

RECRUITING MILLENNIALS: HOW OFFICIAL ADMISSION BLOGS DEPICT  
COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES FROM A PUBLIC RELATIONS PERSPECTIVE

by

KAREN RENÉE SINES

(Under the Direction of Kaye D. Sweetser Trammell)

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this exploratory study was to uncover the way student bloggers depicted their colleges and universities through the use of frames on official university sanctioned blogs. Using content analysis, this study analyzed blog posts ( $n = 2,471$ ) from 92 institutions, representing 349 individual bloggers. Of special interest were the specific attributes and tone used by bloggers to describe their institutions and the use of framing mechanisms and dialogic features. The study discovered that bloggers overwhelmingly used the social life and academics frames when posting and were mostly positive in tone. About one-third of posts included pictures, most which showed images of interest to prospective students. The study also revealed that institutions did not take full advantage of the potential for two-way communication through recruitment blogs. Implications for public relations practitioners are discussed.

INDEX WORDS: Attribute Agenda Setting, Blog, Framing Theory, Online, Public Relations, Relationship Management, University

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## DEDICATION

Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things that you didn't do than by the ones you did do. So throw off the bowlines. Sail away from the safe harbor. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.

– Mark Twain

This work is dedicated to my parents. Two years ago we had no idea what I was getting into, but you helped load the U-Haul and move me to Georgia anyway. Thank you for always coming along for the ride. I haven't regretted this decision for one second.

This work is also dedicated to my best friend and fiancé, Greg Rudolph. You listened to every detail of my progress for the last two years, even when it didn't make sense. Thank you. Our adventure together begins soon. I'm sure I won't regret that either.

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## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

For the next several years, colleges and universities across the country will be courting a new breed of student – the Millennial Generation. This cohort, comprised of individuals born after 1981, will provide ample numbers of prospects. Census figures indicate some 80 million Americans were born after 1981. By 2012, the number of Millennials is estimated to increase to 13.3 million, or 75% of all students (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002).

To attract these students, many colleges and universities have turned to “a rapidly growing trend in higher education” – weblogs (Brumfield, 2005, para. 7). Weblogs, or blogs, are frequently updated Web pages with posts centered on one topic arranged in reverse chronological order (Blood, 2002). Brumfield (2005) reported that university officials are discovering that student blogs offer a look inside college life in a way typical campus Web sites cannot.

Given all the administrative functions a university’s Web site must fulfill, school marketers and other campus officials are realizing that prospective students have few ways to learn what it feels like to be a student at the institution. And that’s where blogs can help, they say. (Brumfield, 2005, para. 8)

This thesis will examine what recurring frames appear in student blogs profiled on college and university admission department Web sites and how these entries depict colleges and universities.

### *College Recruiting and the Millennial Generation*

Stewart (1992) said that “In its simplest form, recruitment can be viewed as the opportunity for interested parties – students, parents, guidance counselors, and admissions officers – to directly communicate about college generally, as well as what the experience at specific institutions is like” (p. 12).

Davis-Van Atta and Carrier (1986) identified three stages in the college selection process: inquiry decision, application decision, and enrollment decision. In the first stage, inquiry, students use characteristics like programs of study, costs, and reputation to narrow down their college choices. This stage spans the longest time frame, lasting anywhere from the pre-teen years to a student’s final year in high school. Once the potential schools are narrowed, students enter the application decision process where they decide to which schools they will actually apply. By this time, students have established attitudes and beliefs about a college education. The enrollment decision stage arrives with the official offers of admission. This is when a student must select the one school in which to enroll.

Admissions offices rely on an arsenal of techniques and strategies to guide prospective students through these stages. Stewart (1992) said that “... there is general agreement that recruitment has evolved into an exquisitely sophisticated, multifaceted set of activities calculated to claim for an institution a share of a variety of segments of the college-bound (traditional and nontraditional) population” (p. 12). Typical approaches

include attending college fairs, giving tours of campus facilities, sending direct mail, and hosting special events (Hossler, 2000).

According to Hossler (2000), there are two guiding principles in recruitment activities: personalization and timing. “The more personalized an admissions office can make the admission process, the more positive the response will be from students. By focusing on timing, institutions should strive to reach students when they are ready for information” (Hossler, 2000, p. 20).

The Millennials, also called Generation Y, possess a few unique traits that complement these principles. First, they expect personalization:

They customize their Yahoo home pages to get local headlines and weather. They choose which news stories to read based on topic. And, of course, they create their own greatest hits collections by downloading favorite songs. (Kruse, 2004, para. 6)

They also expect real-time access:

The new generation demands instant digital gratification. Previous generations waited a week for the film to be returned from the photomat; generation Y snaps digital pictures with camera phones and e-mails them to friends within minutes. Previous generations went to the local library to do research during normal business hours; generation Y accesses multiple libraries around the world via the Internet at any time. Previous generations waited until 6 p.m. for the nightly news with Walter Cronkite or Dan Rather; the ‘Net generation gets e-mail headlines as they occur from CNN.com. (Kruse, 2004, para. 6)

One tool that facilitates such personalization and immediacy is the Internet. A survey sponsored by Noel-Levitz, James Tower, and the National Research Center for College and University Admissions (2005) found that almost half (49%) of students surveyed said they were online everyday. Eighty percent said they are online once per week or more. A Pew Internet and American Life Project survey found that 38% of all online teens – about 8 million young people – said they read blogs. Roughly 4 million keep a blog themselves, usually as a personal journal (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2005a). The Pew results concluded that “While public discussion has raged about whether blogs constitute legitimate journalism or are a reliable source of information, for teens, blogs are much more about the maintenance and extension of personal relationships” (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2005a, p. 15).

Coomes (2004) asserted that Millennials have mastered the art of attachment to friends and family:

They have found a multitude of ways for staying connected, including talking or texting on cell phones, instant messaging their friends, staying connected to distant parents through e-mail, reading and posting to public bulletin boards, and just entering their philosophical ramblings in their personal blog.... (p. 28)

According to Nancy Prater, the Web content coordinator at Ball State University, social networking through Web sites such as Facebook and Xanga is already taking place. “This is something that’s happening no matter if we have blogs on our site or not,” she said.

“We have a very, very connected generation. Putting (blogs) on your Web site gives you

a little bit more control and gives you a little bit of an opportunity to tell your own story in the way that you might like better.”

Ball State, a leader in using technology to recruit students, began utilizing student bloggers in September 2005 (Joly, 2006). In choosing bloggers, Ball State first asked deans, department chairs, and key professors for recommendations (Joly, 2006). “We then interviewed candidates and made selections with an eye toward diversity in terms of ethnicity, gender, hometowns, majors and year in school” (Joly, 2006, para. 3). For compensation, Ball State provided the bloggers with about \$800 each in high-tech gadgets such as digital cameras and iPods – tools they would in turn use as they blogged. Ball State spent about \$37,000 for their recruitment blogging project, including compensation, equipment, promotional materials, and social events for the students (Joly, 2006). Prater, who oversaw the project, was happy with the return on investment:

Prospective students, and certainly their parents, watch with a critical eye when we show them beautiful words and pictures depicting a perfect campus life. No one believes that any university can serve up perfection. What these decision makers need instead is a way to understand what life is like on a particular campus to help them decide if that is the right place for them. (Joly, 2006, para. 20)

### *Purpose*

The purpose of this thesis is threefold. First, the research seeks to uncover the way student bloggers are depicting their colleges and universities through the use of frames – “the way events and issues are organized and made sense of” (Reese, 2001, p. 7). Second, the research investigates specific attributes used to describe these institutions, thus

providing better insight into the bloggers' influence on recruitment. Finally, the study attempts to find out who these bloggers are - what types of students colleges and universities are employing to represent their institutions. This study will create the foundation for future research on framing in a variety of recruitment materials. In addition, it will generate new communication strategies for university public relations and marketing professionals.

### *Rationale*

Positioning student blogs on admission Web sites appears to be one ideal way to reach Millennials, a generation of students who embrace the type of personalization and insight blogs offer. Dearstyne (2005) asserted that blogs "are unedited and unfiltered, which appeals to readers who may not fully trust official corporate pronouncements or traditional mainstream media" (para. 7). Therefore, prospective students may be more receptive to peer input even though they do not know these blogging co-eds personally. Colleges and universities, however, should recognize the power this puts in the hands of student bloggers. Framing assumes that "subtle changes in the wording of the description of a situation might affect how audience members think about the situation" (Hester & Gibson, 2003, p. 74). With this in mind, it is important to investigate not only what these students are blogging about, but also how they are framing their respective institutions in the process. This study attempts to uncover how early-adopter colleges and universities are using student admission blogs in an effort to make recommendations for further implementation.



## Chapter 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This study examined a specific type of online communication used in a public relations setting. Therefore, it was necessary to review previous literature about a variety of online public relations techniques and the use of interactivity features on the Internet as well as all types of previous studies on blogs.

#### *Online Public Relations*

With 63% of American adults and 81% of teenagers now online, public relations practitioners must adapt their techniques to include this new way to communicate. “The Web has become the ‘new normal’ in the American way of life; those who don’t go online constitute an ever-shrinking minority” (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2005b, p. 59). Holtz (1999) described the Internet as one of the most important tools ever employed in the practice of public relations. “Communication professionals need to understand what the medium does best and what it doesn’t do so well, then integrate it into comprehensive efforts that capitalize on the spectrum of possibilities it presents” (Holtz, 1999, p. xiii).

Today’s public relations practitioners are using the Internet in several ways. According to Kent and Taylor (1998) and Esrock and Leichty (2000), organizational Web sites are used as outlets for news releases, opportunities for research of publics, dissemination of organizational information, and as a way to publicize messages, collect

data, and monitor public opinion. In addition, Web sites offer a way to quickly respond to organizational problems and crises.

Organizations are also using the Web to reach a variety of publics and to build organizational-public relationships (Esrock & Leichty, 2000). According to Ledingham (2003), "Relationship management theory suggests that public relations balances the interests of organizations and publics through the management of organization-public relationships" (p.181). The idea originated in the 1980s and has since become increasingly important in public relations work (Bruning, Castle, & Schrepfer, 2004). The concept steered public relations away from the idea of public opinion manipulation and "toward a focus on building, nurturing and maintaining *relationships* as the core function of public relations" (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000, p 56). Ehling (1992) described the adjustment as "an important change in the primary mission of public relations" (p. 622).

Center and Jackson (1995) said that "the proper term for the desired outcomes of public relations practice is public *relationships*. An organization with effective public relations will attain positive public *relationships*" (p. 2). But what exactly is this relationship? Ledingham and Bruning (1998) claimed an organization-public relationship is "the state that exists between an organization and its key publics, in which the actions of either entity impact the economic, social, political and (or) cultural well-being of the other entity" (p. 62). Ledingham (2003) also said that "to be effective and sustaining, relationships need to be seen as mutually beneficial based on mutual interest between an organization and its significant publics" (p. 185).

In 2003, Ledingham clarified relationship management by saying it involves "effectively managing organizational-public relationships around common interests and

shared goals, over time, [which] results in mutual understanding and benefit for interacting organizations and publics” (p. 190).

Measuring the value of public relations has always been difficult and historically revolved around the production and placement of organizational messages (Bruning, 2002). In the relationship management perspective, however, “measuring public relations outcomes is based upon the effective creation, development, and maintenance of mutually beneficial organization-public relationships” (Bruning et al., 2004, p. 436). Success can be determined by assessing the “attitudinal, evaluative, and/or behavioral changes that take place because of effective organization-public relationship management as opposed to the simple measurement of the amount of communication produced” (Bruning et al., 2004, p. 436). L. A. Grunig, J. E. Grunig, and Ehling (1992) furthered this when they said the state of the relationship can be determined by the extent of reciprocity, trust, mutual legitimacy, openness, mutual satisfaction, and mutual understanding.

Ledingham and Bruning (1998) identified five dimensions of organization-public relationships that are related to intended behavior and can even distinguish between “stayers, leavers, and undecided ... in an emerging competitive environment” (p. 63). These dimensions are openness, trust, involvement, investment, and commitment. Research shows that these dimensions “influence perceptions of *satisfaction* with the organization by public members (Bruning & Ledingham), influence perceptions of satisfaction with the organization for business owners, managers, or both (Bruning & Ledingham, 1998), and may be more influential than price or product features in predicting consumer behavior (Bruning & Ledingham, 1998c)” (Ledingham & Bruning,

2000, p. 59). The amount of time in a relationship also influences the understanding of these dimensions (Ledingham & Bruning, 2000). According to Ledingham and Bruning (1998):

This research indicates that an organization-public relationship centered around building trust, demonstrating involvement, investment, and commitment, and maintaining open, frank communication between the organization and its key public does have value in that it impacts the stay-leave decision in a competitive environment. (p. 61)

Ledingham and Bruning's (1998) research "suggests a role for communication initiatives within the framework of relationship management; in that role, goals are developed around relationships, and communication is used as a strategic tool in helping to achieve those goals" (p. 63).

Kent and Taylor (2002) asserted that the shift in public relations theory from an emphasis on managing communication toward a focus on communication as a tool for negotiating relationships is rooted in dialogic communication. The terms "dialogic" and "dialogue" have been used to describe ethical and moral approaches to practicing public relations (Kent & Taylor, 2002, p. 21). The origins of the concept are traced to several disciplines: philosophy, rhetoric, psychology, and relational communication (Kent & Taylor, 2002).

Dialogic communication was first applied to public relations theory by Pearson in 1989 (Kent & Taylor, 2002). Since then, Kent and Taylor (1998; 2002) have suggested that the Web should guide relationship building between organizations and publics by using dialogic communication. In their opinion, "technology itself can neither create nor

destroy relationships; rather, it is how the technology is used that influences organization-public relationships” (p. 324).

In 1998, Kent and Taylor proposed five guidelines on how to effectively use the Web’s dialogic capacity. First, practitioners must recognize the importance of providing an online dialogic loop which “allows publics to query organizations and, more importantly, it offers organizations the opportunity to respond to questions, concerns, and problems” (p. 326). Thus, practitioners also need specially trained organizational members who can respond to electronic communication in a professional and timely fashion. Second, Web sites should contain information of general value to all publics in addition to audience-specific content. Kent and Taylor (1998) contended that “Publics must have their questions and concerns addressed if relationships are to be built, and, if genuine dialogue is to occur” (p. 328).

The third guideline insists that sites should encourage repeat visits by including updated information and changing issues (Kent & Taylor, 1998). Interactive strategies that promote two-way communication are especially recommended. These might include forums, questions and answer formats, and featured “experts” like the company president or CEO. Fourth, sites should be easy to figure out and understand, include more text than graphics, and focus on the organization or product rather than “bells and whistle” features (p. 330). Ultimately Kent and Taylor (1998) asserted that “sites should be dynamic enough to encourage all potential publics to explore them, information rich enough to meet the needs of very diverse publics, and interactive enough to allow users to pursue further informational issues and dialogic relationships” (p. 330).

Finally, Kent and Taylor (1998) warned that Web designers should be careful about including links that can “lead visitors astray” (p. 330). Only essential links ought to be included with “clearly marked paths for visitors to return to your site” (p. 330). Along these same lines, advertising on a site should be placed at the bottom of pages or behind other clearly marked links to decrease the likelihood that visitors will get lost. This advice contradicts what typically occurs through blogging, however, where external links are the backbone of the content (Blood, 2002).

With these guidelines in mind, Kent, Taylor, and White (2001) examined activist Web sites to determine how they used the Internet to foster relationships. It was determined that while the sites embraced the technical aspects of the guidelines (ease of use, few graphics), the dialogic features (generating return visits, keeping visitors at the site) were lacking. The researchers speculated this might be a function of who designs an organization’s Web site. “In many organizations, the individuals who design and maintain Web sites are Web designers with vast expertise on the technical side of the computer-human interface but with little communication training” (Kent et al., 2001, p. 279).

In another study, Kent, Taylor, and White (2003) examined the relationship between Web site design and organizational responsiveness to stakeholders through the lens of resource dependency theory. Kent et al. (2003) found that both activist groups studied (each with varying degrees of resource dependency) employed poor dialogic communication and showed little commitment to building relationships with interested publics. The researchers concluded that to build lasting relationships based on trust with publics, organizations should actually pay attention them. Thus, “the more an

organization depends upon its publics for achieving its mission, the more it should employ dialogic features into its Web site design” (p. 75).

In 1999, Esrock and Leichty sampled *Fortune* 500 corporation Web sites and concluded that only “a minority of *Fortune* 500 organizations have become so energetic and proactive in using the new medium to its fullest potential” (p. 465). In a follow-up study in 2000, the researchers found that the majority of sites addressed several publics, the most important being investors, prospective employees, and customers. Up to 80% of the Web sites studied had feedback/e-mail links somewhere on the site – about three in four on the front page. The researchers concluded that “These corporations appear to endorse the idea that Web sites should allow individuals to initiate a dialogical relationship with the company” (Esrock & Leichty, 2000, p. 340).

Gonzalez-Herrero and Ruiz de Valbuena (2006) added an international perspective to previous research by studying the implementation and use of virtual press rooms in Denmark, France, Norway, Singapore, Spain, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The researchers found that companies from all countries fall short of having a stellar online presence. Specifically, the sites lacked interactivity and daily or immediate updating of information. Gonzalez-Herrero and Ruiz de Valbuena (2006) proposed that these shortcomings are a result of companies not having comprehensive, well-designed communication strategies.

Corporations are not the only organizations utilizing the Web to reach publics. Non-profit organizations, often with limited financial means, are going online to achieve public relations goals. Kang and Norton (2004) determined, however, that like their for-profit counterparts, non-profit organizations are not utilizing the Web to the fullest extent

possible. The sites could be improved, Kang and Norton (2004) contended, by developing interactive functions on the sites, inviting visitors to return, and improving the quality of design. Reber and Kim (2006) uncovered similar results when they studied activist organizations' Web sites. They found that, contrary to what they hypothesized, only about one-third of sites offered dialogic features for members. Most did not have any dialogic features for journalists. Reber and Kim (2006) recommended improving the sites by grouping elements of interest to journalists onto a page dedicated to them, posting press releases regularly, adding policy papers and statements, and identifying specialists or experts.

McAllister-Greve (2005) performed a content analysis of community college Web sites to determine their dialogic ability to build relationships with internal and external constituents. She found that while the sites offered online access to information and services to a variety of publics, they could do more to promote dialogic communication. For example, most sites scored high in the usefulness of information and ease of use features but were lacking in the area of conservation of visitors and the dialogic feedback loop. More importantly, interactive features that solicited input and feedback were limited on the sites. This absence negatively communicates the kinds of relationships the organization prefers to have with its publics (Esrock & Leichty, 2000).

Will and Callison (2006) examined college and university Web sites to find out how institutions communicate online. Alumni and friends were found to be targeted most profusely on homepages, possibly because of their potential to make financial donations to endowments. Of students, prospective students were most targeted with links to the admissions office and online and downloadable applications for admission. Will and



Callison (2006) determined that while efforts were being made to reach students online, there is much room for improvement.

Using a survey and focus groups, Poock and Lefond (2001) observed how college-bound high school students perceived college and university Web pages. The authors, following the findings of previous research, grouped their results into eight categories: content, site architecture, navigation, connection speed, enjoyable experience, target audience, distinctiveness of site, and graphics.

Content was determined to be the most important element of a college or university Web page, according to the sampled students. The information they expected to see most often included material on athletics, on-campus housing, extracurricular activities, course listings, and general admissions requirements (Poock & Lefond, 2001). When it came to organization of this content, the students preferred sites with information grouped by target audience rather than function. In addition, sites that used terminology familiar to the students were viewed as more effective. "It was easier for students to find needed information if they knew what the links meant" (Poock & Lefond, 2001, p. 18).

Ease of navigating the sites was also deemed important by students. Poock and Lefond (2001) were surprised to find the majority of sites lacked accommodation for slow modems. Most students had slow speed access from their computers at home (67%). Only about half had access to a high speed connection at their high schools. Students were also frustrated when they had to click through more than three levels of Web pages to obtain the desired information. "Fewer levels with more information per level appeared far more effective" (Poock & Lefond, 2001, p. 18). Rollovers, which shows the

information found in the link when the cursor touches the link, proved popular by allowing students to find information without blindly clicking on links.

Students confessed that the quickest way to cause them to end their visit to a site was to have a slow connection or download speed. A simple solution is to include the option of by-passing elaborate graphics or viewing pages in text-only formats. Ultimately, this “made the Web site more user-friendly, increased the effectiveness of the site, and reduced the likelihood of terminating the connection before the information was retrieved” (Poock & Lefond, 2001, p. 19).

Institutions must walk a fine line between appealing to prospective students online and making them feel ignored. Poock and Lefond (2001) found that “participants were generally unaware of other constituencies of a university (alumni, faculty, donors, etc.), and therefore viewed any information not directly specific to them as superfluous” (p. 19). In addition, sites that went overboard to appeal to prospective students were seen as unprofessional, a label that indicated a lower quality institution. Distinctiveness of a site proved unimportant to students who felt that few Web pages appeared similar although their view of distinctiveness was limited to physical appearances.

Finally, Poock and Lefond (2001) uncovered two truths about the use of graphics on institution Web sites. First, pictures were best suited to communicate environmental content:

Participants felt strongly that pictures should assist the prospective student in determining what the campus looks like, what the students are like, what student clubs and activities are available, etc. That is, they should

help the prospective student answer the question, 'Will I fit in?' (Poock & Lefond, 2001, p. 19)

Second, students agreed that 70% text and 30% graphics was the optimal blend. They were willing to put up with some slow download speed because they felt graphics provided information unavailable in text.

Vorvoreanu (2006) advocated an experience-centered approach to public relations Web sites. She claimed current research is limited in that it only examines Web sites as texts rather than interactive experiences. "Focusing on the website content provides little information about how websites are perceived and used, and consequently, about the *process of Web-based communication*" (Vorvoreanu, 2006, p. 396). The Web site experience includes a temporal dimension that consists of the sequence of perceptions, exploration, and the exit. Each stage of this temporal dimension has implications for public relations: "the first impression determines whether the user will stay on the site; the exploration phase presents ample opportunities for relationship management; the exit phase has an impact on the likelihood of return visits" (Vorvoreanu, 2006, p. 397).

### *Interactivity*

Jo and Kim (2003) believed that "one of the most distinguishing characteristics of the Web is its unique interactive feature compared to traditional media" (p. 201). Steuer (1992) defined this interactivity as the extent to which users participate in the message content in a computer-mediated environment. Ha and James (1998) took this a step further by proposing five dimensions of interactivity: playfulness, choice, connectedness, information collection, and reciprocal communication. The reciprocal dimension, defined as two-way communication, parallels the two-way models in public relations in that

organizations expect feedback and responses from visitors (Jo & Kim, 2003). “Reciprocal communication enhances the dialogue and exchangeable views between the message sender (organization) and message recipient (public)” (Jo & Kim, 2003, p. 202).

An experiment by O’Malley and Irani (1998) sought to assess the effect of interactivity and amount of information on predicting attitude change and behavioral intention. “They concluded that the concept of interactivity in the Web is related to relationship building through attitudinal and behavioral change” (Jo & Kim, 2003, p. 202). The Web, through interactivity, could essentially foster media relations, employee communication, government relations, and customer relations (Johnson, 1997).

McMillan (2002) proposed that interactivity comes in three forms: user-to-user, user-to-document, and user-to-system (McMillan, 2002). Each form is uniquely suited for blogs (Trammell, Williams, Postelnicu, & Landreville, 2006). For example, user-to-user focuses on interaction between individuals. This typically occurs through Internet chat, instant messaging, or discussion boards. Blogs also foster this interaction by enabling readers to leave comments in response to a post.

User-to-document interactivity is evident when users modify site texts or when real-time feedback is used to revise the message. Book reviews posted on Amazon.com provide an example (Endres & Warnick, 2004). Comments on blog sites also allow readers to experience user-to-document interactivity by permitting them to alter content, “thereby contributing to the overall conversation and changing the meaning of the original text as more is added” (Trammell et al., 2006, p. 25). User-to-system interactivity occurs on all Web sites when users interact with their computers. This interaction can happen when users click on hyperlinks or customize site features such as font size

(Endres & Warnick, 2004). Blogs, which evolved from lists of hyperlinks, provide an example of this type of interaction (Blood, 2002).

Endres and Warnick (2004) contended that there is another form of online interaction – text-based interactivity – that focuses on the “rhetorical features of the *form of verbal and visual expression* in the site text” (p. 326). This might include the use of active versus passive voice, direct address (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> person), use of first name versus last name references, text boxes, captioned photographs, and use of accessible style and design (Endres & Warnick, 2004). In the context of studying campaign Web sites, Endres and Warnick (2004) concluded that text-based interactivity is designed to simulate face-to-face communication between the candidate or members of the campaign team and their site’s users. Text-based interactivity could essentially be used in the same way to spark communication between colleges and universities and prospective students.

Trammell et al. (2006) examined Web pages and blogs of Democratic candidates during the 2004 primary to gauge how much interactivity was offered. Research indicates that increased interactivity “may be able to enhance users’ perceptions of [a candidate’s] sensitivity, responsiveness, and trustworthiness” (Trammell et al., 2006, p. 22). Trammell et al. (2006) found that campaign blogs promoted interactivity more through text than technology. For example, a conversational style of writing was used and the audience was frequently invited to participate in the campaign. As for technical features, all six blogs studied included a comment feature while four had trackback capabilities. Hyperlinks were used less often than the researchers expected. Trammell et al. (2006) posited that this was because campaigns, following Kent and Taylor’s (1998) advice, are hesitant to link to outside material that they have no control over.

Newhagen, Cordes, and Levy (1995) studied perceived interactivity through audience responses sent to NBC Nightly News via the Internet in terms of the scope of the audience the messages addressed. Using content analysis, Newhagen et al. (1995) discovered that the messages received addressed three levels of audience scope – macro, mezzo, and micro. Macro messages tended to be well-written, formal, and critical. Mezzo messages, intended for a medium-sized audience, were less formal, avoided talking about politics, and took the tone of a cheerleader. Micro messages, meanwhile, targeted small audiences and stood out by emphasizing interactivity and speed. While messages in the first two groups are no different from their snail mail predecessors, “this last class of messages seems written by and for inhabitants of the Internet and may represent a departure in their expectations of the communication experience with a large news organization” (Newhagen et al., 1995, para. 47). Therefore, Newhagen et al. (1995) concluded that interaction is a factor in the character of messages written for the Internet.

Recognizing the importance of knowing how interactivity is perceived by users, McMillan and Hwang (2002) identified three elements that are important when exploring perceived interactivity: direction of communication, user control, and time. Using these elements, McMillan and Hwang (2002) proposed three Measures of Perceived Interactivity scales (MPI). They hoped that “by understanding perceived interactivity, [advertising practitioners] can develop Web sites that effectively utilize interactivity” (McMillan & Hwang, 2002, p. 39).

### *Blog History and Research*

Blogs are an increasingly popular way that organizations can reach key publics online. The blogging phenomenon took off in 1999 when free software for creating blogs became available. Blood (2002) described blogs in more detail saying:

Some provide succinct descriptions of judiciously selected links. Some contain wide swaths of commentary dotted sparingly with links to the news of the day. Others consist of an endless stream of blurts about the writer's day; links, if they exist, are to other, similar, personal sites. Some are political. Some are intellectual. Some are hilarious. Some are topic-driven. Some are off-the-wall. Most are non commercial and all are impassioned about their subjects. (p. 1)

The Web site *Webopedia.com* defined a blog as “a Web page that serves as a publicly accessible personal journal for an individual. Typically updated daily, blogs often reflect the personality of the author” (para. 1). For this study, it is sufficient to note that, in general, blogs have posts arranged in reverse chronological order, are updated frequently, usually incorporate links to Internet sources, and allow comments from readers (Cldye, 2004).

Blood (2002) classified blogs into three categories: blogs, notebooks, and filters. She depicted blogs as journals about daily life while notebooks contain longer pieces of focused content. Filters, on the other hand, use links to show readers around the Web. “In the end, it is the maintainer of the site who labels his work and chooses the community with whom he most closely identifies” (Blood, 2002, p. 7).

Inexpensive and easy-to-use software makes creating a blog effortless, but Stauffer (2002) recommended three reasons why a business should consider using one: to inform, to have regular visitors, and to garner feedback and participation. Informing is important especially “if you’re interested in creating debate over topics or trying to convince people of a particular viewpoint” (Stauffer, 2000, p. 19). Blogs are also successful at enticing visitors to return to a Web site. Stauffer (2000) said this happens by “fostering community, having something interesting to say, and saying it with some frequency” (p. 20). Finally, while feedback and participation can be a double-edged sword, they can also enhance the blog experience by allowing readers to contribute to the discussion with comments and questions. Motivations for keeping blogs include information sharing, reputation building, and personal expression (Blood, 2002). A blog may be started for primarily one of these reasons, but Blood said the blogger will eventually do all three.

Herring, Scheidt, Bonus, and Wright (2005) used content analysis to examine blogs in an effort to document and describe blog characteristics. The researchers noted that journalists tend to view blogs as “alternative sources of news and public opinion” while educators and business people see them as “environments for knowledge and sharing” (Herring et al., 2005, p. 1). They found, however, that the overwhelming majority of blogs in their sample were classified as personal journals. These blogs also rarely contained links or elicited comments.

The 260 randomly selected blogs analyzed by Papacharissi (2004) were also characterized as more like diaries than independent journalism. Papacharissi (2004) noted that “while traditional journalism provides individuals with pictures of a world they



cannot experience firsthand, to paraphrase Walter Lippmann, blogs operate in the opposite direction, broadening the pictures in our heads back to a worldwide audience” (p. 21). Feedback mechanisms were present on 54% of the blogs Papacharissi (2004) studied. This included the use of e-mail (48.8%), listservs (3.5%), guestbooks (4.3%), counters (3.6%), contact forms (8.7%), webring or other communities (2.8%), ICQ (3.6%), or other forms of feedback (10.8%). Links were also present and encompassed a wide range of topics including “computer news, alternative news, fan information, links to other bloggers and family, political, religious, music and art interests” (p.16).

In examining blog author characteristics, Herring et al. (2005) found about 60% of bloggers were adult while 40% were teenagers, “although many of the adults indicate that they are in their early 20s” (p. 5). The occupation most frequently listed was student. A longitudinal study by Herring, Scheidt, Kouper, and Wright (2006) found these results have remained stable over time. Other elements did not remain stable. Herring et al. (2006) revealed that over time, bloggers tended to post longer entries with fewer images and links.

Trammell and Keshelashvili (2005) used content analysis to examine the most popular blogs, the ones frequently linked to by other bloggers. They found that “A-list” bloggers divulge an assortment of personal information and actively engage in impression management. In a study of Polish blogs, Trammell, Tarkowski, Hofmohl, and Sapp (2006) found that Polish blogs, for the most part, were similar to English-language blogs in that they are usually diary-like and are used for self-expression.

Lawson-Boarders and Kirk (2005) examined blogs in campaign discourse during the 2004 U.S. presidential election and found that blogs were used as a motivational tool

and a participatory outlet. Bichard (2006) discovered that political campaign staffs are using blogs as a framing device to “glean good information from supporters and expose information in response to attacks while proactively positioning issues in their favor” (p. 331). She used content analysis to examine presidential candidate blogs in the 64 days before the election. Bichard (2006) drew on the multi-dimensional approach of time and space (Chyi & McCombs, 2004) and Ghanem’s (1997) “picture frame” dimensions of subtopics, mechanisms, and cognitive and affective attributes. Bichard (2006) found that most entries focused on the present (time) and on the individual (space). Attacking the opponent was the most frequently used topic for both candidates, however they differed in regards to topic attributes. Ultimately, Bichard (2006) asserted that “the political arena is saturated with those attempting to frame issues in their favor” (p. 330).

Also examining campaign blogs, Trammell (2006) investigated the use of attack messages in blog posts by Bush and Kerry during the 2004 presidential race. She discovered that candidates used their blogs as a place to attack their opponent. “From humorous jabs to all-out assaults on issue stance, blog posts ran the gamut of type and intensity of negativity in attacks on the opponent” (Trammell, 2006, p. 404). Kerry, the challenger, was found to use attacks more frequently which related to his need to convince voters that the country needed change. Trammell (2006) concluded that blogs are a natural location for logical arguments supported by hyperlinked background information. Thus, this negativity in blogs is a skill to be honed for effectiveness.

Kelleher and Miller (2006) evaluated the possible benefits of organizational blogs over traditional Web sites for building and maintaining relationships with publics online.

For their study, organizational blogs were operationally defined as blogs that met the following criteria:

They are 1) maintained by people who post in an official or semiofficial capacity at an organization, 2) endorsed explicitly or implicitly by that organization, and 3) posted by a person perceived by publics to be clearly affiliated with the organization. (Kelleher & Miller, 2006, p. 399)

The experiment established that blogs may be particularly suited for conveying a “human voice” online, thus providing “some sense of human attributes existing behind an organizational façade” (Kelleher & Miller, 2006, p. 409).

Seltzer (2005) determined that the dialogic principles identified by Kent, Taylor, and White (2003) and Taylor, Kent, and White (2001) appeared more frequently on blogs versus traditional Web sites. Blogs heavily incorporated conservation of visitors (85%) and ease of interface (78%). In addition, a greater proportion of blogs responded to a request for more information. Seltzer (2005), therefore, claimed that blogs could be used for online relationship-building efforts, “either as a stand alone corporate weblog or as a complement to the organization’s traditional Web site” (p. 17). But not just anyone should be designated as the company blogger:

The corporate weblogger needs to be independent enough to maintain the distinctive, individual voice that is part of what makes a weblog a weblog, yet must also be trusted not to go off message or post items that could prove to be embarrassing to the organization. (Seltzer, 2005, p. 18)

These concepts can also apply to colleges and universities utilizing student blogs on admission Web sites.

Herring et al. (2005) concluded that because blogs “allow authors to experience social interaction while giving them control over the communication space,” they will continue to grow in popularity and “be put to increasingly diverse use” (p. 11).

## Chapter 3

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Recognizing that the *way* student bloggers write about their college experiences is just as important as *what* they write about, this study is grounded in framing theory and attribute agenda setting. These mass communication theories seek to understand how specific attempts at communication convey meaning to audiences.

#### *Framing Theory*

Early last century, Walter Lippmann (1922) made a striking observation: most public opinion is formed as a response to pictures inside people's heads. These pictures, which are created from media's portrayal of events, create what Lippmann called a pseudoenvironment. "For nearly all the concerns on the public agenda, citizens deal with a second-hand reality, a reality that is structured by journalists' reports about these events and situations" (McCombs, 2004, p. 1). Framing elaborates on Lippman's idea of pictures in our heads and "refers to the way events and issues are organized and made sense of, especially by media, media professionals, and their audiences" (Reese, 2001, p. 7). Shimizu (1951) argued that in today's society, people have to depend on the media to provide details about the larger world. In much the same way, many prospective students must depend on information provided by colleges and universities to determine the academic and social culture of the institution. Shimizu (1951) stated:

It is almost impossible for ordinary people to check the copy against the reality, but they are forced to depend on the copy at the risk of their fate. If the copy reflects the original with complete fidelity, there would be no problem, however it is unlikely. (Takeshita, 1997, p. 18)

Journalists are responsible for crafting Lippmann's pseudoenvironment. Based on previous research, Scheufele (1999) identified five factors that influence how journalists frame an issue. These include social norms and values, organizational pressures and constraints, pressures from interest groups, journalistic routines, and ideological or political orientations of journalists. This framing is so important because it can affect how a person understands or evaluates a problem or issue (Ghanem, 1997).

Scheufele (1999) believed knowing the history of media effects research was important to understanding the concept of framing. Thus, he turned to McQuail (1994) who divided the history roughly into four stages. The first stage encompasses the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century to the late 1930s. During this time, the use of strategic propaganda during World War I frightened people about the potential influence media had on public opinion. During the second phase, which ended around the 1960s, personal experience was deemed as most important when considering causes of attitude change. Klapper (1960) determined that "Campaigns do not influence people; their major effect is the reinforcement of existing attitudes. Even for those who actually do change their mind, the effects are minimal" (Scheufele, 1999, p. 105). The third phase, beginning in the 1970s, found researchers searching for a new strong media effects. Research became focused on cognitive effects of mass media rather than attitude change. The final stage began in the early 1980s and continues to present day. A compromise was reached through social

constructivism – “On the one hand, mass media have a strong impact by constructing social reality ... On the other hand, media effects are limited by an interaction between mass media and recipients” (Scheufele, 1999, p. 105).

Today’s framing research “explores how the media frame an issue or a problem and how this affects people’s understandings of that issue” (Takeshita, 1997, p. 23).

Hallahan (1999) asserted that framing puts information into context and establishes frames of reference so people can evaluate information, comprehend meanings, and take action. In addition, Entman (1993) said framing involves selection and salience:

To frame is to *select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, more evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation* for the item described. (p. 52, emphasis in original)

More recently, Reese (2001) has streamlined the definition of framing by saying:

“Frames are *organizing principles* that are socially *shared* and *persistent* over time, that work *symbolically* to meaningfully *structure* the social world” (p. 11).

Framing works by highlighting information and thus increasing its salience.

Salience – or “making a piece of information more noticeable, meaningful, or memorable to audiences” – increases the likelihood that message receivers will perceive the information, discern meaning and ultimately process it and store it in memory (Entman, 1993, p. 53). Texts can make bits of information more salient by placement, repetition, and by associating them with culturally familiar symbols. Most frames are defined by

what they omit as well as what they include. None of this, however, guarantees the audience will be influenced (Entman, 1989).

Scholars have used a picture frame metaphor to understand the concept of framing. The idea is that a picture frame's size, complexity, and location affect how the picture is perceived (Ghanem, 1997). The picture itself (Picasso versus van Gogh) can also determine how it is discerned. Based on this metaphor, Ghanem (1997) divided media frames into four major dimensions:

- Topic of a news item (what's included in the frame)
- Presentation (size and placement)
- Cognitive attributes (details of what's included in the frame)
- Affective attributes (tone of the picture). (p. 10)

Subtopics of the object are the issues being studied (Ghanem, 1997). Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) proposed that these subtopics within frames can be content analyzed inductively and deductively. Deductive analysis is used to determine the extent that predefined frames occur in the news. Previous literature has identified several common frames which include conflict, human interest, economic consequences, morality, and responsibility. The strengths of this approach are that it can be replicated easily, can handle large samples, and can differentiate framing between media (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). The drawback to a deductive approach is that frames not defined in advance might be overlooked during the study. According to Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), using an inductive approach involves having an "open view to attempt to reveal the array of possible frames, beginning with very loosely defined preconceptions of these frames" (p. 94). While this approach is great for detecting all possible frames, it unfortunately is typically labor intensive, based on small samples, and hard to replicate. Ghanem (1997) claimed another weakness of the inductive approach is that it causes a



“lack of distinction between content analysis in general and the examination of frames” (p. 11). Regardless, an inductive approach is necessary for this study because no predefined frames exist to examine college admission blogs.

Presentation refers to the placement and size of news items. While not examined in this study, these elements play a key role in determining the prominence of a news story. For example, front page stories in a newspaper garner about twice the readership of stories located on inside pages (McCombs, 2004). Presentation also includes the use of photographs, pull quotes, and subheads (Ghanem, 1997).

Affective attributes consider the public’s emotional response to media coverage (Ghanem, 1997). Journalists elicit this response through their use of narratives, most often chronicles and stories, and through news values such as proximity and human interest. Ghanem (1997) suggested that “bringing a story to such a personal level might help the reader identify with the happenings in the story and thus feel more concern for what is going on” (p. 13). In political coverage, affective attributes also include opinions about the candidates (Golan & Wanta, 2001). Golan and Wanta (2001) said cognitive attributes, meanwhile, involve information about newsmakers, whether it’s about issues or personal characteristics. According to Ghanem (1997), cognitive attributes attempt to “shed light on whether the media and the audience are thinking about the problem in the same way” (p. 13). McCombs, Llamas, Lopez-Escobar, and Rey (1997) studied how local Spanish media and advertising influenced voters’ cognitive and affective images of candidates. Affective attributes were coded as positive, negative, and neutral. Cognitive categories included ideology and issue positions, qualifications and professional experience, and personal traits and personality. The researchers uncovered evidence of

second-level agenda-setting effects on both the substantive and affective dimensions of voters' candidate descriptions although there were stronger effects on the affective dimension. A study by Golan and Wanta (2001), however, found that newspapers were more successful at influencing voter perceptions at the cognitive level rather than the affective level.

Ghanem (1997) admitted that the only problem with these picture frame dimensions is that attributes of one object are often not generalizable to other objects. Researchers have also found it difficult to develop mutually exclusive and exhaustive frames for objects. To address these problems, Chyi and McCombs (2004) proposed dividing frames into two dimensions – space and time. Space encompasses five levels: individual, community, regional, societal, and international (Chyi & McCombs, 2004). At the individual level, the news event is limited to the individuals involved. A community level event is framed as relevant to a particular community while a regional level event frames the story as important to a more general population. At the societal level, a story is framed in terms of social or national significance. Finally, at the international level an event is framed from an international perspective. The time dimension includes looking at whether a story deals with the past, present, or future.

Scholars have also classified framing into various types. Episodic frames depict concrete instances or specific events while thematic frames report on more general outcomes (Scheufele, 1999; Bichard, 2006). Iyengar (1991) speculated that this type of framing determined how audience members would attribute responsibility. Depending on the frame, responsibility could shift from personal to societal causes (Iyengar, 1991).

Furthermore, themes can be divided as central themes and aspects. Referring back to the picture frame metaphor, central themes put the focus on the picture. “In the case of aspects, the frame distinguishes between the total set of attributes that the picture includes and what is left outside, a use of the term very similar to the original idea of framing in photography” (Reese, 2001, p. 75).

According to Entman (1993), frames have at least four locations in the communication process: the communicator, the text, the receiver, and the culture. Communicators make framing judgments – consciously or not – in deciding what to say. These judgments are guided by frames, also called schemata, which organize the communicator’s belief system. Frames in texts are apparent “by the presence or absence of certain keywords, stock phrases, stereotyped images, sources of information, and sentences that provide thematically reinforcing clusters of facts or judgments” (Entman, 1993, p. 52). Receivers are the individuals that use frames to digest information. Scheufele (1999) called these individual frames, or “mentally stored clusters of ideas that guide individuals’ processing of information” (Entman, 1993, p. 53). The conclusions drawn by receivers may or may not reflect the frames presented by the communicator or the text (Entman, 1993). Finally, the culture is the accumulation of commonly invoked frames used by most people in thinking and social conversations.

Hallahan (1999) argued that framing theory’s location in the field of public relations is a perfect match. In fact, it is essential to the field. “Public relations workers routinely strive to position clients and their products or services so they will be evaluated favorably and so key publics will respond in a desired way when they buy, invest, donate, work, or vote” (Hallahan, 1999, p. 225). Although public relations has been defined as a

management function, practitioners are sometimes unfairly tagged as merely “imagemakers” or “spindoctors” – labels Hallahan (1999) claimed “only partially portray their important role in constructing social reality” (p. 206). Reber, Gower, and Robinson (2006) claimed that framing processes are important to individuals and organizations that “seek to manage meaning and influence the perceptions, opinions, beliefs, and behaviors of organizational members and other external publics” (p. 30).

Framing has potential in studying “the strategic creation of public relations messages and audience responses” (Hallahan, 1999, p. 205). It has been used as a model for understanding and investigating communication and related behavior across many fields, including psychology, speech communication, organizational decision making, economics, health communication, media studies, and political communication (Rendahl, 1995).

Hallahan (1999) described seven models of framing that can be used in public relations. These include framing of situations, attributes, choices, actions, issues, responsibility, and news. Framing of attributes, or the characterization of objects, events, and people, is essentially second-level agenda setting. It is used to focus on particular attributes that might be flattering or derogatory and thus be advantageous or disadvantageous to message sponsors (Hallahan, 1999). Product positioning and product claims fall into the framing of attributes category.

Positive framing of attributes consistently leads to more favorable evaluations of objects and attributes than negative framing (Levin, 1987). This framing relies on semantic differences in describing the same choice, for example, 75% lean beef versus 25% fat beef, 60% success rate versus a 40% failure rate, or whether a team won 30

games or lost 20 games. Kahneman and Tversky (1984) demonstrated this idea in an experiment that presented public policies likely to save lives and ones likely to result in deaths. They found that even though the outcomes would be identical, participants preferred policies that would save lives over those that would result in death.

While framing is a pertinent part of public relations, Entman (1993) deemed the theory a “fractured” paradigm because “nowhere is there a general statement of framing theory that shows exactly how frames become embedded within and make themselves a manifest in a text, or how framing influences thinking” (p. 51). Some researchers believe the solution is to consider framing in light of agenda-setting. Chyi and McCombs (2004) argued that the union of framing and agenda-setting could advance both theories “by focusing the former and expanding the later” (p. 24). Reese (2001) asserted that framing and agenda-setting research traditions complement each other. McCombs (2004) agreed:

Positioning the concept in the context of agenda-setting theory offers the prospect of sorting out some of these definitions and drawing a distinct and useful boundary between frames and the mass of other attributes – many of which are sometimes also labeled as frames – that can characterize objects. (p. 89)

Patterson (1993) pointed out that framing and agenda-setting both focus on issues in the news and the publics’ minds. But framing also “expands beyond what people talk or think about by examining how they think and talk” (p. 70).

#### *Attribute Agenda Setting*

Since first empirically tested by McCombs and Shaw (1972), agenda setting has explored the transfer of salience from the media to the public. This happens when the

media, over time, feature some issues prominently, some less prominently, and some not at all, “give[ing] us a sense of what issues are important ...” (Grossberg, Wartella, & Whitney, 1998, p. 346). In essence, the media tell the public what to think about.

McCombs and Ghanem (2001) asserted that one of the strengths of agenda setting theory that has aided its growth for more than 30 years is its compatibility with a variety of other concepts and theories such as gatekeeping and the spiral of silence. The recent convergence of agenda setting with framing has resulted in second-level agenda setting, or attribute agenda setting. This second level “examines how media coverage affects both what the public thinks about and how the public thinks about it” (Ghanem, 1997, p.3). In addition, this second level tries to figure out how an agenda of attributes influences public opinion (McCombs & Evatt, 1995). According to McCombs (2004), “attribute is a generic term encompassing the entire range of properties and traits that characterize an object” (p. 70). Ghanem (1997) argued that looking at the attributes of an issue produces a more detailed view of the picture in our head described by Lippman (1922). McCombs, Lopez-Escobar, and Llamas (2000) stated that:

When mass media present an object, they also tell us something about the attributes of the object. Some attributes are emphasized, albeit to varying degrees. Others are mentioned only in passing. Many are ignored. Just as objects vary in salience, so do the attributes of each object. Just as there is an agenda of public issues, political candidates, or some other set of objects, there also is an agenda of attributes for each object. Both the selection by journalists of objects for attention and the selection of

attributes for detailing the picture of these objects are powerful agenda-setting roles. (p.78)

Ghanem (1997) described attribute agenda setting as looking at an item under a magnifying lens while first level uses the naked eye. She added: “The attributes of an object are the set of perspectives or frames that journalists and the public employ to think about each object. How news frames impact the public agenda is the emerging second level of agenda setting” (p. 5). Survey respondents from Iyengar and Simon’s (1993) investigation of media effects that occurred during the Persian Gulf crisis and war illustrate this distinction. The first level of agenda setting is seen when respondents said the crisis was the most important problem facing the nation. Describing the crisis in terms of diplomatic or military options depicts the second level (Reese, 2001).

Two classic studies from the 1976 presidential election illustrate attribute agenda setting at work. First, a panel study by Weaver, Graber, McCombs, and Eyal (1981) revealed a connection between the agenda of attributes in the *Chicago Tribune* and the agenda of attributes in Illinois voter’s descriptions of Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford. Similarly, Becker and McCombs (1978) found a relationship between the attributes covered in *Newsweek* about Democratic contenders for the presidential nomination and how Democrats from New York described this group of politicians.

More recently, Ghanem and Evatt (1995) were able to find applications to attribute agenda setting outside the political realm when they found a link between Texans’ concern about crime and the pattern of news coverage in the major state newspapers. Meanwhile, Hester and Gibson (2003) analyzed print and broadcast news about the economy and found that, as expected, news about the economy was usually

framed negatively. Their findings on the effect of attribute agenda setting suggest that people are more dependent on the media when making judgments about the future of the economy, which fits with earlier assumptions that “people use personal experiences to make judgments whenever possible, but rely more on the media for issues out of their reach, either in terms of physical location or time” (Hester & Gibson, 2003, p. 85). This assumption could also apply to prospective students who are the first in their family to be college-bound. In this situation, students might rely heavily on student blogs to aid in their college decision-making process.

McCombs and Evatt (1995) ascertained that mass communication coverage of news serves as a way for voters to learn about candidates which, therefore, makes second-level agenda setting an important part of the electoral process (Golan & Wanta, 2001). In the same way, admission Web sites and their blogs serve as a source of learning for prospective students. The second-level agenda setting used in this form of communication should be seen as a vital part of the recruitment process.



## Chapter 4

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Taking this knowledge of framing theory and attribute agenda setting into account, the purpose of this study was to examine the characteristics that student bloggers link to their respective colleges and universities. In addition to answering how student bloggers are portraying their institutions, this study also attempted to describe who these students are. Based on the review of research literature above, the following research questions emerged:

**RQ1:** What reoccurring frames appear in entries by student bloggers on admission department Web sites?

Following the lead of McCombs et al. (2000), McCombs et al. (1997), and Bichard (2006), this study also attempted to measure the affective aspects (see Ghanem, 1997) of college and university images as presented by student bloggers by gauging whether a frame's tone is positive, negative, or neutral. Therefore, this study asked:

**RQ2:** What is the distribution of tone within frames?

**RQ3:** Are any relationships apparent between the use of tone and attribute frames?

Like Bichard (2006), this study coded for the presence of framing mechanisms in blog text and asked:

**RQ4:** What specific framing mechanisms (graphics, photographs) are used? How do these images frame the institution?

Previous blog research has sought to capture the characteristics of bloggers from specific genres (Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005; Herring et al., 2005; Huffaker & Calvert, 2005). Thus, this study also asked:

**RQ5:** What are the characteristics of students that colleges and universities employ as bloggers on admission Web sites?

**RQ6:** What are the characteristics of the institutions that use blogs on admission Web sites?

And finally, given the importance Kent and Taylor (1998) placed on dialogic communication through organizational Web sites, this study also examined the use of technical features by asking:

**RQ7:** What technical features are used in the blog posts that help develop dialogic communication?

This was asked as a research question rather than posited as a hypothesis because while admission blogs are considered part of organizational Web sites, they take a very personal nature.

## Chapter 5

### METHODOLOGY

Content analysis is defined as “a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of manifest content of communication” (Berelson, 1952, p. 18). Kaid and Wadsworth (1989) recognized that content analysis is one of the most commonly used methodologies in communication research. It has also become a tested method to analyze the structure, purpose, and themes found in blogs (Herring et al., 2005; Trammell & Keshelashvili, 2005; Trammell & Gasser, 2004; Papacharissi, 2004). Therefore, this study also used content analysis. Kaid and Wadsworth (1989) suggested seven steps for implementing content analysis which this study followed:

1. Formulate the hypotheses or research question to be answered;
2. Select the sample to be analyzed;
3. Define the categories to be applied;
4. Outline the coding process and train the coders;
5. Implement the coding process
6. Determine reliability and validity; and
7. Analyze the results from the coding process.

#### *Sample*

No comprehensive list exists of colleges and universities that use student blogs in their recruitment efforts. Therefore, the sample was created by first determining which institutions use blogs. This was done by visiting the Web site of each college or university listed on a master list of institutions maintained by the University of Texas (<http://www.utexas.edu/world/univ/alpha/>). This list contained all institutions accredited

by the six biggest regional accrediting organizations. These are the major regional accrediting bodies, as recognized by the Department of Education. Other recognized accrediting agencies exist, but they are much smaller and likely to focus on specific types of institutions. The University of Texas list was compared to others maintained by *U.S. News & World Report* and the Carnegie Foundation and deemed to be the most inclusive of all types of schools. Inclusiveness was important for this study because it looked for the use of a specific media tool not yet widely adopted among public relations practitioners (Porter, Sweetser Trammell, Chung, & Kim, 2007). When accessed during the summer of 2006, the list contained a total of 1,906 institutions. Of these, 172 institutions were excluded from the sample for either not offering at least one bachelor's degree, not being located within the 50 states, or for having closed. Thus, 1,734 school sites were examined for the presence of student blogs used for recruitment purposes. For this study, blogs were operationally defined as frequently updated Web pages with posts centered on one topic arranged in reverse chronological order (Blood, 2002). The bulk of blog research is still focused on text blogs in an effort to fully understand them before moving on to examine photo and audio blogs. Therefore, photo and audio blogs that did not contain a significant amount of text were excluded from the study. A total of 183 institutions were found to have blogs fitting the criteria.

The unit of analysis was a blog post collected from each school's Web site. Only posts dated from August 1, 2005 to May 31, 2006 were examined. This timeframe, which represents a full academic year, was chosen to reveal the effect of student bloggers during their tenure as university representatives. To preserve the data, each post was downloaded manually thus capturing the images and text together in one file. Ninety-two institutions

were found to have archives of student blogs for the 2005-2006 academic year resulting in the collection of 4,792 blog posts (see Appendix A for list of institutions). From this, a stratified sample was created. Using a randomized number table, 10% or 10 posts (whichever was greater) from each blogger was identified for analysis. If a particular blogger did not post at least 10 times during the sample period, then all of the posts from that student were analyzed. This random sampling method was necessary because of the enormity of individualized frequencies. The stratified sample included 2,471 posts.

During the analysis of the blog posts, a few oddities surfaced. For example, not all posts were labeled specifically with a month and date. Bluffton University posts only included a month. Also, some bloggers graduated during the study's time frame and kept blogging as alums. Finally, Richard Stockton College of New Jersey had twin sisters write together in one blog. It was unclear which girl wrote which posts.

#### *Coding Categories*

An inductive approach was taken in analyzing posts in an attempt to reveal all possible frames (Semetko & Valkenburg, 2000). Posts were coded for attributes emphasized in the blog (see Appendix B for codebook). The original frames to be used were determined by reading through a sample of blog posts. They include: academics, professors, social life, extracurricular activities, residential life, athletics, finances, physical wellness, religion, and community. These frames were adjusted after a pilot test of the code sheet.

Frames were recorded using an instrument based on the method employed by Semetko and Valkenburg (2000). The instrument contained a series of 20 dichotomous-orientated response questions in order to create a frame factor score for each item. Given

that these are content-specific inductive frames, this factor frame approach appeared to be the most logical in identifying not only the presence of frames, but the level for each item. Poock and Lefond's (2001) research on college and university Web pages was used as a starting point to identify the frame attribute questions.

The *academics frame* emerged when bloggers wrote about coursework, the institution's academic reputation, or academic honesty. The *professor frame* occurred when the blogger wrote comments about the institution's faculty – descriptions of their personal characteristics and whether bloggers felt they are competent. The *social life frame* referred to statements depicting life outside of the classroom including extracurricular activities and entertainment opportunities. The *extracurricular activities frame* included mentions of school-sponsored activities the blogger was involved with outside of class. The *residential life frame* included descriptions of living in a dorm room and what the dining hall was like. The *athletics frame* showed what role athletics played at an institution including intramural and competitive sports. The *finances frame* occurred when the blogger wrote about his personal finances and the costs of attending the institution. The *physical wellness frame* included references to the blogger's personal wellness. The *religion frame* depicted the religious atmosphere on campus and the *community frame* presented the blogger's relationship and feelings toward the local community. After identifying whether these attributes were used, coders determined an overall tone for that frame, as suggested by McCombs et al. (2000), McCombs et al. (1997), and Bichard (2006). In the final analysis, new attributes were added from the "other" category if they appeared 20 or more times.

In addition to frames, the presence or absence of technical features were also coded, building on Kent and Taylor's (1998) idea of dialogic relationships through the World Wide Web. These features included syndication like RSS or XML, hyperlinks, a comments option, and contact information. Demographic characteristics of each blogger were also recorded in an effort to determine what types of student colleges and universities employ as bloggers. Demographic characteristics collected, when possible, included gender, ethnicity, school classification, major, and hometown (in state or out of state).

### *Coding Process*

Two trained coders (including the author) content analyzed the blog posts. Intercoder reliability was established by randomly selecting 274 posts for each coder to analyze. Intercoder reliability was .95 ranging from .69 to 1.00 using Holsti's formula for measuring the percentage of agreement. Intercoder reliability for individual items is given in Appendix B. Differences were reconciled throughout the coding process. Coders, who were given units of analysis on a CD, were instructed to code the entire post in one sitting. A Web-based code sheet was used for the content analysis.

## Chapter 6

### RESULTS

This study explored the types of frames used in blog posts on admission department Web sites. The post was the unit of analysis ( $N = 4,792$ ) and represented 92 institutions and 349 individual bloggers. Ten percent or 10 posts, whichever was greater, from each blogger was randomly selected for analysis ( $n = 2,471$ ).

With no factors surfacing during a factor analysis, this research borrowed a process used by Brunken (2006) and created indices for each of the 10 frames. The indices for each frame, along with means and standard deviations are shown in Table 1. The low alpha scores and lack of emerging frames can be attributed to the study's investigation of a wide range of topics with very specific categories, and is further discussed in the next section.

The academics frame index consisted of 11 variables ranging from on campus academic endeavors such as attending or registering for classes to off campus academic pursuits like internships or studying abroad. The Cronbach's inter-item reliability coefficient score for the academics frame was .212.

The professor frame index included four variables which involved the personal characteristics of professors, encounters with professors outside the classroom, professors' competence, and recommendations about which professors' classes to take. The Cronbach's inter-item reliability coefficient score for the professor frame was .159.



The social life frame index, with five variables, included mentions of the student's life outside the classroom, what he does on the weekends, and entertainment opportunities provided by the institution. The Cronbach's inter-item reliability coefficient score for the social life frame was .346.

The extracurricular frame index encompassed 16 variables including any type of extracurricular activity the student blogged about being involved with such as choir, student government, campus television, theatre, or sororities and fraternities. The Cronbach's inter-item reliability coefficient score for the extracurricular frame was .121.

The residential life frame index, with five variables, involved mentions of the campus dining hall, what it is like to live in a dorm, the parking situation on campus, and whether the student referred to the campus as "home." The Cronbach's inter-item reliability coefficient score for the residential life frame was .116.

The athletics frame index included five variables such as attending competitive athletic events, being part of a competitive sports team, reports on how the school's teams are doing, acting as a cheerleader, or participating in intramural sports. The Cronbach's inter-item reliability coefficient score for the athletics frame was .475.

The finances frame index consisted of seven variables ranging from costs associated with attending the institution and the blogger's financial aid package to having a budget and working a job. The Cronbach's inter-item reliability coefficient score for the finances frame was .140.

The physical wellness frame index included six variables that involved the blogger mentioning anything from exercising, being stressed, or taking naps to utilizing

health services on campus. The Cronbach's inter-item reliability coefficient score for the physical wellness frame was .199.

The religion frame index, with five variables, involved mentions of religious values, praying or meditating, attending a religious service off campus, mission trips, and being involved with a religious organization. The Cronbach's inter-item reliability coefficient score for the religion frame was .396.

The community frame index included four variables which involved the weather where the institution is located, a description of the college town, local news or events, and collaborative efforts between the local community and the institution. The Cronbach's inter-item reliability coefficient score for this frame was .022.

#### *Blogger Use of Frames*

The first research question asked how student bloggers framed their respective colleges and universities in blogs posted on admission department Web sites. The mean score for each of the 10 frames revealed the bloggers' overall use of the frame in admission blogs (see Table 1).

Bloggers wrote a great deal about their social life ( $\underline{M} = 1.30$ ;  $\underline{SD} = .83$ ) in posts by discussing what they did outside of class (82.8%;  $n = 2,044$ ), what they did on the weekends (28.1%;  $n = 695$ ), and entertainment opportunities provided by the institution (18.8%;  $n = 465$ ). The second most common frame was the academics frame ( $\underline{M} = .94$ ;  $\underline{SD} = .94$ ) where bloggers wrote about their coursework (36.9%;  $n = 913$ ), classes (25.5%;  $n = 631$ ), and studying (13.9%;  $n = 344$ ). The extracurricular frame ( $\underline{M} = .29$ ;  $\underline{SD} = .56$ ) was the third most common frame. Under this frame, bloggers wrote about being involved with sports (9.6%;  $n = 237$ ) and groups such as sororities and fraternities (6.2%;

$n = 153$ ) and theatre (1.5%;  $n = 38$ ). The community frame ( $\underline{M} = .18$ ;  $\underline{SD} = .40$ ) ranked as the fourth common frame where the bloggers mostly described the weather (11.7%;  $n = 288$ ). The fifth common frame was the finances frame ( $\underline{M} = .19$ ;  $\underline{SD} = .45$ ) which included details about working a job on campus (7.4%;  $n = 182$ ) and working when not in school (3.4%;  $n = 82$ ). The physical wellness frame ( $\underline{M} = .18$ ;  $\underline{SD} = .46$ ) followed where bloggers admitted being stressed or not stressed (6.7%;  $n = 165$ ) and taking naps or needing more sleep (3.6%;  $n = 88$ ). The athletics frame ( $\underline{M} = .22$ ;  $\underline{SD} = .58$ ) landed as the seventh most common frame and included discussions of being part of a competitive team (7.4%;  $n = 184$ ) and an account of how athletics teams were faring (5.5%;  $n = 136$ ). The eighth common frame was residential life ( $\underline{M} = .14$ ;  $\underline{SD} = .39$ ), the most popular being descriptions of life in the dorm (8.6%;  $n = 213$ ) and the dining hall (2.7%;  $n = 67$ ). The professor frame ( $\underline{M} = .10$ ;  $\underline{SD} = .33$ ) followed including posts about personal characteristics of professors (5.1%;  $n = 125$ ) and encounters with professors outside of class (3.5%;  $n = 87$ ). The religion frame ( $\underline{M} = .11$ ;  $\underline{SD} = .40$ ) was the least used frame and included mentions of religious values (4.7%;  $n = 117$ ) and attending religious services off campus (2.3%;  $n = 58$ ).

Correlations provide additional understanding between the relationship of frames. These tests uncovered that for the most part there were very weak yet statistically significant correlations between frame indices. The highest correlations that occurred were among the nonacademic-oriented items. For example, the social life frame index had a positive weak relationship with the extracurricular frame index ( $r = .214, p \leq .001$ ) and the athletic frame index ( $r = .204, p \leq .001$ ). Additionally, the athletic frame index had a weak positive correlation with the extracurricular frame index ( $r = .360, p \leq .001$ ).

### *Blogger Use of Tone Within Frames*

The second research question asked about the distribution of tone within frames. A frequency count showed that overall frames were mostly positive. In addition to being the most common frame, the social life frame was also the most positive frame (30.3%;  $n = 748$ ) while the residential life frame was the most negative (3.4%;  $n = 84$ ). Table 2 shows tone distribution by frames.

To better understand the relationship between tone and frame index, correlations were run. The community frame had the strongest positive correlation with tone,  $r(2,471) = .933, p \leq .001$ , followed closely by the professor frame,  $r(2,471) = .930, p \leq .001$ . In addition, the athletics frame correlated positively with tone,  $r(2,471) = .897, p \leq .001$ , as did the finances frame,  $r(2,471) = .888, p \leq .001$ . The religion frame correlated positively with tone,  $r(2,471) = .866, p \leq .001$ . Based on Salkind's (2004) scale, these first five frames correlated very strongly with tone. The next five correlated strongly. The residential life frame correlated positively with tone,  $r(2,471) = .826, p \leq .001$ . The physical wellness frame correlated positively with tone,  $r(2,471) = .817, p \leq .001$ , as did the extracurricular frame,  $r(2,471) = .812, p \leq .001$ , and the social life frame,  $r(2,471) = .752, p \leq .001$ . The academics frame also correlated positively with tone,  $r(2,471) = .726, p \leq .001$ . It is important to note that while these correlations show association between the frames and tone, they do not necessarily imply causation.

### *Relationship Between Attribute Frames and Tone*

The relationship between frame attributes and tone was examined in order to answer the third research question. Chi square tests were run separately on each frame attribute to determine how the frame's tone changed when attributes were present.

Results, found in Table 3, show the percentage present within each attribute. Each attribute reached statistical significance. For example, posts that mentioned the blogger's life outside the classroom were more likely to be neutral (63.9%;  $n = 1,306$ ) than positive (35.2%;  $n = 719$ ) or negative (0.9%;  $n = 19$ ),  $X^2(3) = 2,220.116$ ,  $p \leq .001$ . Posts that discussed class were almost equally likely to be neutral (48%;  $n = 303$ ) as they were positive (47.7%;  $n = 301$ ), but less likely to be negative (4.3%;  $n = 27$ ),  $X^2(3) = 562.54$ ,  $p \leq .001$ . Posts that included mentions of attributes from the extracurricular frame were especially likely to be positive. For example, posts about the blogger being involved with student government were more likely to be positive (87%;  $n = 47$ ) than neutral (11.1%;  $n = 6$ ) or negative (1.9%;  $n = 1$ ),  $X^2(3) = 140.161$ ,  $p \leq .001$ . On the contrary, posts about parking on campus were overwhelmingly negative (83.3%;  $n = 5$ ) rather than positive (16.7%;  $n = 1$ ) or neutral (0%;  $n = 0$ ),  $X^2(3) = 118.782$ ,  $p \leq .001$ . Posts about costs associated with the institution were also alarmingly negative (69.4%;  $n = 25$ ) instead of neutral (11.1%;  $n = 4$ ) or even positive (19.4%;  $n = 7$ ),  $X^2(3) = 1437.87$ ,  $p \leq .001$ .

Overall, there was a relationship between the frames and tone and it appeared that bloggers were more likely to frame their institutions positively or neutrally rather than negatively.

#### *Blogger Use of Framing Mechanisms*

The fourth research question asked what specific framing mechanisms were used in the blog posts. This study found that graphics were used in 33% of the 2,471 posts ( $n = 825$ ). The number of pictures per post ranged from one (36%;  $n = 299$ ) to 43 (0.1%;  $n = 1$ ). When the photo included people, almost 40% of the time it was the blogger ( $n = 528$ ). The blogger's friends were almost equally present (38.2%;  $n = 507$ ). Family members

(3.69%;  $n = 49$ ) and the institution's faculty or staff members (1.05%;  $n = 14$ ) were rarely present in the bloggers' photographs.

About 40% of the pictures were taken at a campus location. This included residence halls (15.45%;  $n = 132$ ), scenic views (3.62%;  $n = 31$ ), athletic events (2.81%;  $n = 24$ ), and academic buildings (2.69%;  $n = 23$ ). Other locations on campus accounted for 16.74% of pictures and included locations such as auditoriums or stages, the library, dining facilities, and administrative buildings ( $n = 143$ ).

Almost 60% of the pictures depicted the blogger's social life ( $n = 642$ ). These included images like pictures from spring break adventures, burnt spaghetti from a dinner get-together, and nights out with friends. The academics frame was the next most popular frame for posted pictures at 13.8% ( $n = 148$ ). These pictures included graphics of actual assignments or projects and students working in labs or studying. About 8% of pictures fell under the residential life frame ( $n = 86$ ). These included pictures taken inside a residence hall, dining facility or off campus home such as a house or apartment. Some residence hall photos showed specific features of the dorm such as a broken shower. The extracurricular frame, used 5.22% of the time in pictures ( $n = 56$ ), depicted the blogger engaged in extracurricular activities such as a band concert, pledging activities, or working at the campus radio station. The community frame captured 3.92% of the pictures posted ( $n = 42$ ). These photos included pictures taken around town or at community events. About 3% of pictures were classified under an "other" category ( $n = 36$ ). These included pictures of animals, celebrities, or photos from national news. The athletics frame, used 3.17% of the time in pictures ( $n = 34$ ), mainly included photos from athletic events. The finances frame and physical wellness frame were each used just

under 1% of the time ( $n = 10$ ). For the finance frame, pictures included photos of the blogger's work environment. Pictures classified as the physical wellness frame showed the blogger sick in bed or working out. The religion frame had only six pictures (0.56%). These included pictures from events such as worship services or mission trips. Only one photograph was included under the professors frame.

### *Blogger Characteristics*

The fifth research question asked about the characteristics of students that colleges and universities employed as bloggers on admission Web sites. More than half the bloggers were female (61.2%;  $n = 1,513$ ) and 37.6% were male ( $n = 930$ ); gender for a fraction of bloggers could not be determined (1.1%;  $n = 28$ ). White students were in the majority (68.8%;  $n = 1,700$ ), followed distantly by African Americans (9.3%;  $n = 230$ ), Asians (5.2%;  $n = 129$ ), and Hispanics (0.7%;  $n = 18$ ). Figure 1 shows the frequency of posts by gender and that both males and females tended to post most often during the middle of each semester.

All classifications of students were represented, but the majority of bloggers were freshmen (30.3%;  $n = 748$ ), followed by sophomores (19.2%;  $n = 475$ ), juniors (18.8%;  $n = 464$ ), and seniors (15.5%;  $n = 3384$ ). Only 117 of the entries (4.7%) were written by bloggers identified as transfer students. Figure 2 shows the frequency of posts by classification. Regardless of classification, bloggers followed a similar pattern of posts peaking during the midterm months of the semesters before dropping off in the final months, December and May.

An ANOVA was used to assess the relationship between use of frames and blogger classification. Eight of the 10 frame indices reached statistical significance when

compared with the blogger's classification. Freshmen bloggers used five frames more than their upperclassmen peers: social life (five attributes),  $F(4) = 8.90, p \leq .001$ ; residential life (five attributes),  $F(4) = 19.210, p \leq .001$ ; physical wellness (six attributes),  $F(4) = 5.799, p \leq .001$ ; religion (five attributes),  $F(4) = 10.792, p \leq .001$ ; and community (four attributes),  $F(4) = 5.431, p \leq .001$ .

Juniors were more likely than freshmen, sophomores, and seniors to use the academics frame, which included 11 attributes,  $F(4) = 4.30, p \leq .05$ . Sophomores, meanwhile, were more likely than freshmen, juniors, and seniors to use the extracurricular frames, which included 16 attributes,  $F(4) = 3.807, p \leq .05$ . The athletics frame, with five attributes, was mostly used by seniors,  $F(4) = 3.560, p \leq .05$ .

Geographically the bloggers came from mostly out of state (41.3%;  $n = 1,020$ ) and in state (31.1%;  $n = 769$ ) but also included internationals (3.8%;  $n = 94$ ) and students of missionary parents (0.2%;  $n = 6$ ). Figure 3 shows the frequency of posts by hometown. In-state and out-of-state students followed the same pattern of post frequency peaking during the midterms of both semesters. International students and students of missionary parents showed a less distinct pattern of post frequency.

The relationship between frames and two blogger characteristics, gender and hometown, were also examined in an attempt to uncover deeper connections between the variables. Three frames reached statistical significance when compared with the blogger's gender. Posts that included talk of the blogger's social life were slightly more likely to be written by female students (87.1%;  $n = 1,318$ ) rather than males (80.1%;  $n = 745$ ),  $X^2(2) = 32.918, p \leq .001$ . Male bloggers were more likely to write posts that included the athletics frame (18%;  $n = 167$ ) than females bloggers were (13.7%;  $n = 207$ ),



$X^2(2) = 9.592, p = .008$ . Finally, posts that included the physical wellness frame were more likely be written by a female blogger (17.7%;  $n = 268$ ) rather than a male blogger (13.1%;  $n = 122$ ),  $X^2(2) = 9.65, p = .008$ .

With regards to the bloggers' hometowns, five frames reached statistical significance. Overall the bloggers mentioned the academic frame in posts between 62.2% and 68.1% of the time. International students presented the academic frame most often (68.1%;  $n = 64$ ) while in-state students mentioned it the least (62.2%;  $n = 478$ ) within the blogger hometown variable,  $X^2(4) = 26.947, p \leq .001$ . In addition, posts that included the social life frame were more likely to be written by students of missionary parents (100%;  $n = 6$ ) rather than bloggers from in state (87.5%;  $n = 673$ ), out of state (85.1%;  $n = 868$ ) or international students (86.2%;  $n = 81$ ),  $X^2(4) = 27.035, p \leq .001$ . On the whole, bloggers used the athletics frame between 7.4% and 19.9% of the time in posts. In-state students mentioned the frame most often (19.9%;  $n = 153$ ) followed by students of missionary parents (16.7%;  $n = 1$ ), out-of-state students (14.2%;  $n = 145$ ), and internationals (7.4%;  $n = 7$ ),  $X^2(4) = 22.841, p \leq .001$ . Posts that included the finances frame were written mostly by students of missionary parents (33.3%;  $n = 2$ ) and then almost equally between in-state students (20.7%;  $n = 159$ ), internationals (18.1%;  $n = 17$ ), and out-of-state students (16.7%;  $n = 170$ ),  $X^2(4) = 20.426, p \leq .001$ . Finally, the community frame was mentioned in posts between 16.4% and 24.5% of the time. International students presented the community frame most often (24.5%;  $n = 23$ ) while in-state students used it the least (16.4%;  $n = 126$ ) within the blogger hometown variable,  $X^2(4) = 15.634, p = .004$ .

### *Institution Characteristics*

The sixth research question asked about the types of institutions that operated admission blogs for recruitment purposes. The 92 colleges and universities were classified based on standards used by *U.S News & World Report* for its “America’s Best Colleges” rankings. In determining the size of the institution, a small school was considered one with an undergraduate population of less than 2,000 students. A medium school had between 2,000 and 4,999 undergraduate students. A school was considered large if it enrolled between 5,000 and 9,999 undergraduate students. An extra large school had an undergraduate enrollment greater than 10,000 students. The majority of schools were classified as medium (39.13%;  $n = 36$ ) and small (36.95%;  $n = 34$ ). Large schools accounted for 16.3% ( $n = 15$ ) of the institutions while extra large schools comprised 7.6% ( $n = 7$ ) of the total schools. Figure 4 shows the frequency of posts by the size of the institution. All institutions had similar dips and rises in post frequency up until April when medium institutions saw a rise in the number of posts while other institutions declined.

Of the 92 colleges and universities, 75 were private institutions (81.52%) while 17 were public (18.47%). Forty-six percent of the institutions were religiously affiliated ( $n = 43$ ) while 53.26% were not ( $n = 49$ ). Figures 5 and 6, respectively, show the frequencies of posts by public/private status and religious affiliation. Both public and private schools showed similar patterns in post frequency during the academic year. At private institutions, however, the frequency of posts increased slightly after March before declining at the end of the semester. For public institutions, March signaled the high point in frequencies before a decline in April and May toward the end of the semester.

Institutions also had similar frequency patterns regardless of religious affiliation. The main differences came in March when religiously affiliated institutions dipped in number of posts while non-religious institutions peaked.

The relationship between frames and the institution characteristics, size, public/private status and religious affiliation, were also examined in an attempt to uncover deeper connections between the variables. Four frames reached statistical significance when compared to the size of the institution. Overall the institutions mentioned the social life frame between 77.4% and 88.5% of the time in posts. The medium institutions presented this frame most often (88.5%;  $n = 912$ ) while the large institutions mentioned it the least (77.4%;  $n = 253$ ) within the size of institution variable,  $X^2(3) = 31.08, p \leq .001$ . Posts that discussed extracurricular activities were more likely to be written by bloggers at medium-sized institutions (29.5%;  $n = 304$ ) than from small (22.5%;  $n = 186$ ), large (20.8%;  $n = 68$ ), or extra large (21.3%;  $n = 61$ ) institutions,  $X^2(3) = 18.981, p \leq .001$ .

The religious frame was mentioned in posts between 2.1% and 12.5% of the time. The medium and small institutions revealed this frame most often (12.5%;  $n = 129$  and 9.3%;  $n = 77$ , respectively) while the extra large and large institutions presented this frame least often (2.1%;  $n = 6$  and 2.4%;  $n = 8$ , respectively),  $X^2(3) = 49.966, p \leq .001$ . Similarly, posts that mentioned the community frame were more likely to be written by bloggers at a medium- (20.8%;  $n = 214$ ) or small-sized (16.3%;  $n = 134$ ) institution rather than a large (13.1%;  $n = 43$ ) or extra large (10.8%;  $n = 31$ ) institution,  $X^2(3) = 21.825, p \leq .001$ .

The religion frame achieved the greatest statistical significance when examining the relationship between frames and the institution's public/private status. Posts that mentioned the religion frame were more likely to be written by bloggers at a private institution (10.3%;  $n = 207$ ) than a public institution (2.8%;  $n = 13$ ),  $X^2(1) = 26.466$ ,  $p \leq .001$ .

With regards to frames and the religious affiliation of an institution, two frames reached statistical significance. Posts that mentioned the athletics frame were almost equally likely to be written by a blogger from a non-religiously affiliated institution (13%;  $n = 197$ ) as they were a religiously affiliated institution (18.8%;  $n = 179$ ),  $X^2(1) = 15.293$ ,  $p \leq .001$ . Posts that mentioned the religion frame, however, were more likely to be written by a blogger at a religiously affiliated institution (18.6%;  $n = 177$ ) rather than a non-religiously affiliated institution (2.8%;  $n = 43$ ),  $X^2(1) = 178.839$ ,  $p \leq .001$ .

### *Technical Features*

The seventh research question asked about what types of technical features were being used in the blog posts that might help develop dialogic communication. Following the lead of Kent and Taylor (1998), this study coded for the presence or absence of four dialogic communication features common to blogs: comments, contact information, syndication, and links (see Table 4). Comments were present in 38.1% of posts ( $n = 941$ ). Contact information was present in 27.6% of posts ( $n = 681$ ). Syndication was available for 33.6% of posts ( $n = 830$ ). Links were less prevalent with only 10% of bloggers using them ( $n = 268$ ). Of the links found, 4.2% directed readers to Web pages within the institution's main Web site ( $n = 103$ ) while 5.3% took readers to pages outside the

control of the institution ( $n = 130$ ). A minute number of posts contained a combination of these links (1.4%;  $n = 35$ ).

The use of dialogic features by types of institution was assessed to present a clearer picture of how institutions communicated dialogically. Overall, posts from public institutions ( $\underline{M} = 1.35$ ;  $\underline{SD} = .913$ ) had more dialogic features than posts from private institutions ( $\underline{M} = 1.04$ ;  $\underline{SD} = .903$ ). A  $t$  test indicated that this difference was statistically significant,  $t(2,469) = 6.648$ ,  $p = .002$ . Similarly, non-religiously affiliated institutions ( $\underline{M} = 1.18$ ;  $\underline{SD} = .867$ ) used more dialogic features than religiously affiliated institutions ( $\underline{M} = .965$ ;  $\underline{SD} = .966$ ). This difference was also statistically significant,  $t(2,469) = 5.879$ ,  $p \leq .001$ .

An ANOVA was used to investigate the relationship between use of dialogic features and size of the institution. Posts written by bloggers from large and extra large institutions used more dialogic features than those written by bloggers from small- and medium-sized institutions,  $F(3) = 104.469$ ,  $p \leq .001$ . In addition, a correlation test was run to determine the relationship, if any, between the size of the institution and the number of dialogic features employed. The test revealed a positive weak relationship. These results suggest that the size of the institution impacts the use of dialogic features in admission blog posts. Blogger classification also plays a role in the use of dialogic features. An ANOVA was used to investigate this relationship and found that posts written by seniors included more dialogic features than posts written by freshmen, sophomores, or juniors,  $F(3) = 13.081$ ,  $p \leq .001$ .

## Chapter 7

### DISCUSSION

The research questions in this public relations study were based on the three main purposes of this research. This study's goal was to add to the knowledge of framing theory in discipline by uncovering how student bloggers depicted their colleges and universities through the use of frames. Of special interest were the specific attributes and tone used by bloggers to describe these institutions. Another purpose of this research was to investigate the use of dialogic communication by bloggers as a public relations strategy. These features included using links, providing contact information, enabling comments, and offering syndication. Finally, this research intended to provide data about the types of institutions taking advantage of blogs on their Web sites and the types of students chosen to chronicle their lives through admission blogs. Such data create the foundation for future framing research involving all types of recruitment materials. In addition, it generated suggestions and implications for university public relations and marketing professionals.

The code sheet was based on the content of Poock and Lefond's 2001 study and the methods of Semetko and Valkenburg (2000) and was designed to measure the extent to which certain frames appeared in the blog posts. Unlike Semetko and Valkenburg (2000), however, the frames did not cluster during a factor analysis. This lack of emerging factors has several explanations. First, most bloggers do not confine themselves

to one topic (Pew Internet & American Life, 2006). A Pew Internet and American Life Project survey found that nearly two-thirds of bloggers (64%) say they blog on a lot of different topics. Young bloggers age 18 to 29, in particular, were especially likely to jump from topic to topic in a single post (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2006). Papacharissi (2004) observed that “The online diary metaphor serves the blogging context well, as these online daily musings are disorganized, frequently fragmented, and largely self-referential” (p. 20).

Framing is a traditional journalistic device, and blogs are often characterized as a form of journalism. Most blog authors, however, do not see their blogging as a form of reporting (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2006). In fact, according to the Pew Internet and American Life Project survey, bloggers typically do not conform to traditional rules of journalism such as directly quoting sources, fact checking, posting corrections, receiving permission to post copyright material, and linking to original source material outside of the blog. In a 2005 study, Herring et al. found that the overwhelming majority of blogs in their sample were classified as personal journals. Research on blogs, therefore, while based on previous media research should not be expected to yield carbon copy results.

Finally, as an exploratory study, this research sought to identify and classify the types of frames student bloggers are using. According to Bichard (2006), “The first step toward developing a complete assessment of framing effects is to identify patterns in communication texts that employ framing techniques” (p. 329). That is what this research attempted to do.

### *Blogger Use of Frames*

The current analysis suggests that student blogs have the potential to showcase the college *experience* at an institution. Unlike traditional Web pages or view books, which do a decent job of highlighting an institution's academic prestige and programs, state-of-the-art buildings, and extracurricular offerings, student blogs offer prospective students a chance to "test drive" an institution. This potential is seen by the abundant use of the social life and academics frames by student bloggers when posting entries. The use of these frames is in line with the Pew Internet and American Life Project study that found that 37% of bloggers classify the main topic of their blog as personal experiences (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2006).

Papacharissi (2004) asserted that these experiences are broadcast as written pictures from the blogger to a worldwide audience, the exact opposite of how Walter Lippman described the way "traditional journalism provides individuals with pictures of a world they cannot experience firsthand" (p. 21). Good bloggers were able to capture the essence of student life at the institution in quirky stories about their daily experiences. For example, a student from Rider University wrote about participating in the Ice Cream Sundae Challenge:

Basically it's about 10 scoops of strawberry, vanilla and chocolate ice creams, all piled on top of a brownie and then covered in hot fudge, caramel, whipped cream and cherries. You sat at a table on the basketball court and you had five minutes to eat as much as you could. It sounded like a good idea at the time, but I'm kind of a competitive person and I was up against 7 other people and there was no way I was going to beat any of the guys I was up against. Some one said I was one of the girls that ate the most, but I had such a brain freeze by the end of this, and I didn't want to look at ice cream anymore. But, its another one of those memories I'll never forget.



Administrators should note that academics and extracurricular frames ranked as the second and third frames in frequency. By writing about these topics, bloggers created opportunities to dispense the institution's message, although this message did not always come out exactly as the institution might like. This was the case when Jason at ERAU- Daytona Beach wrote:

I like all of my classes except economics because I mean bottom line, it's not very interesting.

Unlike conventional public relations materials such as press releases or fact sheets, blog content was not always rosy for the institution. These posts added credibility that bloggers had free reign over what they posted and were not being censored. For example, Willie from Whitman College blogged that:

It's April fool's day today and the girls in my dorm have apparently been stealing underwear from all the boys in the dorm and they strung them up on a big rope between two dorms. It was pretty funny.

Nevertheless, by at least opening themselves to the opportunity, institutions create the possibility of gleaning student approval like when Sarah at Hamilton College wrote about her satisfaction with course offerings:

Then there are two courses offered on vampires-- one is a comp. lit class called "Buffy and the Gothic Tradition," and another is a Russian Studies class called "Vampires and Myths." Seriously, thank god for liberal arts colleges where you have your choice of not one, but TWO classes on vampires.

The social life and academics frames were followed in frequency by extracurricular, community, finances, physical wellness, athletics, residential life, professors, and religion. Less than half of the sampled institutions (43%;  $n = 43$ ) had religious affiliations which might explain why the religion frame ranked last in frequency.

Figures 1 through 6 indicate a noticeable increase in the frequency of posts around the midterm of each semester. Specifically, October and November garnered the most posts in the fall semester (237 and 255, respectively) and March and April amassed the most in the spring semester (370 and 392, respectively). Despite the increase in posting, however, bloggers maintained a consistent use of the various frames. This boost in posts might have several explanations – bloggers may become more interested in blogging or more familiar with the computer software or maybe administrators push for the increase. Regardless of the reason, this increase had good timing. October and November are critical months to reach prospective students who begin visiting campuses and choosing which institutions they will apply to. March and April are important as prospective students continue to narrow their choices based on where they gained acceptance.

#### *Blogger Use of Tone Within Frames*

The way bloggers said what they posted is how they garnered their power, appeal, and authenticity. That means there can, and most likely will be, statements posted that make public relations practitioners and administrators cringe. The good news, however, is that blog posts were overwhelmingly positive toward the institution.

Only three frames – social life, academics, and physical wellness – garnered more neutral mentions than positive. This means that posts sometimes included a lot of ramblings about weekend activities and the student being ill or not wanting to get out of bed for an 8 a.m. class before something beneficial to the institution emerged. For example, Danielle from College of the Atlantic felt compelled to share that:

... I'm getting an ultrasound... FOR MY NECK. Odd. Yeah. That's today. Doctors, doctors, doctors. Not so fun. And an ultrasound? heaven-oh-lord. Since when can necks have babies.

But if administrators can overlook an insignificant (albeit funny) post like this, they might later stumble upon a valuable entry like the one a Hamline University student wrote:

As I was sitting there, it struck me how lucky we are at Hamline to have faculty and staff that are committed to providing the students with a diverse, well-rounded educational experience. It makes me so happy to be here!!

Another public relations nugget was written by Nicole at Lewis & Clark College:

I will be graduating in a week and a half with a handful of loans, but I know that every dollar I will have to pay in the future is well worth it for the education and experiences that I have received.

The social life frame acquired the most positive mentions (30.3%;  $n = 748$ ) followed by extracurricular and academics frames (25.8%;  $n = 637$  and 23.3%;  $n = 575$ , respectively). Bloggers spent a lot of space – more than 60% of posts – writing about academics, with only a minor amount of it framed negatively (2.6%;  $n = 64$ ). Wendy at Whitman College, for example, blogged about how happy she was with a required course for her major:

OOOOH, Metaphysics is AMAZING!! WHEEEEE. I'm so glad that the psych department required a philosophy class for the major. It's SUUUUCHHHH a good class (despite weekly papers).

Aiden, from University of the Arts, provided descriptions of class that were less enthusiastic, although not negative or harmful to the institution:

This week we started drawing from nude models in class. Its actually less awkward than one might think. They stand so still that you stop really thinking of them as a man or a woman, but just as a subejct that you need to view and draw. Luckily I have escaped having to draw a crusty old guy, though I think I will have to soon. I cannot remain unscathed for ever.

At 3.4%, the residential life frame was the most negative frame. While this only represented 84 posts, it was a blow to institutions, many of which spend a lot of money trying to keep students happily residing on campus. These negative posts touched on all aspects of residential life but targeted parking on campus (83.3%;  $n = 5$ ) and dining halls (28.4%;  $n = 19$ ) the most. For example, a blogger at ERAU-Daytona Beach griped that:

Riddle has the SMALLEST parking lots for how many cars there are...

Meanwhile, Ryan at Old Dominion University held a grudge against cafeteria food:

It will be so nice to be home again, and have my stomach comforted with real food. By the way, people only gain weight in college because the only good food offered at dinner is the fatty fried food, or f cubed as I like to call it.

Residence halls also took a beating. Holli from DeSales University offered a list of things she learned her first year in college. Number 8 on the list was:

How to kill stink bugs which can be slightly helpful in the dorms because sometimes they can be a problem.

Other negative posts had to do with laundry operations in the dorm:

I have to do laundry soon. I'm so sick of paying to do laundry. I would try to stick out the next few weeks without doing it and wait till I go home, but I don't think I would have enough clean underwear. The principle of paying to do laundry is strange to me. You would think college (especially this one) would encourage clean laundry. But I guess there's that water bill factor. And that's understandable. But still, one whole dollar to wash clothes?! Someone, somewhere is making a profit from this.

If institutions can handle the not-so-flattering parts of blog posts, the public relations sound bites are plentiful. Greg at Albright College heaped praise on an entrée at the dining hall when he blogged:

I think I'm in Love! In the cafeteria they make Salisbury Steak (WOW!), it is so good. I called my mom after dinner and told her what I had, Three Salisbury Steaks, white rice smothered with brown gravy, French cut

strings beans, two homemade dinner rolls (on the side), and with a BIG glass of ORANGE SODA! (Sigh) Wow! IT WAS SO GOOD!!! (I still love my BLTs, but Salisbury Steak is awesome!)

Ben at Biola University was happy with his living arrangements:

I live in Hope Hall, which is kind of like a hotel, with keycards to swipe in the auto-locking doors and a big double-decker lobby. My floor, called The Underground, is packed with the coolest people at Biola.

Ultimately, if institutions decide to have student blogs as part of their recruitment strategy, they must be confident in the product they are selling, have a tough skin, and employ student bloggers who can fairly accentuate the good with the bad.

#### *Blogger Use of Framing Mechanisms*

About one-third of posts included pictures, a figure that is on par with the text/picture combination students expect to find on Web sites (Poock & Lefond, 2001). Even better, the use of pictures on admission blogs was beneficial to institutions because the pictures met the criteria of what prospective students look for in graphics on institutional Web sites (Poock & Lefond, 2001).

First, almost half (41.31%;  $n = 353$ ) of the pictures were taken at a campus location. These pictures can supplement high-quality photos in view books and thus help meet the needs of prospective students who want to see the place they might one day call home. Prospective students also want to know what the students at the institution are like (Poock & Lefond, 2001). Roughly 80% of the blog photos with people were of the blogger and his or her friends ( $n = 1,035$ ). Again, these can augment photos used in view books and provide prospective students with an additional glimpse into life at the institution.

When looking at graphics, prospective students also want to learn about the clubs and activities available at an institution (Poock & Lefond, 2001). Almost 60% of the pictures captured the blogger's social life ( $n = 642$ ), but only 5.22% ( $n = 56$ ) of the photos fell under the extracurricular frame. Practitioners with an eye toward making the blogs as valuable to prospective students as possible should encourage bloggers to snap more pictures at their out-of-class endeavors.

Finally, prospective students want pictures to help answer the nagging question, "Will I fit in?" (Poock & Lefond, 2001, p. 19). Through student blogs, institutions are able to add an array of pictures on their Web site – pictures that have an air of authenticity prospective students can study and evaluate to help them decide if the institution is a right fit for them. These pictures might prove especially useful to institutions seeking to increase diversity on campus as the right pictures could alleviate fears of minority students about their ability to fit in on campus.

#### *Blogger Characteristics*

Student bloggers for admission Web sites were 61% female and 37% male ( $n = 1,513$  and  $930$ , respectively). This was a slight variation from the gender distribution for blogs in general. The Pew Internet and American Life Project study found that bloggers are almost evenly split between men and women (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2006). The higher percentage of women student bloggers is not surprising, though, when considering that nationwide, women make up about 58% of undergraduate students (Wilson, 2007).

The racial breakdown of admission bloggers followed the trend in blogs overall although white students were represented slightly more on admission blogs than in the

overall blog population while black students were represented slightly less (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2006). The key in selecting bloggers is for each institution to decide on a racial breakdown of bloggers based on the institution's unique demographics.

Admission blogs also relied heavily on freshmen students (30.3%;  $n = 748$ ) to chronicle life at the institution. Seeing as freshmen are only one year removed from the college selection process, this appeared to be a good decision. Bloggers should not be limited solely to freshmen, however, because upperclassmen have a variety of experiences and wisdom to share with prospective students that freshmen bloggers may not have gained yet. Further research should survey prospective students to determine the optimal mix of blogger classifications.

Only 4.7% of bloggers were identified as transfer students ( $n = 117$ ). Student blogs provide a unique way to reach special populations of students, like transfers, so more institutions should consider including a transfer student blogger who can provide insight into the ease (or difficulty!) of making the transition. Having this type of representation would demonstrate the institution's concern for the adjustment of transfer students. The same idea can also be applied to institutions that target other special populations such as adult learners.

Statistical tests revealed that younger bloggers used five frames more often than their upperclassmen peers: social life, residential life, physical wellness, religion, and community. These results suggest that the newness of residential and social life on campus as well as the independence associated with physical wellness, religion, and living in a new community influence what freshmen bloggers write about.

Juniors, however, were most likely to use the academics frame. This might be because during the junior year, students are more serious about coursework and focused on their intended majors. Sophomores, meanwhile, were more likely than freshmen, juniors, and seniors to use the extracurricular frames while the athletics frame was mostly used by seniors. These results suggest that blogger classification impacts the use of frames within posts and illustrates why administrators should carefully choose bloggers from a mixture of classifications.

### *Technical Features*

With regards to dialogic communication features, colleges and universities admission blogs were at both ends of the spectrum. On a good note, these blogs were better than the norm when it comes to including syndication like an RSS feed. The downside is that admission blogs did not fully utilize two-way symmetrical communication efforts.

A Pew Internet and American Life Project study found that RSS did not have a strong presence on blogs – only 18% of survey participants said they offered the feed (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2006). This was not surprising considering a general Internet-user survey conducted the year before found that only 9% of Internet users understood what RSS feeds were (Lenhart & Fox, 2006). The admission blogs in this study boasted syndication on 33.6% of posts ( $n = 830$ ). Why so much higher than other blogs? Officials might see syndication options as a positive, non-threatening addition to the blogs. Syndication certainly allows easier access to the posts and encourages a readership, or fan base, to form. It is also an easy way to measure and evaluate this readership.



The benefit of syndication, however, did not make up for the lack of two-way communication available on admission blogs. A Pew Internet and American Life Project survey found that nearly nine in 10 bloggers (87%) allow comments to be posted on their blog (Pew Internet & American Life Project, 2006). The percentage increases to 94% when considering bloggers ages 18 to 29. Even a study by Papacharissi in 2004 found that 54% of blogs had feedback mechanisms in place. The sampled university blogs, however, revealed that less than half of posts (38%;  $n = 941$ ) permitted readers to join the conversation through comments. In addition, only 27.6% of posts provided contact information such as an e-mail address or instant messenger screen name as a way for readers to contact the blogger ( $n = 681$ ). According to Esrock and Leichthy (2000), this absence negatively communicates the kinds of relationships the institution prefers to have with its publics. Instead of measuring the effectiveness of admission blogs by the old public relations standard of amount of communication produced or eyeballs that see it, university officials should turn to relationship management in which outcomes are based upon “the effective creation, development, and maintenance of mutually beneficial organization-public relationships” (Bruning et al., 2004, p. 436). By ignoring the opportunity to engage prospective students dialogically, university officials are missing a key benefit to having student blogs on their admission sites in the first place – to build relationships with prospective students and their families.

Links were present in only 10% ( $n = 268$ ) of posts. This low amount is in sync with previous research by Herring et al. (2005) who found less than one-third of blog posts contained any links at all. Herring et al. (2006) noted that over time blogs “became

less connected to each other and to the rest of the Web, as the average number of links also decreased” (p. 6).

If syndication is safe and comments are risky, links present a middle-ground. Of the 268 links present, 4.2% ( $n = 103$ ) linked within the institution’s Web pages while 5.3% ( $n = 130$ ) linked outside of the institution’s pages. Thirty-five, or 1.4%, linked to both types of pages in a single post. The danger in student bloggers using external links is that they can “lead visitors astray,” especially if there is no “clearly marked path for visitors to return to your site” (Kent & Taylor, 1998, p. 330). Internal links, meanwhile, can smoothly guide visitors – i.e. prospective students or parents – to more information about the institution. Links also put readers in control of deciding what subject they want to learn more about. Practitioners should encourage bloggers to use links to the information Poock and Lefond (2001) determined college-bound high school students expected to find online: materials on athletics, on-campus housing, extracurricular activities, course listings, and general admission requirements.

A correlation test revealed a positive weak relationship between size of the institution and dialogic features employed. Dialogic features give larger schools a chance to exploit a perceived strength of smaller institutions – personal relationships. By providing contact information, syndication options, comments, and links on admission blogs, larger schools have the opportunity to increase relationship building and hopefully exceed the expectations of prospective students, all for little financial investment or additional manpower.

### *Implications for Practitioners*

Overall, public relations practitioners missed opportunities with student blogs. It was apparent that many institutions had simply slapped a blog up on their admission Web site with only the thought that having one was better than not having one. Much more is involved in running a successful admission blog than just the logistics of getting it on the Web. Institutions must carefully select bloggers who will represent the student body and, ultimately, the institution's brand. Practitioners should also stay involved with the project, actively guiding bloggers so that their posts can meet established goals, namely to provide prospective students with the clearest picture of life at the institution. Finally, practitioners should use the blogs as a resource to gauge the campus climate.

Student bloggers should remain acutely aware of the purpose of recruitment blogs. In this study, less than 20% of bloggers ( $n = 463$ ) acknowledged the specific audience they were blogging for – prospective students. This was alarming and showed why many posts failed to reach their potential. For example, Shari from Robert Morris College in Illinois used most of her blogs to write about her 15-year-old daughter's trips around the world. The institution, and prospective students, would benefit more from the posts if Shari spent more space writing about her experience of returning to school later in life.

Papacharissi (2004) discovered that bloggers were not usually focused on feedback or what their audiences had to say about the blogs. This is why practitioners should guide bloggers when needed. That does not mean tell them what to write. Instead, it means remind them who their audience is, suggest topics to write about, and encourage quick and helpful responses to comments. Practitioners should also impose limits on the

number of posts per week. While not justified quantitatively, this study suggested that blogs lose their effectiveness when bloggers post more than once or twice a week.

Bloggers simply ran out of insightful things to write and resorted to ramblings that give a play-by-play account of the blogger's day. These sprawling posts often lost sight of the purpose of recruitment blogs.

Practitioners can also use blogs for environmental scanning of current student opinions. For example, Emily at the University of Dayton wrote about her beef with smokers on campus without a clearly designated smoking area. She wrote:

All I ask is that I can make it to Humanities without smelling like an ashtray by the time I get there. I think my next mission here at UD is to persuade the university to create stricter smoking rules about the designated areas on campus. Right outside the doors of Marycrest is not a very convenient place for students to smoke, considering I have to walk right through those doors and multiple clouds of smoke just to enter the building.

Also, Lauren from Ball State University was unhappy about a studio not staying open 24/7:

I've been working on a group project for two weeks for studio which isn't due until midnight on Monday but oh yes, my group finished early! We finished plotting our last board around 4:15 (though due to an annoying new policy which causes our plotting room to no longer be available 24/7 we couldn't pick up the last 2 until this morning because the room locked at 4 AM).

These are easy problems for administrators to address once they are aware of the problem. They could even evoke credit in a future post about their willingness to listen and accommodate students.

In addition, reading the blogs carefully might allow practitioners to warn their colleagues in student affairs of impending mischief on campus. Noah at Lewis & Clark College, for example, wrote that:

... at some point a few of us are going to get squirt guns and raid the dorms on the other side of campus - namely Akin and Odell.

A heads up to the hall directors and residents of Akin and Odell would not hurt.

#### *Limitations and Future Research*

While this study offers insight into the way student bloggers frame their institutions, there are some limitations. First and foremost, this study was exploratory. The frames created and used for this study were based on previous literature but relied on inductive attributes. The frames did not factor analyze, which affected the alpha scores. Therefore, following previous literature, this study used indices. Future studies can adjust the frames and attributes so that they might have a better chance to factor analyze – maybe focus on one topic more like previous journalism studies. But it is important to remember that these posts were not journalism pieces confined to a single topic. These were more like diaries. And they were not created by communication professionals. In this particular exploratory context, it was critical to be more liberal with the alpha scores and relax the standard in an effort to uncover all the possible frames and attributes being used in an effort to create a good, descriptive analysis.

This study's sample was also limited by only including institutions that had blog archives from the 2005-2006 academic year. Future studies should expand the sample as more – and different types – of institutions shift their recruitment focus to the World Wide Web.

After encouraging institutions to utilize comment features, future studies should also analyze comments left on admission blogs in an attempt to understand the two-way communication between student bloggers and their audience. In addition, future research should take into account some variables not included in the current study, namely the use

of curse words in posts and the impact of poor grammar, spelling, and writing. Josh from Rutgers University, for example, introduced himself on his blog as a “sofomore.” These items should be considered because they can have an impact on how prospective students view an institution.

Finally, this study did not attempt to note the influence of framing on the targeted audience, prospective students and their parents. Future researchers should conduct surveys of prospective students and parents to determine their perspective on admission blogs. This type of research could help clarify the types of students who make the best bloggers as well as the topics in most demand. Ball State University has begun this process on their campus with intercept interviews during campus tours and of incoming freshmen during summer orientation. Future researchers should continue this type of evaluation to determine the impact recruitment blogs have on their intended audience.

Nancy Prater, the Ball State University official who oversaw her institution’s blog project, remarked that putting blogs on the institution’s Web site gives administrators “a little bit more control” and a chance “to tell your own story in the way you might like better.” By carefully selecting the students who will represent the institution and giving them proper guidance on the purpose of the blog, recruitment blogs do give colleges and universities control over telling the institution’s story as compared to non-institution blogs. But the control is limited. It is nothing like the complete control practitioners have over other university public relations materials. This study showed, however, that bloggers are portraying their institutions in an overwhelmingly positive way and using frames that benefit the institution. It also pointed toward the untapped potential of recruitment blogs.

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Table 1. Mean Scores of Frames and Issue Attributes

	M ( <i>n</i> = 2,471)	SD	Percentage ( <i>n</i> = 2,471)
<b>Frame Indices</b>			
Academics Frame Index ( <i>a</i> = .212)	.94	.94	<b>61.5%</b>
Administrative tasks	.05	.21	4.7%
Class	.26	.43	25.5%
Coursework	.37	.48	36.9%
Academic honesty	.00	.02	0.1%
Honor or remedial courses	.03	.16	2.7%
Academic reputation	.01	.07	0.5%
Studying	.14	.34	13.9%
Study abroad	.06	.23	5.6%
Internships	.03	.16	2.7%
Field trips	.01	.09	0.9%
Career services	.01	.09	0.8%
Professor Frame Index ( <i>a</i> = .159)	.10	.33	<b>9.4%</b>
Personal characteristics of professor	.05	.21	5.1%
Encounters with professors outside the classroom	.04	.18	3.5%
Professor's competence	.02	.13	1.7%
Recommendations about which professor to take	.00	.02	0.1%
Social Life Frame Index ( <i>a</i> = .346)	1.30	.83	<b>84.2%</b>
Life outside the classroom	.83	.37	82.8%
Too much going on to study	.00	.04	0.2%
Entertainment opportunities provided through the institution	.19	.39	18.8%
What he does on the weekends	.28	.45	28.1%
Being bored	.01	.07	0.5%
Extracurricular Frame Index ( <i>a</i> = .121)	.29	.56	<b>25.1%</b>
Band	.01	.92	0.8%
Choir	.01	.11	1.3%
Sports	.10	.29	9.6%
Honor societies	.00	.07	0.5%
Theatre	.02	.12	1.5%
Political groups	.00	.02	0.1%
Student publications	.01	.11	1.3%
Student union activities	.01	.09	1.0%
Sororities/fraternities	.06	.24	6.2%
Pep rallies	.00	.06	0.4%
Tailgating	.00	.06	0.4%
Tour Guide	.01	.11	1.4%
Student government	.02	.14	2.2%
Orientation leader	.01	.09	1.0%
Campus TV/radio	.01	.09	0.9%
Academic club	.01	.11	1.3%
Residential Life Frame Index ( <i>a</i> = .118)	.14	.39	<b>13.5%</b>
What it's like to live in a dorm	.09	.28	8.6%
Calling the campus "home"	.02	.12	1.7%
Dining hall	.03	.16	2.7%
Parking on campus	.00	.04	0.2%



Living off campus	.01	.12	1.5%
<b>Athletics Frame Index (a = .475)</b>	<b>.22</b>	<b>.58</b>	<b>15.2%</b>
Attending competitive athletic events	.05	.21	4.9%
Being part of a competitive team	.07	.26	7.4%
How teams are faring	.06	.22	5.5%
Acting as a cheerleader	.02	.14	2.1%
Playing or watching intramural sports	.02	.15	2.3%
<b>Finances Frame Index (a = .140)</b>	<b>.19</b>	<b>.45</b>	<b>16.8%</b>
Costs associated with attending the institution	.01	.12	1.5%
Financial aid package	.01	.09	0.8%
Having a budget	.01	.08	0.7%
Working a job on campus	.07	.26	7.4%
Working a job off campus	.02	.15	2.3%
Working at an unknown location	.03	.17	3.0%
Working a job when not in school	.03	.18	3.4%
<b>Physical Wellness Frame Index (a = .199)</b>	<b>.18</b>	<b>.46</b>	<b>16.0%</b>
Exercising or working out	.03	.17	3.3%
Being stressed or not stressed	.07	.25	6.7%
Taking naps or needing more sleep	.04	.18	3.6%
Being sick	.03	.16	2.9%
Using health services on campus	.00	.06	0.4%
Time management	.02	.13	1.8%
<b>Religion Frame Index (a = .396)</b>	<b>.11</b>	<b>.40</b>	<b>8.9%</b>
Involved with a religious organization	.02	.13	2.0%
Mission trips	.00	.06	0.4%
Attending a religious service off campus	.02	.15	2.3%
Reference to religious values	.05	.21	4.7%
Praying or meditating	.02	.13	2.0%
<b>Community Frame Index (a = .022)</b>	<b>.18</b>	<b>.40</b>	<b>17.1%</b>
Describe the weather where the institution is located	.12	.32	11.7%
Describe the town or city where the institution is located	.03	.16	2.6%
Collaborative efforts between the local community and institution	.02	.14	2.2%
Local news or events	.02	.12	1.5%

Table 2. Tone Distribution By Frame

	Negative ( <i>n</i> = 325)		Neutral ( <i>n</i> = 3,171)		Positive ( <i>n</i> = 3,422)		Frame Not Mentioned ( <i>n</i> = 17,792)	
Frame								
Academics	64	2.6%	927	37.5%	576	23.3%	904	36.6%
Professor	12	0.5%	20	0.8%	210	8.5%	2229	90.2%
Social Life	20	0.8%	1312	53.1%	748	30.3%	391	15.8%
Extracurricular	3	0.1%	96	3.9%	637	25.8%	1735	70.2%
Residential Life	84	3.4%	73	3.0%	215	8.7%	2099	84.9%
Athletics	5	0.2%	52	2.1%	327	13.2%	2087	84.5%
Finances	30	1.2%	202	8.2%	192	7.8%	2047	82.8%
Physical Wellness	66	2.7%	319	12.9%	63	2.5%	2023	81.9%
Religion	0	0.0%	41	1.7%	197	8.0%	2233	90.4%
Community	41	1.7%	129	5.2%	257	10.4%	2044	82.7%

Table 3. Relationships Between Tone and Attribute Frames

Frames	N	Negative	Neutral	Positive	X <sup>2</sup>	P
Academics Frame						
Administrative tasks	115	13.0%	43.5%	43.5%	117.43	.001
Class	631	4.3%	48.0%	47.7%	562.54	.001
Coursework	913	3.2%	72.4%	24.4%	1002.13	.001
Academic honesty	2	50.0%	0.0%	50.0%	19.46	.001
Honor or remedial courses	67	0.0%	25.4%	74.6%	107.78	.001
Academic reputation	13	0.0%	7.7%	92.3%	34.99	.001
Studying	344	4.7%	71.8%	23.5%	278.00	.001
Study abroad	138	0.0%	22.5%	77.5%	250.45	.001
Internships	66	0.0%	39.4%	60.6%	67.30	.001
Field trips	22	0.0%	18.2%	81.8%	43.61	.001
Career services	20	0.0%	10.0%	90.0%	50.56	.001
Professor Frame						
Personal characteristics of professor	125	6.4%	5.6%	88.0%	1230.10	.001
Encounters with professors outside the classroom	87	0.0%	12.6%	87.4%	897.63	.001
Professor's competence	43	7.0%	0.0%	93.0%	445.68	.001
Recommendations about which professor to take	2	0.0%	50.0%	50.0%	65.71	.001
Social Life Frame						
Life outside the classroom	2044	0.9%	63.9%	35.2%	2227.55	.001
Too much going on to study	4	0.0%	25.0%	75.0%	3.91	.05
Entertainment opportunities provided through the institution	465	1.1%	5.4%	93.5%	1094.42	.001
What he does on the weekends	695	1.2%	53.2%	45.6%	229.58	.001
Being bored	13	23.1%	76.9%	0.0%	87.48	.001
Extracurricular Frame						
Band	21	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	60.98	.001
Choir	31	0.0%	3.2%	96.8%	83.49	.001
Sports	237	0.0%	16.0%	84.0%	628.25	.001
Honor societies	12	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	34.71	.001
Theatre	38	0.0%	7.9%	92.1%	94.60	.001
Political groups	2	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	5.76	.05
Student publications	33	0.0%	18.2%	81.8%	81.86	.001
Student union activities	24	0.0%	12.5%	87.5%	57.49	.001
Sororities/fraternities	152	0.7%	11.2%	88.2%	384.24	.001
Pep rallies	9	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	26.00	.001
Tailgating	10	0.0%	10.0%	90.0%	24.09	.001
Tour Guide	35	0.0%	2.9%	97.1%	95.20	.001
Student government	54	1.9%	11.1%	87.0%	140.16	.001
Orientation leader	24	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	69.77	.001
Campus TV/radio	23	0.0%	0.0%	100.0%	66.84	.001
Academic club	31	0.0%	3.2%	96.8%	83.49	.001
Residential Life Frame						
What it's like to live in a dorm	213	23.0%	19.7%	57.3%	1315.42	.001
Calling the campus "home"	41	2.4%	2.4%	95.1%	395.46	.001
Dining hall	67	28.4%	14.9%	56.7%	401.77	.001

Parking on campus	6	83.3%	0.0%	16.7%	118.78	.001
Living off campus	37	47.2%	13.9%	38.9%	290.46	.001
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Athletics Frame						
Attending competitive athletic events	121	1.7%	7.4%	90.9%	717.96	.001
Being part of a competitive team	184	0.5%	17.4%	82.1%	1101.56	.001
How teams are faring	136	1.5%	4.4%	94.1%	848.13	.001
Acting as a cheerleader	53	0.0%	3.8%	96.2%	328.47	.001
Playing or watching intramural sports	58	0.0%	10.3%	89.7%	331.57	.001
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Finances Frame						
Costs associated with attending the institution	36	69.4%	11.1%	19.4%	1437.87	.001
Financial aid package	20	5.0%	30.0%	65.0%	115.82	.001
Having a budget	18	5.6%	77.8%	16.7%	127.13	.001
Working a job on campus	182	2.7%	9.3%	87.9%	1790.90	.001
Working a job off campus	57	7.0%	64.9%	28.1%	325.22	.001
Working at an unknown location	74	1.4%	94.6%	4.1%	761.48	.001
Working a job when not in school	82	0.0%	75.6%	24.4%	573.24	.001
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Physical Wellness Frame						
Exercising or working out	81	4.9%	56.8%	38.3%	615.54	.001
Being stressed or not stressed	165	20.0%	72.1%	7.9%	847.88	.001
Taking naps or needing more sleep	88	13.6%	79.5%	6.8%	436.15	.001
Being sick	72	22.2%	70.8%	6.9%	367.02	.001
Using health services on campus	10	40.0%	10.0%	50.0%	149.34	.001
Time management	45	6.7%	77.8%	15.6%	220.07	.001
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Religion Frame						
Involved with a religious organization	49	0.0%	10.2%	89.8%	486.98	.001
Mission trips	9	0.0%	11.1%	88.9%	87.21	.001
Attending a religious service off campus	58	0.0%	22.4%	77.6%	568.89	.001
Reference to religious values	117	0.0%	14.5%	85.5%	1158.80	.001
Praying or meditating	49	0.0%	16.3%	83.7	469.33	.001
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Community Frame						
Describe the weather where the institution is located	288	9.7%	41.7%	48.6%	1684.48	.001
Describe the town or city where the institution is located	65	3.1%	4.6%	92.3%	488.81	.001
Collaborative efforts between the local community and institution	54	1.9%	1.9%	96.3%	440.42	.001
Local news or events	38	23.7%	13.2%	63.2%	253.27	.001

Table 4. Distribution of Dialogic Features

Dialogic Tool	M	SD	n	%
Comments	.38	.486	941	38.1%
Contact Information	.28	.447	681	27.6%
Syndication	.34	.472	830	33.6%
Links	.19	.586		
Within the Institution's Web pages			103	4.2%
Outside the Institution's Web pages			130	5.3%
Both types			35	1.4%

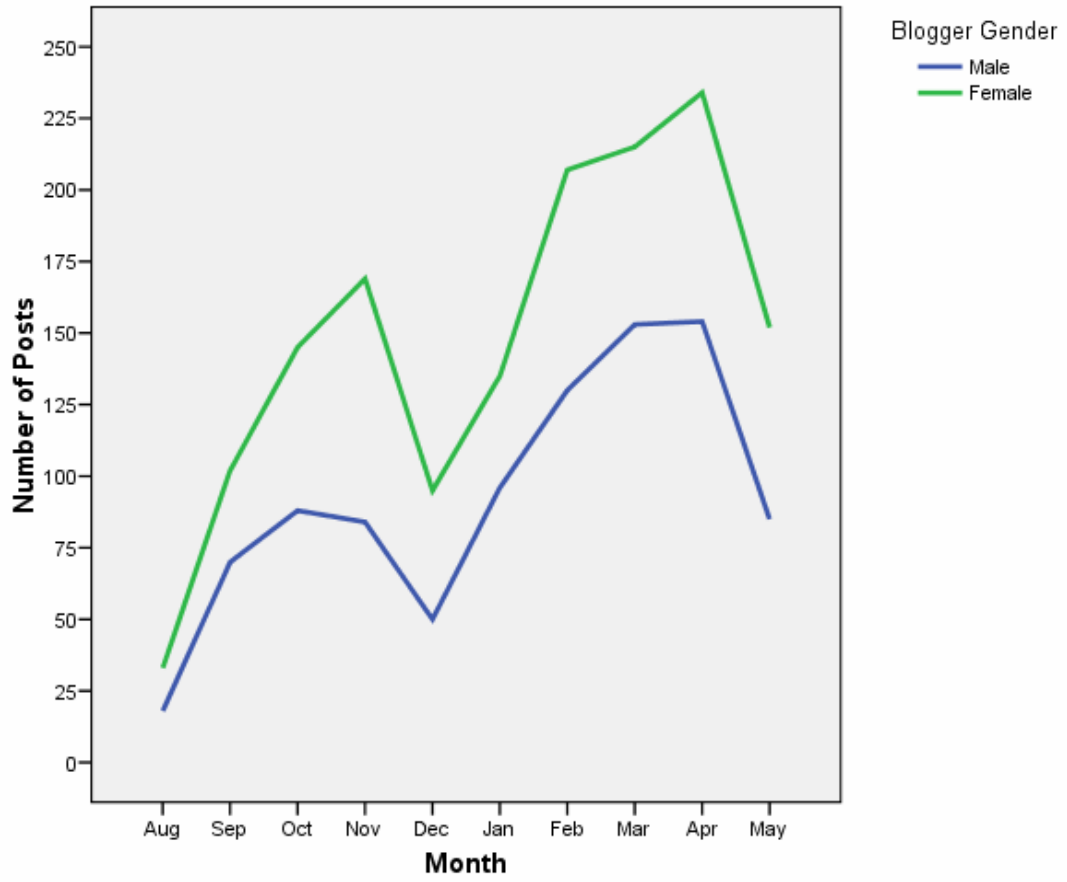


Figure 1: Frequency of Posts By Month and Blogger Gender

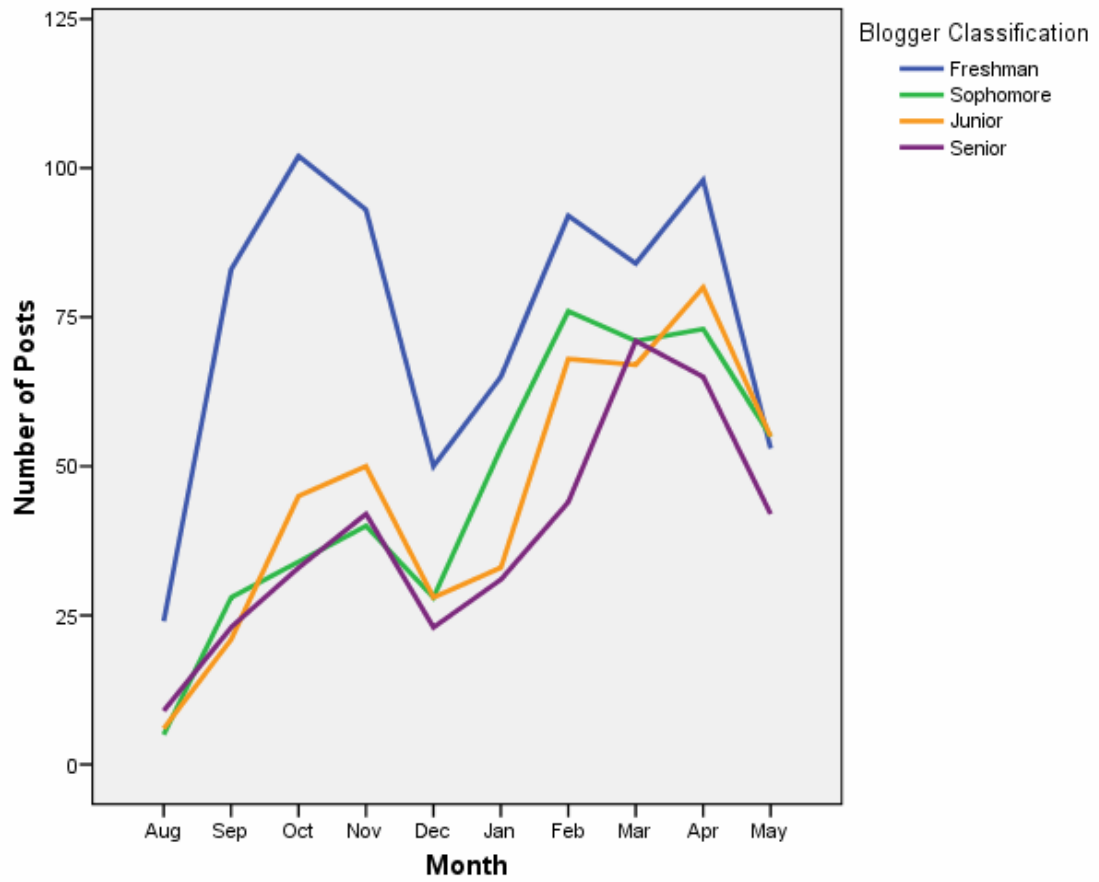


Figure 2: Frequency of Posts By Month and Blogger Classification

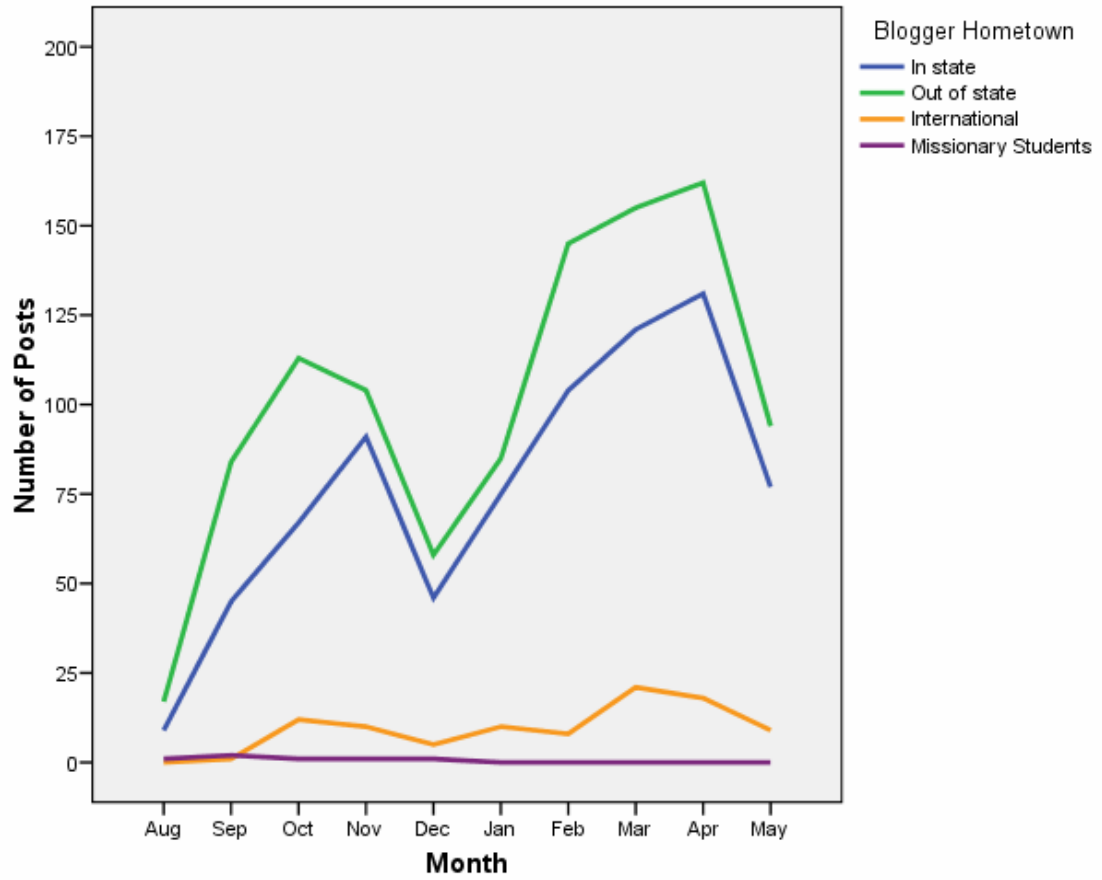


Figure 3: Frequency of Posts By Month and Blogger Hometown



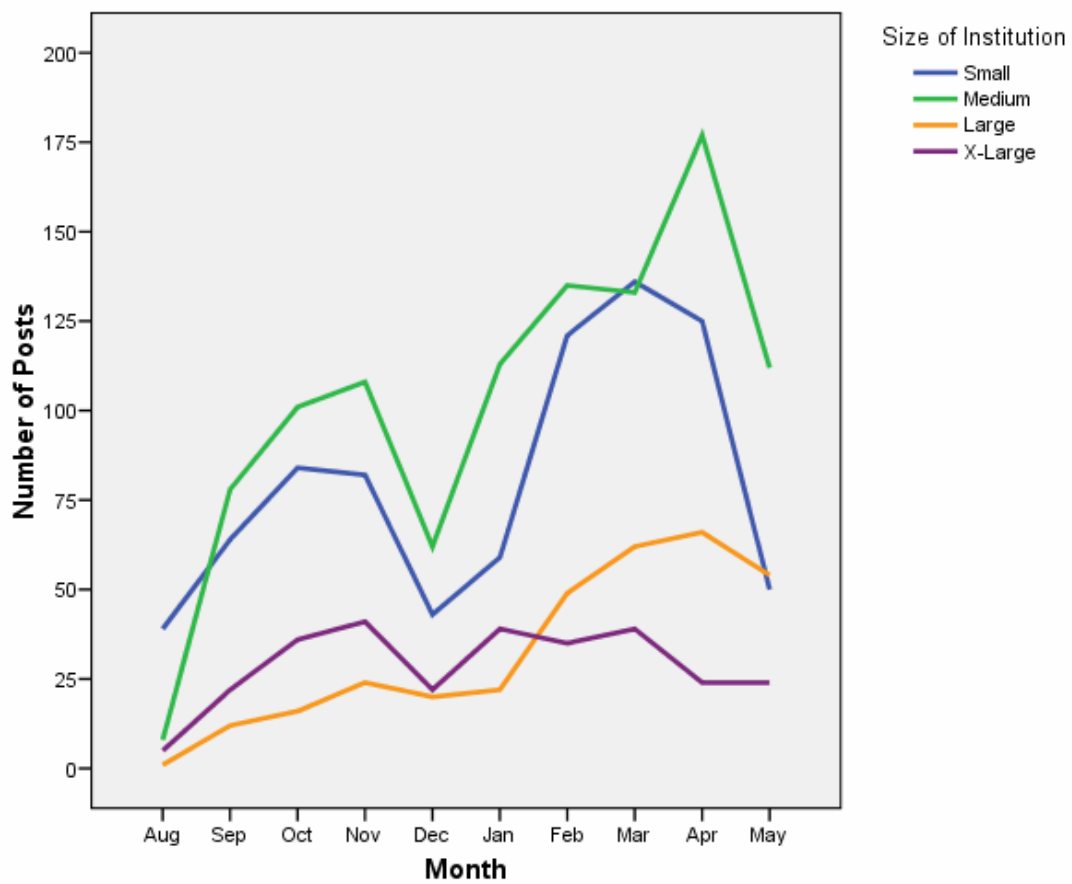


Figure 4: Frequency of Posts By Month and Size of Institution

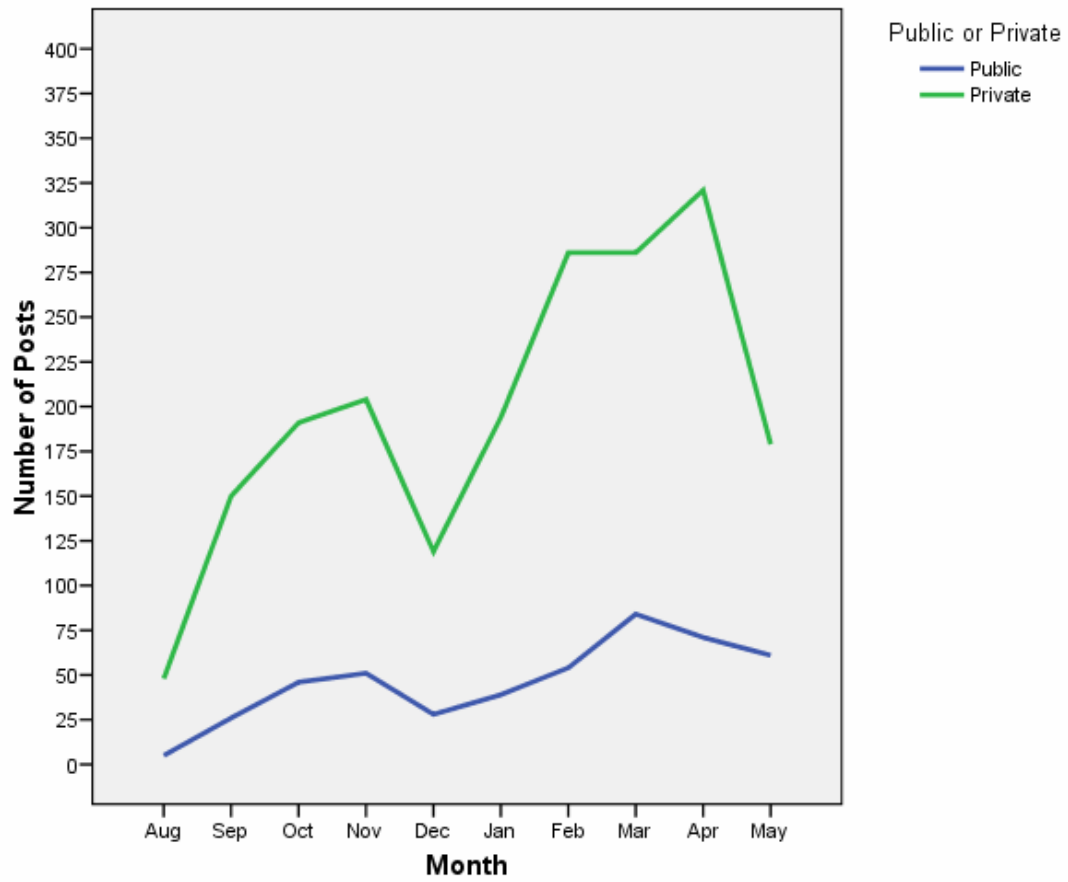


Figure 5: Frequency of Posts By Month and Public/Private Status

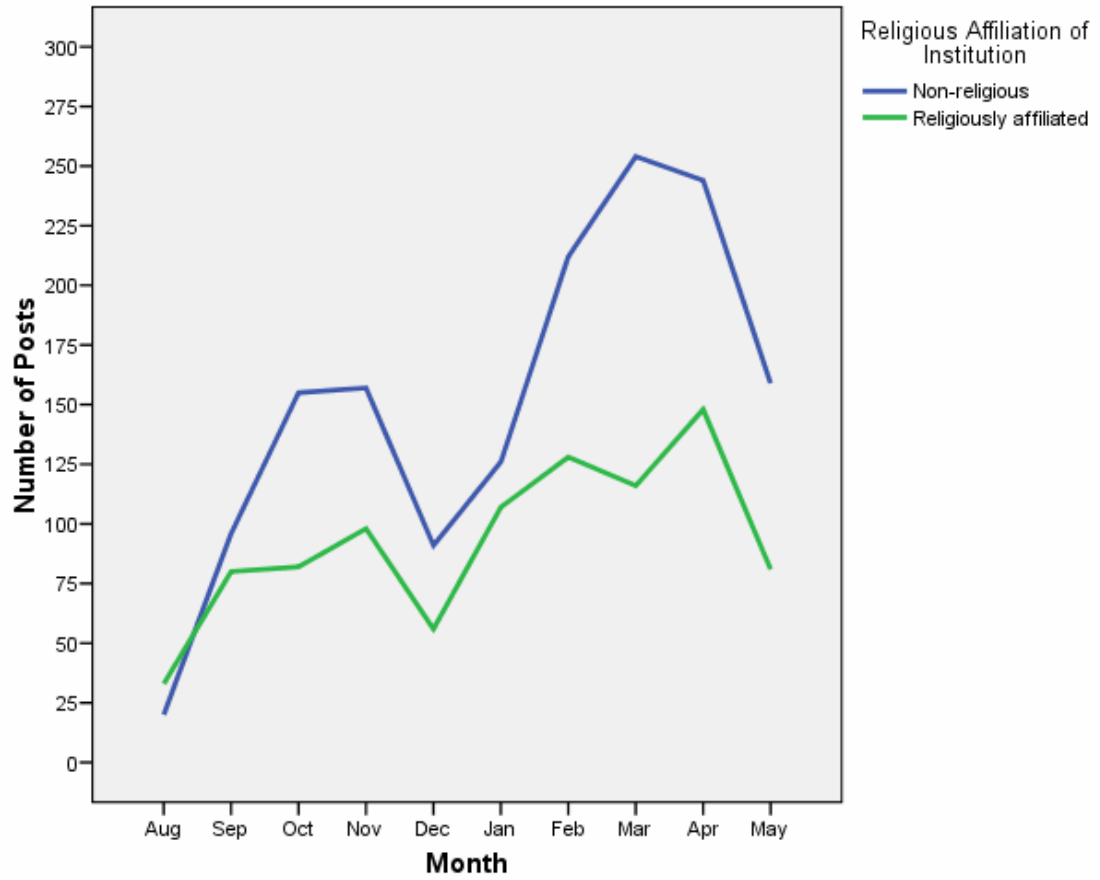


Figure 6: Frequency of Posts By Month and Religious Affiliation of Institution

## Appendix A

## COLLEGES &amp; UNIVERSITIES WITH RECRUITMENT BLOGS

Archived for 2005-2006 Academic Year

Institution	Size	Public or Private	Religious Affiliation
Albright College	Medium	Private	Yes
American University	Large	Private	Yes
Arcadia University	Small	Private	Yes
Ashland University	Medium	Private	Yes
Assumption College	Medium	Private	Yes
Austin Peay State University	Large	Public	No
Ball State University	XL	Public	No
Beloit College	Small	Private	No
Biola University	Medium	Private	Yes
Bluffton University	Small	Private	Yes
Bradley University	Large	Private	No
California College of the Arts	Small	Private	No
Calvin College	Medium	Private	Yes
Canisius College	Medium	Private	Yes
Capital University	Medium	Private	Yes
Clarkson University	Medium	Private	No
Colgate University	Medium	Private	No
College of St. Scholastica	Medium	Private	Yes
College of the Atlantic	Small	Private	No
College of the Holy Cross	Medium	Private	Yes
Colorado Christian University	Medium	Private	Yes
Colorado College	Small	Private	No
Colorado School of Mines	Medium	Public	No
Dakota Wesleyan University	Small	Private	Yes
Dartmouth College	Medium	Private	No
DeSales University	Medium	Private	Yes
Dickinson College	Medium	Private	No
Dominican University	Small	Private	Yes
Eastern Mennonite University	Small	Private	Yes
Eastern Oregon University	Medium	Public	No
Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University – Daytona Beach	Medium	Private	No
Faulkner University	Medium	Private	Yes
Gallaudet University	Small	Private	No
Goldey-Beacom College	Small	Private	No
Hamilton College	Small	Private	No
Hamline University	Medium	Private	Yes
Hampshire College	Small	Private	No
Hastings College	Small	Private	Yes
Hollins University	Small	Private	No

Immaculata College	Medium	Private	Yes
Indiana Institute of Technology	Medium	Private	No
Lakeland College	Medium	Private	Yes
Lewis & Clark College	Small	Private	No
Loyola Marymount University	Large	Private	Yes
Marian College	Small	Private	Yes
Mars Hill College	Small	Private	Yes
Metropolitan State College of Denver	XL	Public	No
Mount Saint Mary College	Small	Private	Yes
Northwest Nazarene University	Small	Private	Yes
Notre Dame College	Small	Private	Yes
Ohio Wesleyan University	Small	Private	Yes
Oklahoma Christian University	Small	Private	Yes
Old Dominion University	XL	Public	No
Pace University	Large	Private	No
Philadelphia University	Medium	Private	No
Polytechnic University of New York	Small	Private	No
Prescott College	Small	Private	No
Purdue University Calumet	Large	Public	No
Randolph-Macon College	Small	Private	Yes
Richard Stockton College of New Jersey	Large	Public	No
Rider University	Medium	Private	No
Robert Morris College (IL)	Large	Private	No
Robert Morris College (PA)	Medium	Private	No
Rochester Institute of Technology	XL	Private	No
Rockhurst University	Medium	Private	Yes
Rollins College	Small	Private	No
Rutgers University - New Brunswick	XL	Public	No
Saint Michael's College	Medium	Private	Yes
Southeast Missouri State University	Large	Public	No
Spring Arbor University	Medium	Private	Yes
St. Norbert College	Small	Private	Yes
Sterling College	Small	Private	Yes
Thomas More College	Small	Private	Yes
Tulane University	Large	Private	No
University of Central Florida	XL	Public	No
University of Central Missouri	Large	Public	No
University of Dayton	Large	Private	Yes
University of Detroit Mercy	Medium	Private	Yes
University of Idaho	Large	Public	No
University of Mississippi	XL	Public	No
University of Richmond	Medium	Private	No
University of Scranton	Medium	Private	Yes
University of the Arts	Medium	Private	No
University of Tulsa	Medium	Private	Yes
University of Vermont	Large	Public	No
Ursinus College	Small	Private	No
Villa Julie College	Medium	Private	No

Wayne State College	Medium	Public	No
Western Carolina University	Large	Public	No
Whitman College	Small	Private	No
Williams Baptist College	Small	Private	Yes
Wingate University	Small	Private	Yes

## Appendix B

### COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY RECRUITMENT BLOGS CODE BOOK

**Unit of Analysis:** The unit of analysis is the individual blog post collected from each college or university's Web site. Only posts written by college students are coded.

Read through the entire post and code that post using the code sheet. This should be done in one sitting. The code sheet is online at <http://projects.jou.ufl.edu/survey/entry.jsp?id=1168970220141>.

**Item ID Number:** Write in the name of the file (ex. 0827 – institution name – blogger).

**Coder:** Write your name to indicate that you are the one coding the post.

**Title (1.00):** Write the post's title.

**Date (1.00):** Indicate the date of the post. Use the four digit code: August 27 is 0827.

#### ***FRAMES***

Determine whether the student answers the following questions by marking (1) yes or (0) no.

#### **Academics**

- **Does the student write about administrative tasks (.97)?** Does the student mention registering for class, having advising appointments or completing a degree plan?
- **Does the student discuss class (.85)?** Does the student mention what happened in a class? Does the student mention grades he earned?
- **Does the student refer to academic coursework (.86)?** Does the student write about homework assignments, projects, tests, or quizzes?
- **Does the student write about academic honesty (1.00)?** Does the student mention an academic honor code? Does the student describe any encounters with cheating, copying, plagiarism, etc.?
- **Does the student refer to taking special courses (.98)?** For example, does the student write about taking honor or remedial course work?
- **Does the student reference the institution's academic reputation (1.00)?** Does the student write about the school's ranking in polls such as the annual *U.S. News & World Report* ranking of best colleges and universities?
- **Does the student write about studying (.90)?** Does the student write about needing to study, the amount of time spent studying, a favorite study location, or the best time of day to study?
- **Other (.93)?** Write specifically what the student wrote about in this frame that is not included previously. This might include writing about internships (.97), student teaching, field trips (.99), study abroad opportunities (.92), career services (.99), or searching for a job after graduation.

Overall, if one of the above questions was answered as "yes," was it presented as positive (3), neutral (2), or negative (1) as seen by the institution (.73)?

### Professors

- **Does the student write about personal characteristics of his professors (.95)?** For example, does the student say whether professors are friendly and approachable or mean, tough, or unfair?
- **Does the student describe encounters with professors outside of the classroom (.97)?** Does the student describe visiting a professor during office hours? Does the student mention seeing professors around campus or town?
- **Does the student suggest that a professor is competent (.97)?** Does the student value his professors' capabilities as a teacher? Does the student think his professors are knowledgeable in their subject area?
- **Does the student make recommendations about which professors to take (1.00)?** Does the student warn other students to take or not take certain professors?
- **Other (.99)?** Write specifically what the student wrote about in this frame that is not included previously.

Overall, if one of the above questions was answered as "yes," was it presented as positive (3), neutral (2), or negative (1) as seen by the institution (.92)?

### Social Life

- **Does the student write about his life outside of the classroom (.80)?** This might include mentions of what he does in the evenings, between classes, or during breaks like Fall Break or Spring Break.
- **Does the student say too much is going on to study (1.00)?** For example, does the student suggest that he is involved with so many activities that he does not have time to study?
- **Does the student describe entertainment opportunities provided through the institution (.82)?** Does the student attend campus-sponsored events such as movie nights or concerts?
- **Does the student write about what he does on the weekends (.89)?** For example, does the student describe going home on the weekends, watching movies, studying, or hanging with friends?
- **Does the student write about being bored (1.00)?** Does the student complain about having nothing to do for fun or entertainment?
- **Other (.99)?** Write specifically what the student wrote about in this frame that is not included previously. This might include topics like dating, drinking, drugs, and sex.

Overall, if one of the above questions was answered as "yes," was it presented as positive (3), neutral (2), or negative (1) as seen by the institution (.69)?

### Extracurricular Activities

- **Does the student indicate that he's involved in any extracurricular activities?** These might include: band (.99), choir (1.00), sports (.93), honor societies (.99), theatre (.99), political groups (1.00), student publications (.99), student union activities (.99), sororities/fraternities (.98), pep rallies (1.00), tailgating (.99), or others: ambassadors/tour guides (.99), student government (.97), orientation (.99), TV/radio (1.00), academic club (.98), or other (.91).

Overall, if the above question was answered as "yes," was it presented as positive (3), neutral (2), or negative (1) as seen by the institution (.83)?



### Residential Life

- **Does the student describe what it's like to live in a dorm (.90)?** Does the student write about things such as the noise in the dorm, the size of the room or what it's like to have a roommate?
- **Does the student refer to the campus as "home" (.99)?** Is the student happy to be back on campus after breaks or long weekends?
- **Does the student write about the dining hall (.98)?** Does the student write about what types of food are available in the dining hall? Does he write about the hours the dining hall is open or the meal plan options?
- **Does the student write about the ability to park on campus (1.00)?** For example, does the student write about finding a great parking space or having to park far from the dorm?
- **Does the student describe what it's like living off campus (.98)?** For example, does the student write about living in an apartment or what it is like to commute?
- **Other (.96)?** Write specifically what the student wrote about in this frame that is not included previously.

Overall, if one of the above questions was answered as "yes," was it presented as positive (3), neutral (2), or negative (1) as seen by the institution (.85)?

### Athletics

- **Does the student write about attending competitive athletic events (.98)?** For example, does the student participate in tailgates or pep rallies for the institution's athletic teams?
- **Does the student write about being part of a competitive team (.98)?** Does the student mention being a team member of a collegiate sports team?
- **Does the student write about how athletic teams are faring (.98)?** Does the student write about his approval or displeasure in the team's performances?
- **Through his blog posts, does the student act as a cheerleader for the institution (.97)?** Does the student write comments like "Go Dawgs!?" Does the student display pride in attending his institution?
- **Does the student mention intramural sports (1.00)?** Does the student write about attending or participating in intramural games for any kind of sport?
- **Other (1.00)?** Write specifically what the student wrote about in this frame that is not included previously.

Overall, if one of the above questions was answered as "yes," was it presented as positive (3), neutral (2), or negative (1) as seen by the institution (.93)?

### Finances

- **Does the student mention costs associated with attending the institution (.99)?** Does the student write about paying for tuition or textbooks?
- **Does the student write about his financial aid package (.98)?** For example, does the student describe having loans, grants, scholarships, or work-study?
- **Does the student mention having a budget or the need to have one (.99)?** Does the student describe having to juggle paying bills and other expenses?
- **Does the student write about working a part-time job on campus (.95)?** Does the student work in an office on campus?
- **Does the student write about working a part-time job off campus (.97)?** For example, does the student baby-sit, clean houses, or work for a local establishment in town?

- **Does the student write about having a job at an undetermined location (.96)?** For example, the student mentions having a job but is not clear about whether it is on or off campus.
- **Does the student mention having a job when he's not in school (.96)?** For example, a job between semesters while the student is on break.
- **Other (.98)?** Write specifically what the student wrote about in this frame that is not included previously.

Overall, if one of the above questions was answered as "yes," was it presented as positive (3), neutral (2), or negative (1) as seen by the institution (.90)?

### Physical Wellness

- **Does the student write about exercising or working out or the need to do so (.90)?** Does the student write about going to the gym or need to go?
- **Does the student acknowledge being stressed or not stressed (.98)?** For example, does the student write about being stressed about school work or relationships?
- **Does the student write about taking naps or needing more sleep (.97)?** Does the student write about being tired or well rested?
- **Does the student write about being sick (.98)?** Does the student describe not feeling well? Does the student write about any health-related injuries such as broken bones or sprains?
- **Does the student mention using any health services offered on campus (.99)?** Does the student utilize a campus health center or other resources such as a pharmacy or shot clinic?
- **Other (.95)?** Write specifically what the student wrote about in this frame that is not included previously. This might include crime and safety on campus, time management (.99), being homesick, or having an injury (possibly sports-related).

Overall, if one of the above questions was answered as "yes," was it presented as positive (3), neutral (2), or negative (1) as seen by the institution (.86)?

### Religion

- **Does the student mention being involved with a religious organization on campus (.98)?** Does the student participate with a religious group or attend a group's activities?
- **Does the student write about mission trips (.99)?** For example, does the student describe a previous mission trip he went on or an upcoming trip he will take?
- **Does the student write about attending a religious service through an off campus organization (.99)?** For example, does the student write about attending a local church?
- **Does the student make reference to religious values (.94)?** For example, does the student mention being pro-life for religious reasons? Or does the student reference God in a serious way (i.e. *not* "Oh my God!")?
- **Does the student mention praying or meditating (.98)?** For example, does the student write about decisions made after prayerful consideration?
- **Other (.98)?** Write specifically what the student wrote about in this frame that is not included previously. This might include attending a campus-wide worship service.

Overall, if one of the above questions was answered as "yes," was it presented as positive (3), neutral (2), or negative (1) as seen by the institution (.94)?

### Community

- **Does the student describe the weather where the institution is located (.97)?** Does the student write about a beautiful spring day or a blizzard that just buried the campus?
- **Does the student describe the town or city where the institution is located (.91)?** Does the student describe the town or city's size, geographic characteristics, or area attractions?
- **Does the student mention collaborative efforts between the local community and the institution (.99)?** For example, does the student write about community volunteer opportunities organized by the institution?
- **Does the student write about local news or events (.97)?** For example, does the student describe local politics or crime? Local events might include things like the Daytona 500 or local professional sporting events.
- **Other (.99)?** Write specifically what the student wrote about in this frame that is not included previously.

**Overall, if one of the above questions was answered as "yes," was it presented as positive (3), neutral (2), or negative (1) as seen by the institution (.87)?**

**Memorable quote from this post:** Write something that is memorable about this blog. This may be used in the discussion section. Not all items will warrant this.

**Did the item address the audience directly (.90)?** Answer yes or no. Read the item and determine if the audience of prospective students (or their parents) was addressed directly. For example: "Please send me your questions" or "I wanted to answer a question a prospective student sent me." This might also include encouraging prospects to visit campus or attend a special preview event or describing anything to do with the admission process.

### ***FRAMING MECHANISMS***

**Graphics contain:** Review all of the graphics in the blog post and determine if any of the following are present at least once. If so, check each item accordingly.

**Are there any graphics (.87)?** Answer yes (1) or no (0).

**Number of graphics (.87):** Answer for the whole post.

**Does the graphic's image relate to any of the following: academics, professors, social life, extracurricular, residential life, athletics, finances, physical wellness, religion, community, or other (.83)?** Answer based on previous descriptions describing these categories.

**People (.89):** Graphic contained images of people (human beings, not pets):

**Blogger:** Graphic contained likeness of the actual blogger (e.g., blogger posts picture of himself).

**Friends:** Graphic contained images of blogger's friends (e.g. boyfriend/girlfriend, roommate, classmate)

**Family:** Graphic contained images of blogger's family.

**Institution faculty/staff:** Graphic contained images of institution faculty or staff member (e.g., professor, advisor, president, secretary).

**Other people:** Any people contained in the graphics that don't fit in previous categories.

**Places blogger had been (.91):** Graphic contained image of a place the blogger had visited or physically been, such as vacation photos, concert, building, etc.

**Things the blogger had seen (.90):** Graphic contained an image of something the blogger had seen such as a car, sandwich, etc.

**Campus (.87):** Graphic contained images of the college or university campus:

**Academic building:** Graphic contained images of classroom, auditorium, library, etc. on campus.

**Residence hall:** Graphic contained images of dorm room or other residence hall location.

**Athletic event:** Graphic contained image of collegiate or intramural sporting event.

**Scenic view:** Graphic contained outdoor image of campus.

**Other:** Any graphic that contained images of campus that don't fit in previous categories.

**Other (.83):** Identify what the graphic depicts that hasn't been included previously.

### ***TECHNICAL FEATURES***

Determine whether the following features are present (1) or not present (0):

**Comments (.95):** This is a link associated with every post that allows readers to respond to the blogger's post.

**Contact information (.87):** Look for an e-mail address, instant messenger screen name, phone number or other such contact information for the blogger, not the institution. This can be available in a link labeled "contact."

**Syndication like RSS or XML (.88):** This is typically a button or text links that say "syndication," "RSS," or "XML." This feature allows people to subscribe to the content.

**Hyperlinks (.94):** This is a link to other Web pages. If present, indicate whether the hyperlinks lead to (1) pages within the institution's Web pages, (2) pages outside the institution's Web pages, or (3) pages both within and outside the institution's Web pages.

### ***DEMOGRAPHICS***

**Gender:** Answer male, female, or coder unable to determine gender. Determine gender by looking at the blogger's name or picture, but do not guess. If the name is ambiguous ("Pat") and the entry does not refer to the person's own gender, then select "coder unable to determine." If the name is foreign and you are unable to assign gender, then select "coder unable to determine."

**Ethnicity:** Answer white/Caucasian, African American, Asian, Hispanic, or other. Determine ethnicity by looking at the blogger's picture or by reading the entry. If there is no picture and the entry does not refer to the person's ethnicity, then select "coder unable to determine."

**School Classification:** Answer freshmen, sophomore, junior, or senior. Determine school classification by information provided in the blogger's profile (if available) or in the entry. If there is no profile or reference to classification in the entry, then select "coder unable to determine."

**Major:** Determine the student's major by reading the entry. Only record if the blogger specifically writes what his major is. Do not guess.

**Hometown:** Determine the blogger's hometown (city and state) by reading the entry. Only record if the blogger specifically writes where his hometown is.

## Appendix C

### COLLEGE & UNIVERSITY RECRUITMENT BLOGS CODE SHEET

ID # \_\_\_\_\_

Coder \_\_\_\_\_

Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_ (4 digit code: August 27 is 0827)

**FRAMES:** Answer each question as yes (1) or no (0).

#### **Academics**

- \_\_\_\_\_ Does the student write about administrative tasks?  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Does the student discuss a class?  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Does the student refer to academic coursework?  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Does the student write about academic honesty?  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Does the student refer to taking special courses?  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Does the student reference the institution's academic reputation?  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Does the student write about studying?  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

#### **Professors**

- \_\_\_\_\_ Does the student write about personal characteristics of his professors?  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Does the student describe encounters with professors outside of the classroom?  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Does the student find his professors to be competent?  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Does the student make recommendations about which professors to take?  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

#### **Social Life**

- \_\_\_\_\_ Does the student write about his life outside of the classroom?  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Does the student say too much is going on to study?  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Does the student describe entertainment opportunities provided through the institution?  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Does the student write about what he does on the weekends?  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Does the student write about being bored?  
 \_\_\_\_\_ Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**Extracurricular**

Does the student indicate he's involved with any extracurricular activities such as:

- Band
- Choir
- Sports
- Honor societies
- Theatre
- Political groups
- Student publications
- Student union activities
- Sororities/fraternities
- Pep rallies
- Tailgating
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**Residential Life**

- Does the student describe what it's like to live in a dorm?
- Does the student refer to the campus as "home"?
- Does the student write about the dining hall?
- Does the student write about the ability to park on campus?
- Does the student describe what it's like living off campus?
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**Athletics**

- Does the student write about attending competitive athletic events?
- Does the student write about being part of a competitive team?
- Does the student write about how athletic teams are faring?
- Through his blog posts, does the student act as a cheerleader for the institution?
- Does the student mention playing or watching intramural sports?
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**Finances**

- Does the student mention costs associated with attending the institution?
- Does the student write about his financial aid package?
- Does the student mention having a budget or the need to have one?
- Does the student write about working a part-time job on campus?
- Does the student write about working a part-time job off campus?
- Does the student write about working a job at an undetermined location?
- Does the student write about working a job when he's not in school?
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**Physical Wellness**

- Does the student write about exercising or working out or the need to do so?
- Does the student acknowledge being stressed or not stressed?
- Does the student write about taking naps or needing more sleep?
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**Religion**

- Does the student mention being involved with a religious organization on campus?
- Does the student write about mission trips?
- Does the student write about attending a religious service through an off campus organization?
- Does the student make reference to religious values?
- Does the student mention praying or meditating?
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**Community**

- Does the student describe the weather where the institution is located?
- Does the student describe the town or city where the institution is located?
- Does the student mention collaborative efforts between the local community and the institution?
- Does the student write about local news or events?
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

**Memorable quote from this post:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Did the blogger address the audience directly? Answer yes (1) or no (0).

**FRAMING MECHANISMS**

**Graphics contain:** Review all of the graphics in the blog post and determine if any of the following are present at least once. If so, check each item accordingly. Answer yes (1) or no (0).

- Are there any graphics?
- Number of graphics

Does the graphic's image relate to:

- Academics
- Professors
- Social life
- Extracurricular
- Residential life
- Athletics
- Finances
- Physical wellness
- Religion
- Community

- \_\_\_\_\_ People:
- \_\_\_\_\_ Blogger
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Friends
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Family
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Institution faculty/staff

- \_\_\_\_\_ Place blogger had been
- \_\_\_\_\_ Things the blogger had seen
- \_\_\_\_\_ Campus:
- \_\_\_\_\_ Academic building
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Residence hall
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Scenic view
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Athletic event
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Other

### **TECHNICAL FEATURES**

Determine whether the following features are present (1) or not present (0):

- \_\_\_\_\_ Comments
- \_\_\_\_\_ Contact information
- \_\_\_\_\_ Syndication like RSS or XML
- \_\_\_\_\_ Hyperlinks:
- \_\_\_\_\_ Within the institution's Web pages
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Outside the institution's Web pages
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Includes both types of links

### **DEMOGRAPHICS**

- \_\_\_\_\_ Gender
- (1) Male
  - (2) Female
  - (3) Unable to determine
- \_\_\_\_\_ Ethnicity
- (1) White/Caucasian
  - (2) African American
  - (3) Asian
  - (4) Hispanic
  - (5) Other
  - (6) Unable to determine



\_\_\_\_\_ School Classification

- (1) Freshmen
- (2) Sophomore
- (3) Junior
- (4) Senior
- (5) Unable to determine

Major \_\_\_\_\_

Hometown \_\_\_\_\_

University \_\_\_\_\_