EXAMINING THE STUDENT DECISION-TO-ENROLL PROCESS

What Motivates Prospective Students to Enroll in Private Sector Schools?

INTRODUCTION

It takes a tremendous amount of confidence and belief in self to be successful in college. Prospective students who make it all the way through the decision-to-enroll process usually have both. Two of the biggest decisions that can shape someone’s future are whether or not to go to (or back to) school, and if so, where to attend. After all, earning a degree requires a significant commitment of time, money, and resources, and isn’t something prospective students can or do take lightly.

In order to more effectively market to prospective students, it is critical that private sector schools themselves understand the prospect’s decision making process at each phase, from the initial idea to further his/her education, through research, selection, application and enrollment. Helix Education’s Research & Analytics team has published new primary research that gives private sector schools deeper insight into a prospective student’s thought process and priorities so that they can deliver the information, support, and experience that person needs.

STUDY OBJECTIVES & METHODOLOGY

Helix conducted an extensive online research survey with a panel of private sector school prospects, applicants, and enrollees to better understand the motivating factors that played a part in their successful transition from one phase of the enrollment process to the next.

A total of 761 people across the United States participated in the study. Participants were pre-screened so only those who met certain criteria were allowed to complete the survey. The sample was distributed across several segments: degree level interest (undergraduate/graduate), class format (online/campus), and enrollment stage (prospect/applicant/enrollee).

Highlighted findings from the survey are included in this paper. A full 50-page report with detailed results is available by contacting Scott Jager at sjager@HelixEducation.com or 801-886-2002.

KEY FINDINGS

Within each phase of the decision-to-enroll process, prospective students diligently weigh numerous factors that ultimately lead them to active student status at a particular school. Survey highlights include:
**Initial Interest & Inspiration:** Undergraduate and graduate prospective students see the ability to achieve a goal they set for themselves as the most important reason to pursue higher education.

**Research:** The majority of prospective students start the research process within one to two months of deciding to go to school, and they turn to Internet sources for information.

**Selection:** Prospective students rated the program of interest being offered and the cost of the program as the most important factors in narrowing down their choices.

**Application:** Roughly one-third of prospective students did not apply due to financial reasons. However, of those who did not apply, 62% said they still intend to go back at some point to further their education.

**Enrollment:** Accreditation, amount of financial aid provided, and program cost are the three most important factors to enrollment.

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**RESEARCH SUMMARY**

**WHY DO PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS SEEK HIGHER EDUCATION OPPORTUNITIES?**

Prospective students’ current or changing life and career situations are what often drive them to seek educational opportunities. The most common reasons prospective students cited for wanting to further their education included:

1. Want to achieve a goal I set for myself (50%)
2. Like to do a better job or contribute more (37%)
3. Not happy with current lifestyle or standard of living (34%)
4. Not able to get the job I want with current education/training (27%)
5. Want to try switching to a field I’m more passionate about (25%)

While goal achievement was the top response for both undergraduate and graduate prospective students, the other main motivators varied in priority among the two populations. For a breakdown of key motivators by prospective student type, please request a copy of the full report.

Additionally, prospective students’ end goals also differed between undergraduate and graduate, as well as campus and online. However, across the board, the top five end goals that prospective students want to achieve as a result of earning a degree include:

1. Higher pay (16.2%)
2. Open the door to more opportunities/make me more marketable (15.6%)
3. To better myself/increase my knowledge (13.7%)
4. Start on a career path and work in my chosen field (12.2%)
5. Sense of accomplishment (10.9%)

“Helix Education’s Research & Analytics team has published new primary research that gives private sector schools deeper insight into a prospective student’s thought process and priorities...”
How much time do prospective students spend gathering information, and how do they go about it?

Not all prospective students decide to pursue their education and immediately start the due diligence process. There is often a lag time involved; roughly 50% of prospective students surveyed took up to one month to think about going back to school before they started researching their options. The median timeframe to start the research process is one to two months. However, nearly 20% of survey participants said they took over one year to get to the research phase.

Once prospective students start researching, they start the application phase faster, on average, than they took to get to the research phase. About 40% of those who applied said they did so within two weeks of researching, and almost 60% had applied within four weeks.

Prospective students entering the research phase said that they first turn to a school’s website for information (47.8%). Other sources that received a 20% or higher rating of importance included Internet search engines, online school and program sites/directories, counselors or admissions representatives, information received by email, and information sent to the prospective student in the mail.

SOURCES USED TO GATHER MOST IMPORTANT INFORMATION IN INITIAL PHASE OF DECISION PROCESS

- School websites: 47.8%
- Internet search (Google, Bing, Yahoo, etc.): 47.0%
- Online site or directory about various schools and the programs: 31.1%
- Counselor or admissions representative at a school you’re considering: 24.0%
- Information emailed to you: 21.2%
- Information sent to you in the mail: 20.2%
- Friends: 16.4%
- Employment/job sites: 14.8%
- Online school reviews by professional organizations: 14.4%
- Career/job association sites: 14.3%
- Online school reviews by students: 12.7%
- Current or former students of the schools: 12.5%
- Family members: 12.4%
- Career/job counselor: 10.6%
- Information you picked up at a job or school fair: 9.7%
- Social networking sites (Facebook, Twitter, etc.): 8.4%
- Other: 2.6%
HOW DO PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS NARROW DOWN THEIR CHOICES?

Deciding where to go to school involves numerous factors. About 83% of the prospective students initially looked into one to five schools. After researching and gathering information, they narrowed down their options to three or fewer schools.

The information survey participants used the most to assist them in honing in on a particular school(s) included:

1. Program of interest is offered
2. Cost of the program
3. Accreditation of program and school
4. Length of time to complete the program
5. Availability of financial aid

“About 83% of the prospective students initially looked into one to five schools.”

The information considered most important also varied some by segment depending on whether or not the prospective student was an undergraduate or graduate seeking a campus or online program. For most segments, the program cost or program availability were two of the most important pieces of information. For a further breakdown of program selection criteria by degree level and class format, please request a copy of the full report.
WHAT INFLUENCES A PROSPECTIVE STUDENT’S DECISION TO APPLY TO A PARTICULAR SCHOOL?

About half of the prospective students surveyed said that they applied to only one school. An additional 20% said they applied to two schools, and 26% said they applied to three or more schools.

The reasons prospective students decide not to apply after researching and selecting a school(s) can vary, but the majority of prospects do not apply due to financial and time challenges. The top three reasons for not applying included:

1. Couldn’t afford/financial reasons (32.8%)
2. Too busy (15.6%)
3. Changed mind/not ready (15.6%)

The good news is that 62% said they still intend to go back at some point to further their education. Some felt they would be ready within three to six months, while others said it would take them ten or more months to reengage in the process.

When deciding which schools to apply to, there were several factors that were important to prospective students. The following factors were rated by survey participants as very important:

1. Accreditation (59%)
2. Offer Classes Online (56%)
3. Likelihood of getting financial aid (54%)
4. Quality of the program and courses (53%)
5. Convenience of classes (51%)
6. Cost of Program (51%)
7. Quality of teachers (48%)

“About half of the prospective students surveyed said that they applied to only one school.”
WHAT SETS PRIVATE SECTOR SCHOOLS APART?

Prospective students who applied to private sector colleges and universities were asked what those schools offered that some of the other institutions they considered did not. The most popular responses were: delivered 100% online classes, offered the programs they wanted, and provided a better education. Twenty percent said they did not offer anything above and beyond the other schools.

WHAT FACTORS CARRY THE MOST WEIGHT IN A PROSPECTIVE STUDENT’S DECISION TO ENROLL?

The decision to enroll is the culmination of each of the previous phases. Aside from the major factors prospective students considered at the application phase (accreditation, cost, quality, online classes), they also looked at class availability and schedules before deciding to enroll.

MOST IMPORTANT FACTORS WHEN DECIDING TO ENROLL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Offer classes online</td>
<td>19.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program and school are accredited</td>
<td>17.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amount of financial aid would receive</td>
<td>10.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost of program</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reputation of the school for academic excellence</td>
<td>7%</td>
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CONCLUSION

While there are some differences among the segments of prospective students, the bottom line is that they are all looking to reach a goal they have in mind, and they believe that furthering their education is the right approach to achieving that goal.

Prospective students focus first on finding the right program and school for them, considering various factors such as completion time, class schedules, quality, and online or campus format. The further into the process they get, the more they become concerned about cost, how they can afford to go back to school, and accreditation. These are the factors that weigh the most on their minds, regardless of their situation.

By providing prospective students with the kind of information, support, and overall experience that helps reassure them that your school and program is the right place for them, the more likely they are to enroll and the closer they are to reaching their goal.