

How to connect with your parent audience: Duquesne University's implementation of a strategic family communications platform

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Abstract

The increasingly competitive higher education market demands that institutions adapt to and communicate effectively with the key audience of parents and families. As decision makers and influencers, parents are highly involved in helping their children manage the college selection process and navigate their academic journeys. This case study lays out how the Duquesne University Parents and Families Portal, built on the software platform by CampusESP, enabled the university to provide a modern, all-in-one communication and family engagement vehicle that shares personalised, timely content. The tool and vendor service team facilitate the needed support with guidance and relevant general content in furnishing a streamlined, main hub of information. The strategy empowers a point person working with the central marketing and communications team and engenders campus partners in a campus-wide collaborative effort to share inspirational communications that provide the greatest opportunity for brand and relationship building. Readers will learn how Duquesne University, a private, Catholic institution, with more than eight thousand students, implemented this strategic communication platform for parents and families that influenced student retention and recruitment, and exceeded expectations.

Keywords

strategic communication, family communication, parent portal

INTRODUCTION

Duquesne University implemented a strategic family communication platform, which had an impact on student retention and recruitment that exceeded expectations. The challenge began long before implementation with the realisation that the university needed to improve family communication. After much discussion, deliberation and debate, the onset of COVID-19 prompted a response by the university that resulted in an action plan, selection of a vendor and portal application, identification of an implementation team, construction of a manageable content strategy, the breaking down of silos, and contribution from nearly every department at the university.

SITUATION ANALYSIS

It is well known that higher education has experienced significant changes in recent years, with 2020 being a particularly challenging year for the industry. The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on higher education

institutions, resulting in enrolment declines and budget cuts. Higher education professionals experienced pandemic fatigue coupled with the ‘great resignation’ that affected their work and morale, and the hangover, though waning, still remains. This situation analysis provides an overview of the state of the industry which prompted action, highlighting the much maligned ‘enrolment cliff’ and the lingering effects of the pandemic.

Duquesne, a private/Catholic institution

Duquesne is a private, Catholic institution with more than 8,000 students choosing from more than 80 undergraduate majors and 110 graduate and certificate programmes. Niche.com, the market leader in connecting colleges and schools with students and families, ranks Duquesne in the top quarter, at 39 of 166 US private Catholic institutions.¹ As a part of the private, Catholic subset of the higher education industry, Duquesne has unique

characteristics yet equally faces challenges similar to other institutions, including the enrolment cliff and pandemic-related disruptions, in addition to increased calls to address issues such as diversity, equity, inclusion and social justice.

Despite these challenges, private Catholic institutions such as Duquesne remain a strong, popular choice for students. According to the Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities, these colleges and universities serve over 700,000 students in the US.² Private, Catholic institutions offer unique opportunities for students to pursue their bigger academic goals and often provide a strong sense of community, social impact and purpose for students who choose them.

Enrolment decline

The well-known 'enrolment cliff', is a term used to describe a projected decline in the number of high school graduates in the coming years. According to an article by Brookings, the biggest decline occurred in first-time enrolment, which fell by about 10 per cent, and overall enrolment in higher education institutions decreased by 2.5 per cent in the autumn of 2020.³ The decline is expected to continue, with some projecting a 15 per cent decline in the number of high school graduates by 2025.⁴

Budget cuts

The pandemic effects combined with the enrolment decline has directly or indirectly resulted in budget cuts for many higher education institutions. According to an article in *The New York Times*, the effect has cost colleges billions of dollars, forcing stopgap measures such as hiring freezes and early retirements. These cuts have resulted in furloughs

and discontinued programmes at many institutions.⁵

Parent involvement

The pandemic has also highlighted changes to the college selection process, including a well-documented increase in parent involvement. With the disruption it caused, more students have turned to parents for guidance and support in navigating the college search process.

As the title of an *Inside Higher Ed* article, from June 2022, states 'Parents Matter More' than in the past in the college admissions process. The article mentions, according to a survey by EAB, of 4,848 high school seniors who graduated in 2021, 48 per cent ranked 'parental influence' as one of their top five sources of information on the admissions process. That figure compares to 34 per cent in 2019 and 37 per cent in 2020 (Figure 1).⁶

Similarly, in 2020, 86 per cent of high school seniors surveyed said their parents were involved in their college planning process, a statistic taken from Ruffalo Noel Levitz's (RNL) '2020 High School Student Perceptions of College Financing Report'. Parent involvement, according to RNL's findings, can be extremely influential when it comes to enrolment, retention and promoting student success.^{7,8}

This increased involvement is attributed to the uncertainty and anxiety caused by the pandemic, as well as shifts to virtual college fairs and virtual campus visits. Parents have become more involved in reviewing college materials, attending virtual events and researching financial aid options.

In addition, the pandemic increased the importance of certain factors in the college selection process. For example, according to a survey by EAB,⁹ students and families place a greater importance on

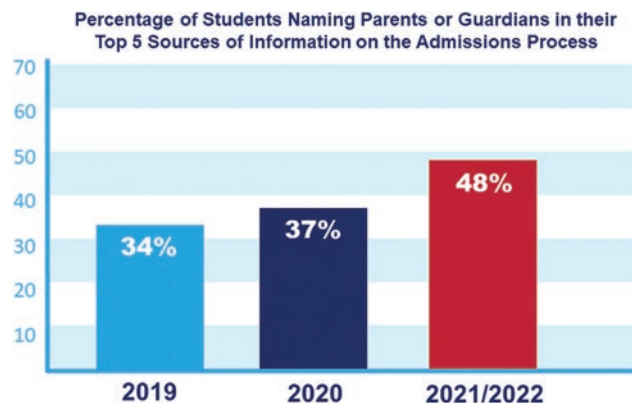


FIGURE 1 Due in part to the influence of the pandemic, this shows prospective students increasingly value the input from their parents regarding assessing the college selection process
Source: EAB, 2022

factors such as campus safety, affordability and flexibility in learning options. These factors reflect the unique challenges posed by the pandemic, including concerns about health and safety and the need for flexible learning modalities.

Overall, the pandemic has had a significant impact on the college selection process, with an increase in parent involvement and a shift in priorities for students and families. This change has demanded that higher education institutions adapt and communicate effectively with families to address their concerns and needs.

TIME FOR CHANGE, TIME FOR BIGGER GOALS

Cabinet-support driven by family expectations

Several champions at the cabinet-level leadership of Duquesne University had been calling for improved communication with parents and families prior to the pandemic, yet the pandemic provided the unexpected spark to move aspiration to action.

Each year, as families send their children off to college, they look to school leaders not only to provide a sense

of stability and security, but to gain a sense of trust and excitement that the school their child chose was in fact the best choice. Receiving consistent and intentional communications from the university helps families remain connected and vested in the higher education institution that they helped select with their child.

The 2022 EAB parent survey showed that 75 per cent of parents indicated that colleges should communicate with them directly. According to a study by RNL and CampusESP, 85 per cent of parents expect communications at least weekly from their student's institution (Figure 2).¹⁰

Establishing a parent communications portal in higher education promotes transparency, collaboration and engagement. It not only satisfies the expectation of reliable communication, but also strengthens the partnership between parents, students and the institution, contributing to a supportive and successful educational experience for students.

Duquesne's response

Duquesne University knew that it needed to do a better job of communicating with parents, ensuring they were receiving

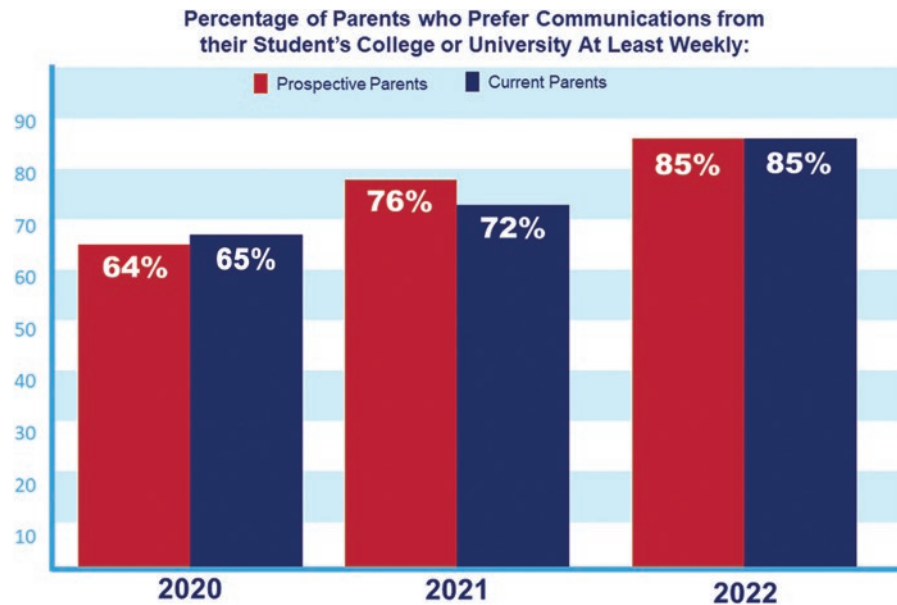


FIGURE 2 Today's families of college students expect frequent communication from their child's college or university with 85 per cent of both prospective and current families preferring weekly communication
Source: RNL and CampusESP, 2020–23

timely and informative updates from the university regarding their student's safety. Prior to that time, campus communications with parents were strictly transactional sometimes sporadic, regularly inconsistent and often somewhat repetitive. The consistent response was that parents heard from the university frequently, sometimes weekly, during the recruitment cycle, and after deposit, communication felt like it just stopped — unless it was to pay a tuition bill or satisfy a paperwork requirement.

Like other institutions during the height of the pandemic, Duquesne created a website to provide specific health and safety information and updates to parents and families of Duquesne students with weekly, sometimes daily notifications.

Informed by brand research

During the same period (end of 2020), Duquesne University released the results of its brand research and survey,

reinforcing what was already known to be true — parents were becoming increasingly involved in their student's college selection process and engaging the parent audience in a more aspirational manner would assist in student recruitment and retention.

Addressing legacy parents and net promoter score

In addition, Duquesne discovered that greater communication with parents was an opportunity to better engage 'legacy parents' (alumni now sending their children off to college) who were often overlooked in existing communications plans.

Duquesne's brand research indicated a lower-than-average *net promoter score* from the alumni audience; a research metric based on a single survey question asking respondents to rate the likelihood that they would recommend a university to a friend or colleague. This was a strong indicator for Duquesne that demonstrated

the need to communicate more frequently and intentionally with this audience.

Content strategy

The implementation team identified four key categories of parent communications. Each category served an important purpose related to the types of messaging used to inform and engage parents. While all of the messaging within each category needed to better align with the university's new brand research findings and key message points, the inspirational type of communications proved to have the most opportunity for brand and relationship building.

Communication categories

The four communication categories that existing parent communications fulfilled are as follows:

- *transactional*: pay bills, satisfy paperwork (health forms, etc) or acquire access;
- *informative*: learn key facts, dates, deadlines;
- *involvement*: ask for feedback, volunteer, donate;
- *inspirational*: relationship building, brand equity. Messaging does not have to include a specific call to action. This category has the most potential for those thinking about how to enhance their communications. It can:
 - build awareness and understanding of the character and experience of a Duquesne education; and,
 - make good on brand promise: the value of a Duquesne education, the benefits, the relationships, the outcomes.

The content strategy sought to pull key communication from existing communication in various locations around campus

and, with minor edits, use it to inform parents and families of events and activities on campus. The existing communication came from press releases and news stories, marketing communication pieces from enrolment activities and campus events, activities of the office of the president and provost including new hires and promotions, major gifts and donations, campus construction and facilities updates, academic and athletic updates, grants and awards and student success stories.

In addition, the identification of these communication categories informed the Duquesne product discovery process and provided a wish list by which to evaluate vendors. Using marketer's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats (SWOT) analysis thinking these opportunities were identified that a parent communication tool could address:

1. treating parents as partners;
2. sharing the university brand messaging with this important influencer group;
3. combating the misinformation of an existing private parent Facebook group;
4. increasing prioritisation at the institutional level of looking at retention from a streamlined and holistic perspective;
5. helping to move away from outdated paper forms of communication to save staff time and create a centralised place for Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) data.

Discovery process

Normally a protracted process that begins with identification of a need, identifying sources of funding, incorporating the request on a tech-product roadmap for staff and technical resources and proceeding through a multi-year schedule, this project was very much fast-tracked. Selection of a parent portal tool was one

of the quickest selections and implementations at Duquesne in the past several years. Discovery to start up took less than four months!

Units and divisions at the university that were instrumental in bringing a new vendor on board included representatives from the university president's chief of staff, Admissions Office, Advancement Communications, Communication and Technology Services, the Division of Marketing and Communications, Division of Student Life, Enrolment Management Services, Provost's Office/Academic Affairs and the registrar's office.

SELECTION AND IMPLEMENTATION

Vendor selection

Through the process, Duquesne selected CampusESP as the vendor and tool to manage its parent communication — as 'Duquesne Parents and Families Portal'. CampusESP is currently used in varying scopes of implementation by more than 300 colleges and universities. The company states that 98 per cent of university clients renew annually. Two key benefits of the CampusESP platform that affected the decision to choose this vendor included superior customer support and the speed at which the platform could be launched into the market. Reference checks reinforced the strength of customer support from this vendor, and our experience since has proven this to be true. In addition, CampusESP touts three weeks from start-up as the length of time to see results.

Planning

After vendor selection, the university's marketing and communications team was

charged with establishing a strategic parent communications plan. The goal was to provide an outline and key messaging to guide campus partners to ensure any information they proposed was appropriately positioned to the audience, included university brand messaging, was timely and not duplicative and was not transactional messaging being handled outside of the portal.

Implementation and buy-in from campus partners

Once buy-in was established, implementing the 'Parents and Families Portal' required members from this cross-functional team to work together to execute the plan that would inspire parent audiences to engage in intentional desirable behaviours that would benefit the university and, most importantly, engage and retain its students.

The implementation team determined a guiding principle for campus partners for the communications plan: if the communication met less than three of the following criteria, eliminating it or, at minimum revising it, should be considered. Similarly, any communication that did not meet all four criteria should be flagged for revision. The criteria included:

- *Timely*: Is the communication helping students/parents at a moment of need or when there is a necessary behaviour objective?
- *Intelligible*: Is the communication easy to understand?
- *Motivating*: Does the communication establish the required action and prompt a response?
- *Personalised*: Does the communication address the specific needs of the recipient?

University's single point of contact

What became apparent in the implementation process was that current units could not absorb the requirements of the additional audience communication. It was clear that there needed to be a single point of contact that owned and was accountable for parent communications. Because the most important function of a centralised parent communications platform is to support the success of students, the platform had to be closely connected to the Student Life department. In addition to budgeting for the tool, the university allocated funds for an individual who was identified, designated and charged with managing parent engagement in the new platform, becoming the single point of contact for the university and the vendor. This person would also work in concert with the university's Division of Marketing and Communications and Enrollment Management Group to provide consistent and intentional communications, including news and announcements, events and stories.

Launch, collaboration and success strategy

Duquesne launched its 'Parents and Families Portal' with CampusESP as the vendor of choice in July 2021, and it currently has more than 10,000 families of current students as members. The launch of the portal included an invitation to the university's mailing list of parents, inviting them to opt in to membership on the new platform.

Utilisation of the 'Parents and Families Portal' enables Duquesne to reach parents and guardians every day. The informational and inspirational posts

keep parents up to date with all major announcements, exciting events, student spotlights and university plans.

When the portal first launched, Parent Relations and the Division of Marketing and Communications collaborated in weekly content strategy and execution meetings. During these sessions, the two offices, which included as many as ten individuals, would review the posts with good engagement and review upcoming events and stories that could be posted the following week. Now, after almost two years, the meetings have moved to a bi-weekly schedule and provide the team a chance to connect, ensuring messaging is consistent and on brand, and stories are accurately relayed to the family audience.

Frequent posting

Duquesne maintains a schedule of posting once per day to ensure the information is highlighted for approximately 24 hours. This timeline gives members a chance to see it, read it and interact with it if they wish. Interaction includes commenting, e-mailing or otherwise taking a specific call to action to the post and the information.

Bi-weekly newsletters

In addition to daily posts, another function of the portal solution that Duquesne utilises is the e-mail newsletter. The newsletter is a collection of previous posts e-mailed to members on a bi-weekly basis. The most prominent, interesting or important posts to showcase are included. Usually, these range from two to five posts in a category called 'Duquesne Updates' and three to six posts in a category called 'Student and Parent Resources'. In 'Duquesne

Updates', posts highlight student and faculty spotlights that detail the interesting research happening on campus, exciting student-centred events such as the 'Festival on the Bluff' music festival, important health information and procedures or campus construction updates.

Targeted messaging

In addition to the newsletters and posts, the 'Parents and Families Portal' has given administrative users the ability to target messaging based on an array of information including, but not limited to, first-generation families, fourth-year families, prospective families or all current families. The Duquesne team can also segment users based on geographic location, ethnicity, psychographic interests and more.

One of the many benefits of the 'Parent and Families Portal' is the option for family members to register, self-select and self-identify which information they would like to receive. Being able to target users through specific messaging ensures that the information the audience is receiving is relevant and applicable to them.

The new generation of students and parents communicate more frequently than in the past. Long gone are the days of college students checking in with parents on a weekly or less frequent schedule. The most recent RNL/CampusESP survey shows that four out of ten families communicate with their college students on a daily basis. This level of interaction makes parents key influencers in their students' lives.¹¹ Through conversation via phone call, daily text message conversations or video calls, parents can prompt for participation in particular campus events, status updates on class progress and assignments, quality of food service or health service availability. Parents

continue to be the guiding adults in their young adult students' lives.

Continuous improvement mindset

Enhancing the university's parent communication strategy is an ongoing collaborative effort. Feedback gathered in a 2022 RNL survey of Duquesne parents, reinforced the need for a mainstreamed platform for parent information, the desire for more information about Duquesne and its departments, details of programmes offered and updates on key events, as well as the need to view student records that are protected by FERPA.

Feedback from the survey identified what Duquesne's users wanted to see more of, with comments such as 'better and more communications from the university about what is going on that would help me support my son', 'I find the Duquesne newsletter good but sometimes received too late', and 'communications with parents regarding life on campus is minimal'.¹² The implementation team was quick to pivot and include more messaging based on these findings.

Parents as partners

Duquesne began including up-and-coming information regarding events, so that users were aware of the fun things going on at the university. The goal was to include parents as partners in the promotion of these events to their students. A point was made of providing information regarding the university's key events including orientation, Homecoming and Family Weekend, graduation and more, again, to harness that parent influence. As feedback is received from users, work is done to implement the changes as quickly as possible. Ultimately,

the aim is for the ‘Parent and Families Portal’ to be the best it can be for the people using it: parents of Duquesne students.

Adding FERPA permissions

Besides communications, it was clear there was also a need for student–parent connections. Containing FERPA permissions and information in an easy to access location that parents and guardians visit frequently was a priority. Working with CampusESP, Duquesne developed and implemented a module where parents and guardians could request access to their student’s FERPA information including, class schedule, GPA, financial aid information, holds on student accounts and account balances. After a parent or guardian requests access, the student receives a notification alerting them of the connection request. The student can then go in and approve or deny any of the permissions in the request. Duquesne has an 80 per cent approval rating on the FERPA module, meaning 80 per cent of students approve their parents’ request to connect. This gives users a snapshot of information and links for additional steps, such as how to access billing and making online payments.

Breaking down silos

The Duquesne ‘Parent and Families Portal’ has a great collaborative team and a great working relationship with the departments and offices across campus. Parent Relations has worked with more than 45 different offices including Athletics, the Center for Career Development, Annual Giving and the Day of Giving, Residence Life, Health Services, Dining Services, Financial Aid and many more to help share important updates

about upcoming events and promote their information and initiatives with the parent audience.

The assistant director of Parent Relations invites offices to e-mail information that they would like to share on the ‘Parent and Families Portal’. This information is reviewed and formatted, uploaded to a scheduled post and then sent back to the department contact for review and approval.

As mentioned, the strategy calls for one post per day. On occasion, there may be two posts scheduled on the same day, but these posts are usually posting to different audiences. Anecdotal evidence shows the solution has been extremely successful. The vendor, CampusESP, regularly calls upon Duquesne University to share its success story during vendor webinars and, most recently, at regional professional development conferences. Now that the solution has been in operation for one year, the Duquesne implementation team will select and implement metrics that measure and assess its success.

CONCLUSION

Overall, Duquesne University implemented a strategic family communication platform that exceeded expectations. The realisation that the university needed to improve family communication with current students was accelerated by the onset of COVID-19. The university selected a vendor and portal application, charged an implementation team, devised a manageable content strategy and broke down silos generating contributions from nearly every department at the university. The result has been a successful implementation and significant improvement of parent and family communications from the university.

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