

A look at how colleges and universities respond to inquiries from prospective adult students

Published by InsideTrack

InsideTrack has coached more than 250,000 students at leading universities nationwide, enabling universities to increase student engagement, persistence, and success.

Spring 2011

OVERVIEW

InsideTrack works with colleges and universities to provide one-on-one coaching for prospective and enrolled students. Many of the schools we work with serve adult and other non-traditional students. As part of our market research activities, we conducted a “secret shopping” exercise. We inquired as prospective students at numerous adult-serving degree programs to assess their inquiry handling processes. Our goal was to better understand the typical responsiveness of admissions staff and the comprehensiveness of information provided.

After reviewing the results, it occurred to us that this information might also be of value to colleges and universities seeking to better understand the enrollment decisions of nontraditional students. To that end, we prepared this summary of our initial findings.

It is important to note that this is not a scientific study. While our “secret shopper” analysis does include quantitative and qualitative data from a broad range of institutions, academic programs, and campus types, the colleges and universities we assessed were not chosen at random and there are numerous other limitations to our analysis. We strongly encourage more statistically sound inquiry into this topic.

Warnings aside, our “secret shopping” exercise did find that certain programs, including for-profit programs, online campuses, and marketing and design programs, responded in a more timely fashion and with more comprehensive information than their peers. This included quickly providing the prospective student with sufficient information to help them gauge:

- A program's fit with their educational needs
- Their qualification for the program
- The application process

Where most programs fell flat was in providing prospective students sufficient information to assess the personal and financial commitments associated with enrolling in school. Programs looking to increase enrollment and encourage student success might look for ways to enhance their performance in this area.

METHODOLOGY

In the Fall of 2010, InsideTrack initiated prospective student inquiries at 150 adult-serving degree programs, including for-profit programs, private and public non-profit programs, online and ground campuses, various academic program categories, and undergraduate and graduate degree programs. InsideTrack utilized contractors similar in age and employment background to many prospective non-traditional college students. Each team member inquired as a prospective student through three

separate channels (website form, email, and phone), using three different student personas. For each channel, researchers used a ten-point scale to measure response timeliness and the comprehensiveness of the information provided—resulting in a comprehensiveness score, a responsiveness score, and a combined overall score. Additionally, they noted the method of response: Web site form, phone or email, and included notes detailing their impressions of each institution's staff and processes. The team then followed up with additional requests for information through the same three channels, using the same student persona. They again measured response timeliness and the comprehensiveness of the information provided.

For its general assessment of overall information comprehensiveness, the team noted whether each school's inquiry handling process:

- Provided them with sufficient information to evaluate the program in question,
- Helped them determine if they were qualified for the program in question,
- Gave them sufficient information to understand the application process, and
- Helped them understand the personal and financial commitment involved with starting or returning to school.

InsideTrack analyzed the quantitative and qualitative data to measure the overall student experience and the likelihood that each “shopper” would, in the role of a student, select this program using the overall, comprehensiveness, and responsiveness scales described above.

ANALYSIS

InsideTrack reviewed the results of all 150 “secret shopper” inquiries, looking to identify significant differences in overall, comprehensiveness, and responsiveness scores across institutional categories. We also examined the results for high performing subcategory combinations of sector, campus and student type. Unless otherwise indicated, all differences between categories have been determined to be significant at the .05 level using an ANOVA analysis.

RESULTS

The programs with the highest average ratings were for-profit programs (across all measures), online programs (significant results for overall score and responsiveness only), and marketing/design programs (across all measures). No statistically significant differences emerged between graduate and undergraduate programs. →

Statistical differences by institutional categories

• **For-profit vs. non-profit programs**

- **Overall score:** Average overall inquiry scores were 7.8 for for-profit programs, 6.7 for private non-profit programs, and 5.3 for public non-profit programs (Figure 1).
- **Comprehensiveness score:** Average comprehensiveness scores were 8.4 for for-profit programs, 7.3 for private non-profit programs, and 6.0 for public non-profit programs (Figure 2).

Figure 1:
Average overall inquiry scores by sector

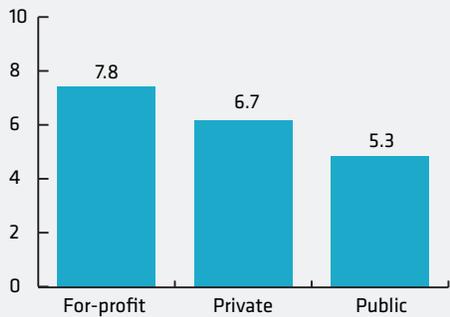


Figure 2:
Average inquiry comprehensiveness scores by sector

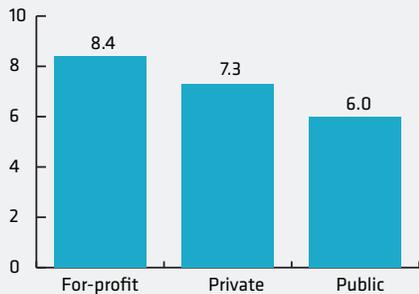
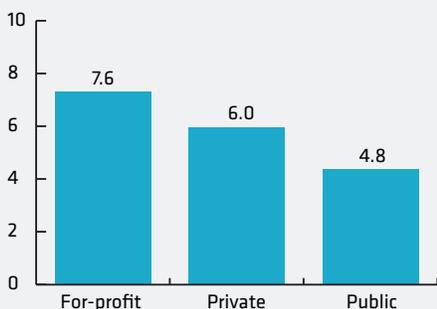


Figure 3:
Average inquiry responsiveness scores by sector

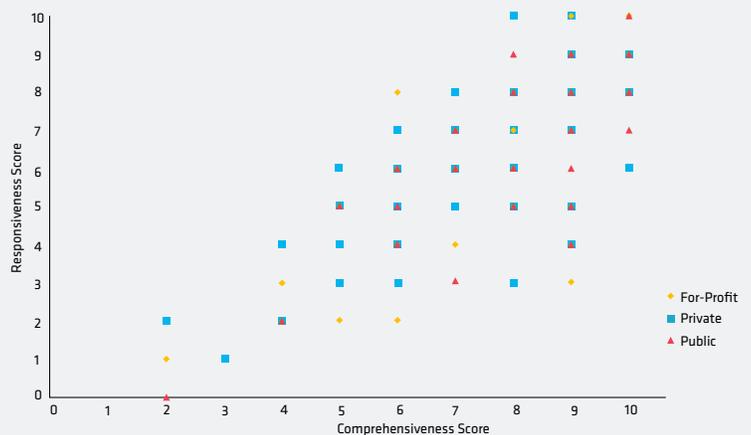


- **Responsiveness score:** Average responsiveness scores were 7.6 for for-profit programs, 6.0 for private adult and professional programs, and 4.8 for public adult and professional programs (Figure 3).
- **Distribution of scores:** A scatter analysis of institutions by sector shows that while for-profit programs on average had higher scores for comprehensiveness and responsiveness, there is significant variation between programs, with a number of for-profit programs receiving some of the lower scores. Similarly, while private non-profit programs and public non-profit programs average lower performance scores, individual private and public non-profit programs received some of the highest marks (Figure 4).

• **Information adequacy: a breakdown of comprehensiveness**

- **Gave sufficient information to evaluate the program:** Most programs provided sufficient information for applicants to evaluate the programs about which they were inquiring. 85% of for-profit programs, 76% of private non-profit programs, and 65% of public non-profit programs provided sufficient information. These sector rankings were mirrored across all other information adequacy measures.
- **Helped applicants determine if they were qualified for the program:** Most programs were able to provide applicants with sufficient information to determine if they were qualified for the programs in question. Ninety percent of for-profit programs provided sufficient information to help applicants determine if they were qualified for the program about which they were inquiring, 80% of private non-profit programs and 65% of public non-profit programs. →

Figure 4:
Comprehensiveness and responsiveness by sector



- Gave sufficient information to understand the application process:** The vast majority of programs provided applicants with sufficient information to understand the application process, with 95% of for-profit programs, 85% of private non-profit programs, and 76% of public non-profit programs providing sufficient information.

- Provided adequate information on financial/ personal commitments:** While most programs gave sufficient information in other areas, they did not provide sufficient information to help applicants determine the full extent of the financial and personal commitments associated with enrollment. Only 58% of for-profit programs provided this information, while only 27% of non-profit private programs and 15% of non-profit public programs did so. This is an area where programs seeking to improve their enrollment and retention results might like to focus attention.

• **Ground vs. online (campus type)**

- Overall score:** Average overall inquiry scores for ground campuses were 6.2, compared with 7.3 for online campuses (Figure 5).

Figure 5:
Average overall inquiry scores by campus type

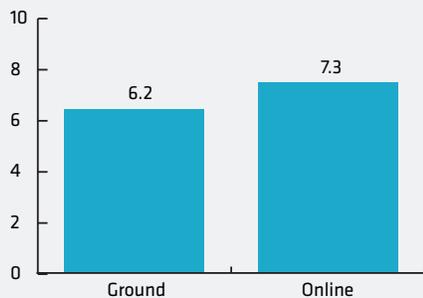
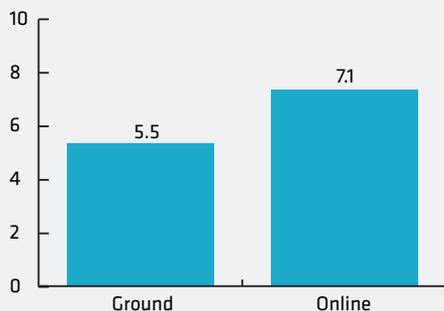


Figure 6:
Average inquiry responsiveness scores by campus type



- Comprehensiveness score:** Average inquiry comprehensiveness scores were 7.0 for ground programs and 7.6 for online programs, but the difference was not statistically significant at the .05 level.

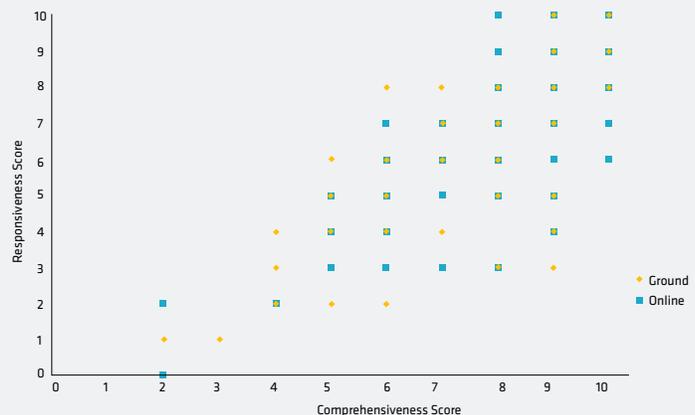
- Responsiveness score:** Average overall inquiry scores for ground campuses were 5.5, compared with 7.1 for online campuses (Figure 6).

Distribution of scores: A scatter analysis of institutions by campus type shows that while online campuses on average had higher scores for both comprehensiveness and responsiveness, there are individual ground campuses that also excel. However, some ground campuses received scores between zero and two on both comprehensiveness and responsiveness, well below the scores of the worst online campuses (Figure 7).

• **Information adequacy: a breakdown of comprehensiveness**

- Gave sufficient information to evaluate the program:** 71% of programs on ground campuses and 82% of online programs provided applicants with sufficient information to evaluate the programs in question.
- Helped applicants determine if they were qualified for the program:** 74% of ground campuses and 87% of online campuses helped applicants understand if they were qualified for the program in question.
- Gave sufficient information to understand the application process:** 80% of ground campuses and 93% of online campuses gave sufficient information to help applicants understand the application process. →

Figure 7:
Comprehensiveness and responsiveness by campus type



- Provided adequate information on financial/personal commitments:** The majority failed to provide applicants with sufficient information to understand the financial and personal commitments associated with school, but online campuses outperformed ground campuses, with 24% of ground campuses and 44% of online campuses providing sufficient information in these areas. This is an area where programs seeking to improve their enrollment and retention results might like to focus attention.

Academic degree programs

- Overall score:** Overall inquiry scores were highest for marketing/design programs, with an 8.5 average rating, and lowest for liberal arts programs, with a 5.6 average rating (Figure 8).
- Comprehensiveness score:** Inquiry comprehensiveness scores were highest for marketing/design programs, with an 8.7 average rating, and lowest for liberal arts and business programs, with a 6.7 average rating (Figure 9).
- Responsiveness score:** Inquiry responsiveness scores were highest for marketing/design programs, with an 8.1 average rating, and lowest for liberal arts and business programs with a 5.0 average rating (Figure 10).

Distribution of scores: A scatter analysis of institutions by degree program shows a high level of variance between scores in program types. While marketing/design programs had higher average scores for both comprehensiveness and responsiveness, they share top rankings with individual science, business, education and legal programs. Nonetheless, business and legal programs received some of the lowest average scores in both comprehensiveness and responsiveness (Figure 11).

Information adequacy: a breakdown of comprehensiveness

- Gave sufficient information to evaluate the program:** Marketing/design programs provided sufficient information to evaluate programs most often, at 92%, while business programs fared the worst, with only 68% of programs providing sufficient information.
- Helped applicants determine if they were qualified for the program:** Legal programs provided sufficient information to evaluate programs most often, at a full 100%, while health programs scored the lowest with only 62% of programs providing sufficient information.
- Gave sufficient information to understand the application process:** Legal programs provided sufficient information to understand the application process most often, at a full 100%, while health programs scored the lowest with only 69% of programs providing sufficient information. →

Figure 8: Average overall scores by academic program

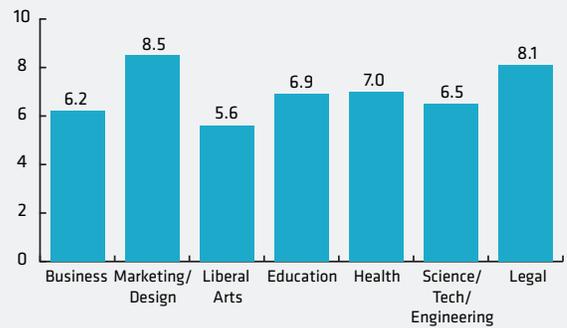


Figure 9: Average comprehensiveness scores by academic program

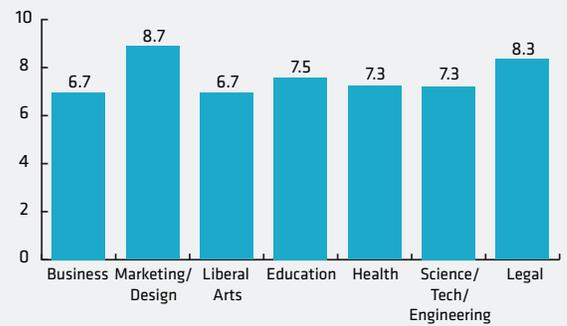


Figure 10: Average responsiveness scores by academic program

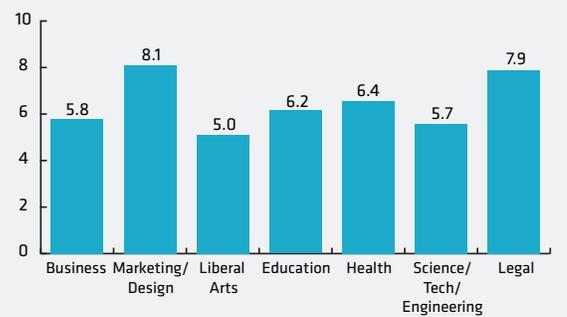
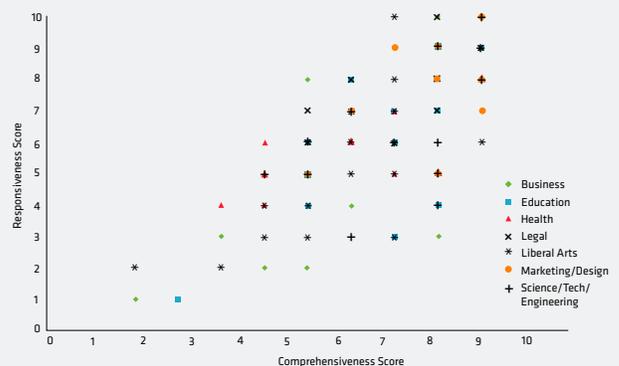


Figure 11: Comprehensiveness and responsiveness by degree type



- **Provided adequate information on financial/personal commitments:** The majority of programs, regardless of area of study, did not help students sufficiently understand the financial and personal commitments associated with enrolling in school. However, marketing/design programs, at 62%, were the only category where a majority of programs did explain these commitments. Meanwhile, health programs performed the worst, with only 12% of programs explaining these commitments. This is an area where programs seeking to improve their enrollment and retention results might like to focus attention.

- **Undergraduate vs. graduate programs**

Since no significant differences were found between undergraduate and graduate adult-serving programs in any of the measures explored in this analysis, we do not include a detailed comparison between these categories here.

However, a high-level overview of these results shows:

- **Overall score:** Average overall inquiry scores were 6.3 for graduate programs and 6.7 for undergraduate programs, but the difference was not statistically significant at the .05 level.
- **Comprehensiveness score:** Average inquiry comprehensiveness scores were 6.7 for graduate programs and 7.4 for undergraduate programs, but the difference was not statistically significant at the .05 level.
- **Responsiveness score:** Average inquiry responsiveness scores were 6.0 for graduate programs and 6.2 for undergraduate programs, but the difference was not statistically significant at the .05 level.

SUMMARY

In summary, although great variation exists between institutions in every category, on average for-profit programs and online campuses in both the non-profit and for-profit schools provided the most timely and comprehensive inquiry responses. Marketing/design programs within these institutions stand out for their responsiveness and the comprehensiveness of the information they provide to applicants, while business and liberal arts programs are generally below average in both respects. Additionally, across all sectors, campus types and degree programs, adult-serving institutions generally provided students with adequate information to:

- Evaluate the programs in question,
- Assess whether they are qualified for the program they are inquiring about, and
- Understand the application process.

However, the findings indicate that most institutions and programs can do more to provide prospective students with information about the personal and financial commitments associated with enrolling in school.

ABOUT INSIDETRACK

InsideTrack is the nation's premier provider of student coaching services. Our mission is to improve student engagement, persistence, and success. InsideTrack has coached more than 250,000 students at leading institutions across the country. Our clients include Penn State University, University of Dayton, Florida State University, and Chapman University.

For additional information on this study, please contact us at:

415.243.4468
programs@insidetrack.com
or visit our Web site: www.insidetrack.com.