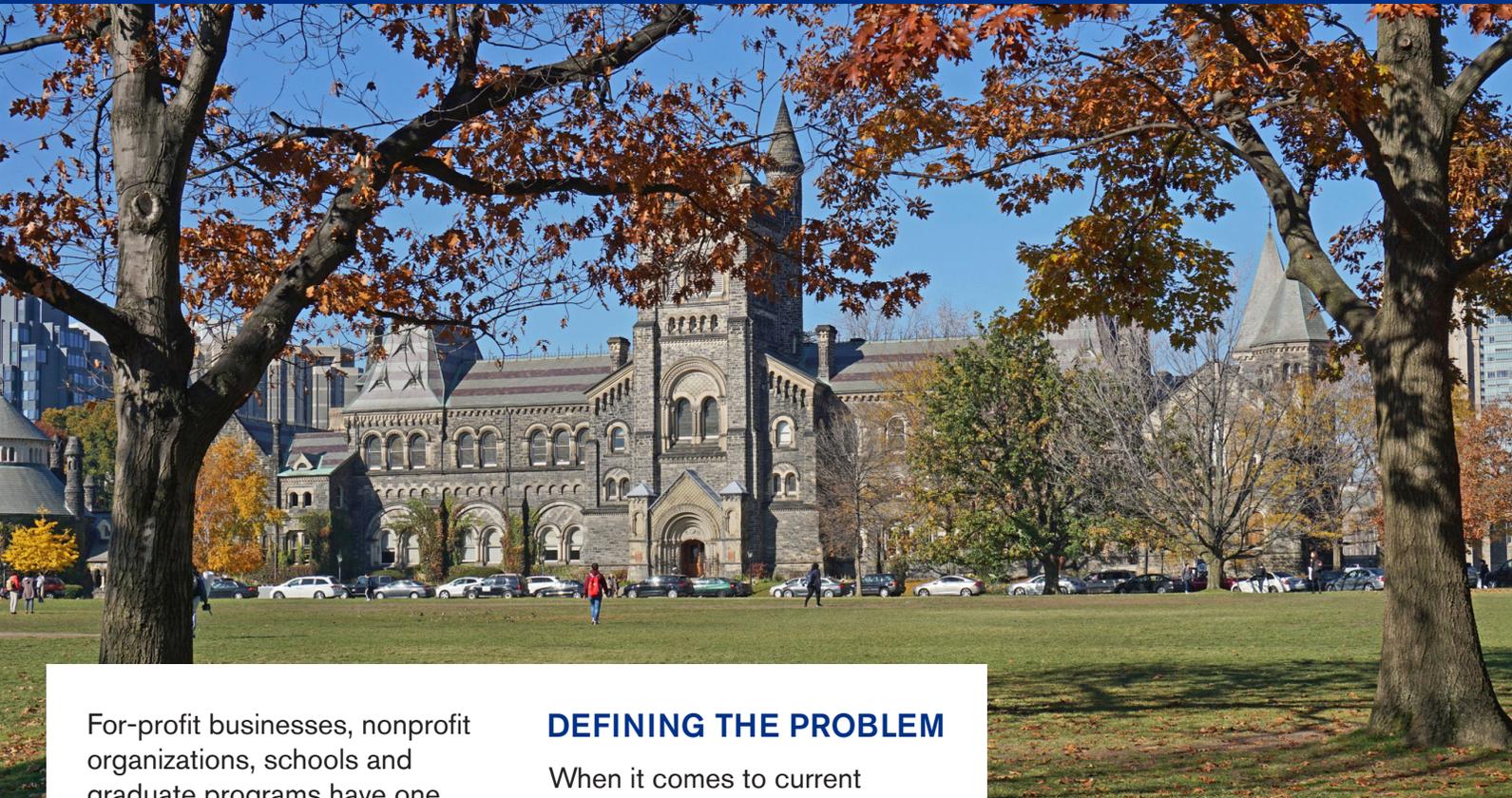


# How to Craft an Effective Graduate Student Engagement Strategy

## Leveraging the 4 Ws to Recruit Best-Fit Students



For-profit businesses, nonprofit organizations, schools and graduate programs have one goal in common: Finding and implementing new — and better — ways to engage their target audiences.

As proof, look no further than the seemingly endless array of whitepapers, presentations, think pieces and studies devoted to exploring the nature and metrics of engagement. Clearly, engagement is a force to be reckoned with.

But what does engagement really mean? And what are the specific challenges faced by institutions of higher education who want to engage prospective graduate students?

### DEFINING THE PROBLEM

When it comes to current students, engagement is relatively easy because they already have a relationship with the institution they are attending. They're invested in the ongoing story of the university because now it's their story, too.

Throughout our over two decades of powering admissions and enrollment marketing solutions for higher education, Liaison has recognized that prospective students, on the other hand, present a greater challenge.

It's not that prospects aren't interested in engagement; it's simply that they are interested in developing connections with people they already know.

Because they don't know us yet, institutions have to work harder at reaching out consistently and in ways that feel personal — without crossing the line into invasive — to our prospective students.

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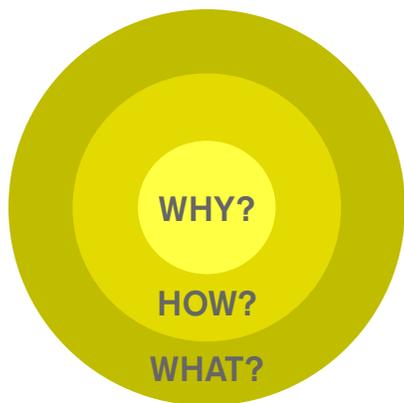
**“People don't buy what you do. They buy why you do it.”**

– Simon Sinek

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## The Golden Circle

In 2009, author and motivational speaker Simon Sinek gave a TED Talk titled “How Great Leaders Inspire Action.” While his message was tailored for the business community, it’s just as relevant for anyone trying to run a successful graduate program. Let’s start with his primary concept, which he calls “The Golden Circle.”



The Golden Circle illustrates how businesses and organizations think, act and communicate. The outermost ring represents the “What,” which would be your graduate program.

Moving into the next ring, we encounter the “How,” or ways and means by which you get your “What” out into the world.

Finally, we get to the innermost heart of the circle, which is where we locate our “Why” — also known as our purpose and reason for being.

### Communicating from the Inside Out

In his talk, Sinek points out that many companies, organizations and schools work from the outside of the circle in: They start with the “What,” the product or program that they’re offering.

What’s wrong with that, you might ask. Isn’t the “What” important? Absolutely -- but research and real-life experiences have proven time and time again that as human beings, we are not nearly as guided by logic and reason as we like to believe. Whether we like it or not, we tend to make decisions based on emotional motivations -- and then we use our rational brains to construct reasonable justifications for whatever decisions we’ve made.

In an abstract for their academic paper titled “Emotion and Decision Making,” a team of researchers proclaimed, “A revolution in the science of emotion has emerged in the last few decades, with the potential to create a paradigm shift in thinking about decision theories. The research reveals that **emotions constitute powerful, pervasive and predictable drivers of decision making.**”

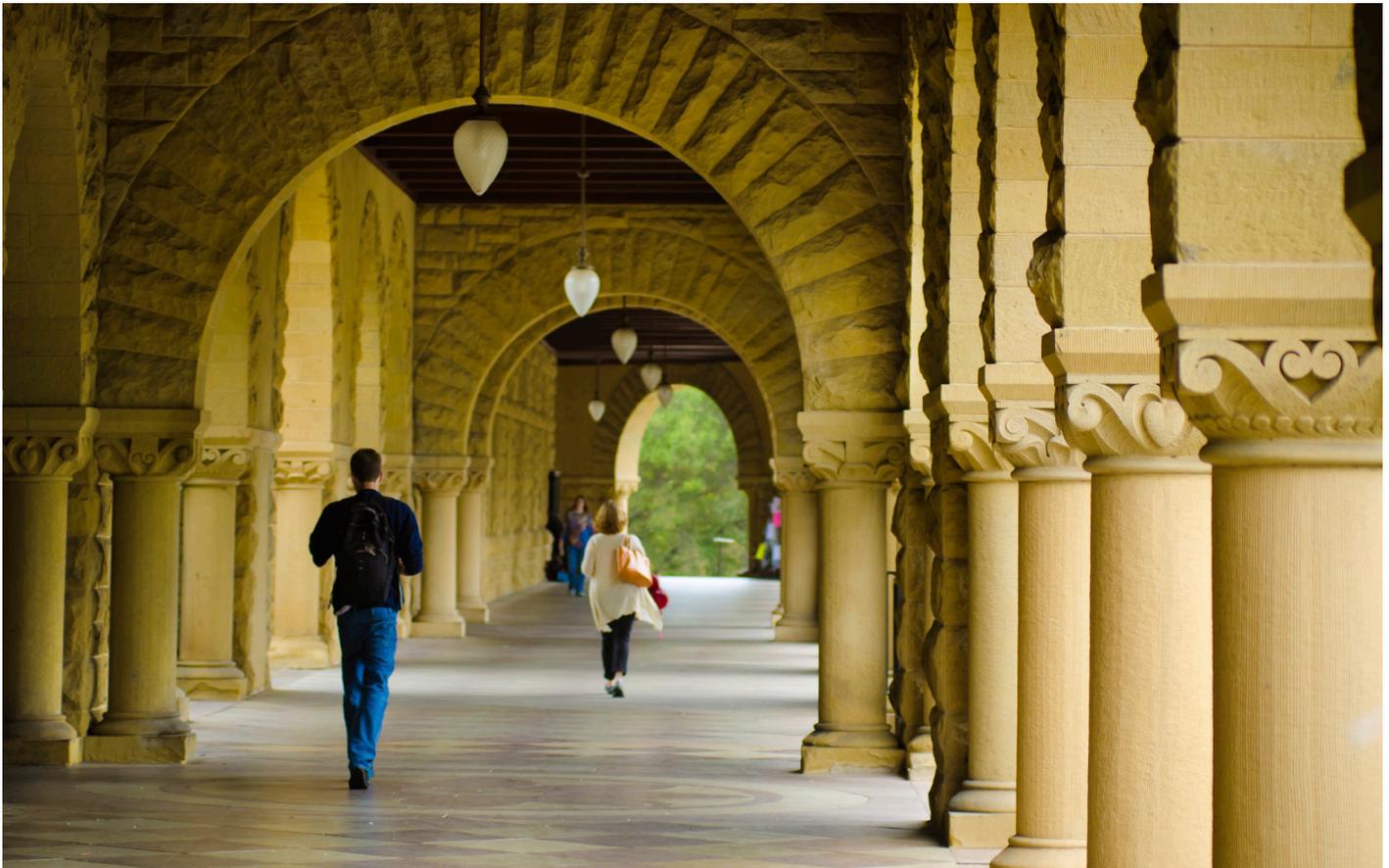
At this point you may be thinking, “Interesting stuff, but what does any of it have to do with creating a meaningful engagement

strategy for my program’s prospective students?”

Understanding the driving forces behind how people— including your prospective students — decide to interact with you is an important part of crafting an effective engagement strategy.

In the end, engagement is actually much more than a strategy. It’s a natural outcome of relationships that have been nurtured over time. Engagement with our prospects is more likely when we are able to emotionally inspire them to connect, share and engage.

So, how do we do that?



## THE FOUR WS OF ENGAGEMENT

Your institution is unique, which means your reason and purpose for being will be, too. So how you define the metrics of successful engagement will depend on factors that are unique to your program and institution — in other words, there is no such thing as a one-size-fits-all engagement strategy. What works for another program may not work for yours, and vice versa.

Which isn't to say that there's not much to be learned from how other institutions have managed to connect with their respective audiences. There's a wide array of best practices that can apply in almost any situation, so we should

definitely seek to learn from the experiences of our peers.

What's important to keep in mind is that just because a certain tool is being used effectively for another program doesn't mean it's the exact right one for your needs and goals.

### **Who? What? When? Why?**

In order to create and maintain an effective engagement strategy, we need to know more than just **Who** we're trying to reach — we also need a deep understanding of **What** tools are best to use, **When** it's best to use them

and **Why** we should have an engagement strategy in the first place.

Defining the "Who" of engagement is actually the easy part — it's your prospective students! But building a strategy on only one W is a little like trying to drive a car with three flat tires. The other Ws — Why, What and When — need to be equally balanced.

Let's look at each of them in turn.

## WHY DOES WHAT WORKS WORK?

These days there are so many social media tools, apps and resources available that it's easy to fall into the trap of thinking that you should be using all of them, all the time. Instead, as you craft your engagement strategy, ask **Why** you use the tools you're using.

As an example, take a look at Snapchat. According to a 2014 report by Sumpto based on 1,650 responses, 77% of college students use Snapchat daily — and that was in 2014. It's still the most popular app currently in use by millennials. However, it's not enough for institutions to use it simply because a large percentage of their prospective applicant pool does. If we don't look at why we want to use a particular tool, we run the risk of using it in ways that aren't effective.

### It's Time To Get Personal

In a report by CKSyme Media Group called "Your Guide to Advanced Snapchat Marketing Strategy," the author looked at the way the Saints, New Orleans' football team, drove engagement with fans through calculated use of the popular app. The team's social media manager, Alex Restreppo, points out that, "Snapchat isn't a regular social media outlet. **When you send a snap, it's perceived as a direct message from the brand or team... if it's a snap, they see it as more of a personal touch.**"

So how could this work in higher education? One great example is the University of Wisconsin, which started using Snapchat to send acceptance notifications to students before mailing their official packet. *U.S. News & World Report* recently highlighted the University of Wisconsin for using Snapchat to send acceptance notifications to students before mailing their official packets. Students responded with excitement, often replying back with a selfie and also sharing the news with friends.

"Of course you want the prestigious acceptance letter, but I think students also enjoy having the wall brought down and being able to communicate with the institution that they have chosen," said Brittany Shope, the web coordinator at Tennessee Wesleyan College (TWC), in a 2014 Time.com article.

### WHY: Choosing the tools you use



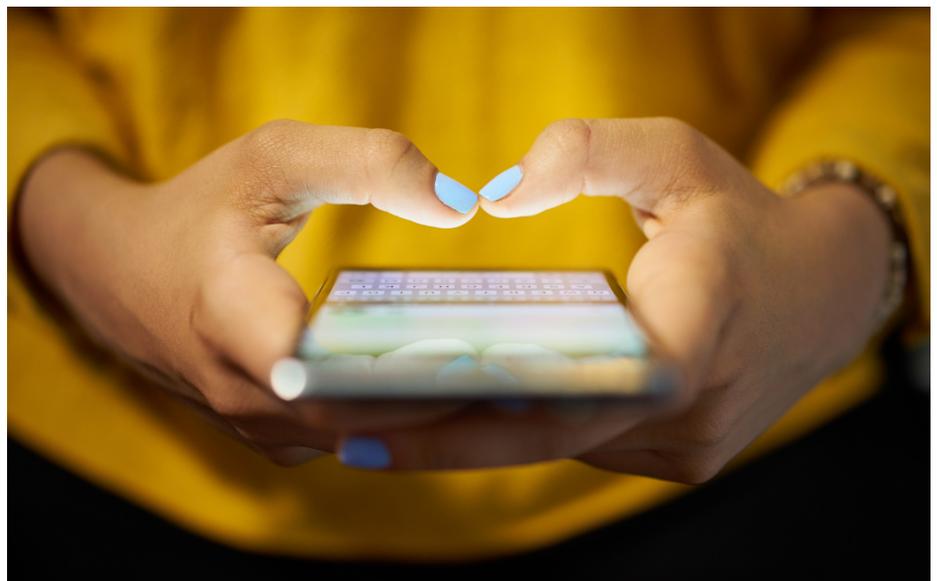
#### The wrong approach:

Jump onto the next big trendy social tool without stopping to consider why it's trending in the first place.



#### The right approach:

Understand the different uses for the different channels, and analyze the reasons behind a trending tool or app before adopting.



## WHAT DO YOUR STUDENTS EXPECT?

You know what you expect from prospective graduate students. Now it's time to ask yourself if you know what they expect from you at every step of the admissions process — and whether you have the tools and resources in place to deliver what they need.

With more people expecting a greater level of transparency from businesses, nonprofits and governing bodies, you can bet that prospective students will expect it from your program as well. But what does “transparency” mean?

Think about your program's admissions process. Are you communicating quickly and personally with students when they reach out for information? Do students understand what happens once they've applied?

Are the different steps in the process clear to them, and are they confident in knowing where they are at each stage?

### Keeping Students Informed

Businesses like Amazon and Domino's have instant progress trackers that allow people to stay on top of their order status any time, from anywhere. For example, when you order a pizza from Domino's, you can find out in a moment whether your pizza is still being prepared, or whether it's on the way to your house.

You may want to consider using similar technology to help streamline your process while allowing prospective students to feel more connected to your institution.

#### WHAT: Exploring process and student expectations



##### The wrong approach:

Maintain an air of mystery around your process. Make it difficult for prospective students to get a sense of where they are within the application timeline.



##### The right approach:

Develop ways for students to be more involved and up to date with every step of the process as it unfolds.

## WHEN ARE STUDENTS INTERACTING WITH YOU?

Over the past 25 years, our culture has changed dramatically in its relationship to time. For example, banks and grocery stores have adapted to the increasing demands of a growing 24/7 culture by expanding hours of operation and adding greater online accessibility.

Institutions have been doing a lot of adapting as well. A generation ago, students would typically send letters or make phone calls to institutions requesting program

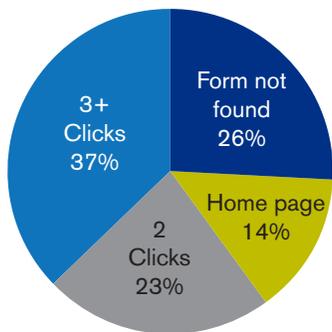
information and admissions materials. In return, they would receive a packet of information in the mail — days, if not weeks, later. If they had questions after perusing the printed materials, they could write back, or call on the phone during office hours.

Today, students can access most of the information they need at the exact moment they need it. They can peruse university websites for program details and download brochures, program

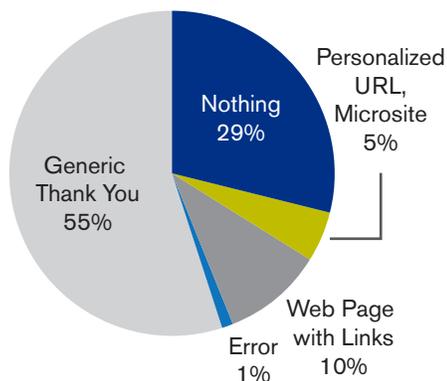
resources and applications to their desktops at home, or even to their cell phones while they're on the go.

But is all that enough?

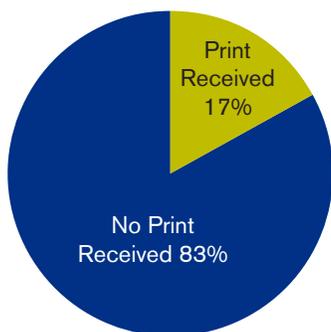
### Access to Request Information



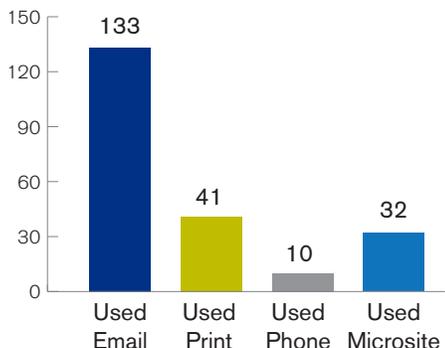
### Thank You Page



### Print Received



### Channels Used



## Updating Our Communication Strategies

**Times have changed. Technology has evolved. Why are we using the same engagement strategies?**

Recent research into how graduate schools interact with prospective students highlights a concerning trend: Many schools have not updated their engagement strategies to meet students' expectations for targeted, relevant and highly customized communication.

In fact, Liaison visited the web pages for a sample of graduate schools who are members of the Association for Graduate Enrollment Management (NAGAP). We searched for inquiry forms and ways to indicate interest, submitted inquiry forms and tracked responses from each school for a period of four weeks, noting the dates and times that email, print and phone communications were received as well as the level of personalization on each piece.

26% of schools did not have a form for requesting information that we could find. Only 14% had such a form on their home page, and over 50% required two or more clicks to request information.

Not only is the way to request more information more complex than it needs to be, but what happened when we submitted the easily accessible forms also left a lot to be desired. 55% of the schools that we requested more information from responded to interest with a generic thank you page. The technology exists to customize —

more on that later — but these schools are not utilizing it to show prospective students how important they are.

Furthermore, only 17% of these schools' inquiry response strategies included print, and 13% used only one email to respond to our inquiries. Only 5% responded with a personalized phone call.

The takeaway: it's time to pay attention to which way the technological winds are blowing. When you're working out your engagement strategy, remember that 35% of students are looking for information about your program (and possibly sending email requests) from their cell phones, and that could be at any time of the day or night.

**WHEN:**

**Timing is everything**



**The wrong approach:**

Don't acknowledge when students are interacting with you, which could cause them to pursue other institutions who are more readily available across a range of media and channels when students need them to be.



**The right approach:**

Take advantage of available technology like Liaison's Enrollment Marketing Platform (EMP) to meet students' expectations of responsiveness.

## THERE'S A BETTER WAY TO ENGAGE

Remember: *"People don't buy what you do, they buy why you do it."* Prospective students aren't just shopping for a program; they are looking for a place where they feel they belong — where their needs will best be served, not by facts and figures, but by real-life experiences.

Whatever strategy you create needs to be flexible and adaptable to the ongoing evolution of student needs. Effective engagement is all about nurturing relationships with students, and healthy relationships are organic and fluid. That means your engagement strategy should be as well.

In order to ensure that your strategy is working effectively, you need the right tools in place to track and measure behaviors and outcomes. Technology partners like Liaison provide the structure and expertise required to ensure that you are staying ahead of the tech and trend curve, in the ways that work best for your program's unique needs.

### Liaison Can Help

Liaison offers a range of services and solutions like our [Enrollment Marketing Plan \(EMP\)](#), which helps you to personalize communications across the multiple channels that prospects are using every day — including email, websites, text, print and even voice messages.

Designed specifically to meet the ever-changing needs of today's prospective students as well as institutional administrators, EMP gives you the tools you need to create an engagement strategy that is immediate, personalized, automated and trackable.

EMP will help your program:

- Easily launch personalized multi-channel campaigns.
- Engage with prospective and admitted students more authentically.
- Track all communications from an easy-to-use interface for a 360-degree view.
- Be more effective with robust time management features like event management tools for campus visits, open houses and virtual tours.

Our experienced enrollment consultants will work with you to create and maintain an engagement strategy that capitalizes on prospective student interest, thus transforming inquiries to enrollees.

Your first step?  
[Contact Liaison today.](#)

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