

COLLEGE ACCESS MARKETING (CAM) IS A RELATIVELY NEW PHENOMENON THAT SEEKS TO POSITIVELY INFLUENCE THE COLLEGE-GOING RATE. THIS REPORT DEFINES CAM, DESCRIBES CAM EXAMPLES, AND DISCUSSES HOW CAM SEEKS TO COUNTER BARRIERS TO COLLEGE. IT EXPLORES FOUR MAIN ELEMENTS OF CAM: INFORMATION, MARKETING, ADVOCACY, AND SOCIAL MOBILIZATION. FURTHER, IT IDENTIFIES THEMES AMONG THE CAM LITERATURE THAT ILLUSTRATE ITS VALUE. IT EXPLAINS CAM'S ROLE IN SUPPORTING ACCESS TO HIGHER EDUCATION, DISCUSSES THE SHORTCOMINGS OF THE LITERATURE, AND IDENTIFIES AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH. AS CAM EVOLVES, SO WILL ITS EFFECTIVENESS IN PROMOTING HIGHER EDUCATION AND FACILITATING COLLEGE ENROLLMENT.



CAM

COLLEGE ACCESS MARKETING

BY CHRISTOPHER W. TREMBLAY

“Going to college”

is an expression that has been used since the first college in the United States opened in the 1600s (Cabrera and Burkum 2001). Since then, colleges have promoted and advertised themselves, often selling the education they provided. According to Gastwirth (2007a), the Ad Council promoted “going to college” prior to the 1970s as a way to increase college attendance. In the 1990s, to further increase the college-going rate, the concept of college access marketing (CAM) emerged and the expression was coined (Gastwirth 2007b). (CAM is so new that it does not appear in the online college access glossary hosted by the National College Access Network.) CAM is a public awareness effort designed to positively influence the college-going rate. The intent of CAM is to “change students’ behaviors...related to preparing for, attending, and succeeding in college” (Mize 2008). On the basis of public opinion research, the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (2009) states that the American

population “believes that college access is declining” (p. 1). The American population’s perception is their reality.

From a practical perspective, CAM seeks to influence the predisposition and the search stages of the college choice model developed by Hossler and Gallagher (Hossler, Schmit and Vesper 1999). This model explains the process of how students prepare for and enter higher education. According to Hossler and Gallagher (1999), students experience three stages in the college choice process, and CAM can shape students’ perspectives through psychological constructs (Hossler and Palmer 2008; Hossler, Schmit and Vesper 1999).

With college access a top priority of educators, legislators, and business professionals, there has been a surge of marketing and awareness campaigns to increase the college-going rate. The blending of college access and marketing is not new, but thanks to foundations, higher education associations, college access marketing, and non-profit organizations, financial and other resources are being invested to encourage students to pursue a college education and consequently to increase college enrollments. This paper seeks to define CAM, to identify and describe CAM examples, and to determine whether CAM is an effective tool—all through a review of related resources.

At its core, CAM is really a form of advocacy, communication, and social mobilization (Grimm 2001). CAM *advocates* for enrollment in higher education and *communicates* directly using college-going messages to mobilize individuals to choose college. The origin of such communication and mobilization efforts lies with work the Ad Council (2010) undertook in 1942. Examples of advocacy and social mobilization efforts include the “just say no” to drugs campaign, the “campaign for tobacco-free kids,” and the “only you can prevent forest fires” slogan featuring Smokey the Bear (Ad Council 2010). Overall, the goal of CAM is to create social change by influencing students’ decision making.

Today, CAM has many faces. According to Christensen (2010), “A college access marketing campaign may comprise

a single project or an ongoing, reiterative program” (p. 1). CAM initiatives range from national efforts and statewide projects to limited campaigns and electronic implementations. The main components of CAM are information, marketing, advocacy, and social mobilization. An assessment of CAM thus requires a review of these four elements.

ELEMENTS OF CAM

The literature on CAM is relatively young, dating only to the 2000s. Much of the literature describes examples of CAM campaigns; a few more recent pieces include evaluative research. Before surveying the literature, a description of CAM’s four components is necessary.

Information

The primary goal of any CAM campaign is the distribution and sharing of knowledge. This is referred to as the *content*. Conley (2005) acknowledges that “college preparation is knowledge-intensive” (p. 21). To prepare to enter college requires students to obtain a vast array of information to make effective decisions. Daun-Barnett and Das (2007) identify “information necessary to navigate the decision and choice processes” as one of the four college access dimensions and assert that lack of information is often an access barrier for students (p. 5). Former U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings once said, “We found that access to American higher education is unduly limited by the complex interplay of inadequate preparation, lack of information about college opportunities, and persistent financial barriers” (English and Tillery 2009). Lack of information is one of the primary challenges Spellings and others have identified as a barrier to higher education enrollment. CAM is implemented with the intent of providing information to students so they can prepare for and enter college.

Marketing

Marketing is an organized method of convincing an audience using promotional techniques. For CAM, marketing is the approach and design that works to communicate college preparatory information. According to Coles and Krywosa (2007), CAM “uses marketing techniques to motivate people to take steps to further their education.” It incorporates awareness campaigns, Web sites, access portals, social networking, media purchases, slogans/taglines, advertising, public relations, testimonials, logos,

and branding. CAM marketing efforts are shifting toward increased use of electronic media, such as social networking Web sites. Marketing demands that CAM campaigns have compelling messages and carefully identified target audiences (Grimm 2001).

Advocacy

Generally speaking, advocacy is a public recommendation of a person, place, or thing. In regard to college access, advocacy is defined as publicly supporting a college education. As of 2003, only 27 percent of all adults in the United States age 25 years or older had earned a bachelor’s degree (Stoops 2004). Clearly, much work needs to be done to convince the American public of the benefits of a college education. According to Grimm (2001), CAM is essentially *issue branding* in which a coalition of college advocates is framing the issue of “going to college.” Issue branding is the connection among advocacy, marketing, and social mobilization.

Social Mobilization

Social mobilization is an organized effort to encourage individuals to take action. Gastwirth (2007a, p. 1) refers to college attendance as a “great social concern” primarily because of higher education’s connection to prosperity in the United States. CAM therefore aims to mobilize awareness so as to instigate action—specifically, to increase knowledge about the benefits of college and, thereby, to increase enrollment. CAM campaigns are a form of social mobilization that “influence[s] peoples’ attitudes about going to college” (Daun-Barnett and Das 2007, p. 2). According to Gastwirth, CAM campaigns have five main behavioral change goals: aspiration, academic preparation, availability, affordability, and application (as cited in Kanoy and Watts 2005). Gastwirth (2007a) elaborates that CAM campaigns are “most effective when they are focused on concrete, specific and actionable positive behavior changes” (p. 20). Those actions and behavior changes include thinking about and planning to pursue a college education and actually taking the steps to put oneself on that path.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Now that information, marketing, advocacy, and social mobilization have been explained and linked, it is time to survey the CAM landscape. Of the 25 sources of infor-

(ORIGINAL ADVERTISEMENT REMOVED)

mation related to CAM reviewed, there are eight different types of content. This literature included five research reports, one campaign report, six PowerPoint presentations, three white papers/proposals, two general articles, four “how to” pieces, one Web site, and one corporate publication. Although each of these offered a varying perspective on CAM, some common themes emerged, including use of Web sites and Web portals, statewide approach, collaboration, a focus on content, and marketing.

Because of their ability to reach thousands of students efficiently, Web sites are a primary component of CAM. The State of North Carolina first created and launched a CAM-based Web portal in July 2000 (Kanoy and Watts 2005); the site frequently is referenced by others because it was the original online college access portal. Such sites are essentially electronic tools that serve as a one-stop Web presence where students can learn about and embark on the steps toward college preparation. According to the Washington Higher Education Coordinating Board (2009), a Web portal is “a public-facing Web site that offers a broad array of information and services from diverse sources in a unified fashion, giving the customer the option of accessing a subset of resources anonymously or a fuller, richer, and more customized set of resources through registration and authentication” (p.1). Providing information with dynamic functionality, Web portals constitute an integrated CAM solution, bringing together previously decentralized content and linking information for students. For example, the North Carolina site (cfnc.org) includes a high school planner, college preparation content, career planning information, tools for the college search process, information about financial aid, and links to college applications (Kanoy 2006). Watts (2009) points out that the Web portal solution is beneficial because it is accessible, current, interactive, and versatile. Most of the literature focuses on the content and technological functionality of CAM sites rather than on the marketing aspect per se.

Other state examples of Web portals and Web sites include Ohio’s (www.ohiocap.org), Oklahoma’s GEAR UP site (www.okhighered.org/gearup), and New Hampshire’s Get Ready NH! (www.getreadynh.org) (Christensen 2010). A distinguishing feature of state and national Web sites is their target audience paths. Most provide links based on grade level (*i.e.*, eighth grade, eleventh grade, etc.). Knowing your audience is one of the core principles

of CAM (Coles and Krywosa 2007). CAM sites use marketing phrases such as “more opportunity” and “advancing your education” and show photos of graduating students in their caps and gowns (Ohio Board of Regents 2010). West Virginia’s new portal (cfwv.org), hosted by the College Foundation of West Virginia (2010), has a tagline of “learn more. earn more.” Marketing is evident in taglines such as Oklahoma’s portal phrase: “Click, Compare, Choose” (Oklahoma 2010). Maine uses a “kick start” theme featuring a donkey (Kick Start Maine 2010).

At the national level, <knowhow2go.org> is the most well-known and branded CAM-based Web site. In fact, knowhow2go has expanded its presence through the creation of state versions of the site. Knowhow2go describes four steps in the college preparation process: be a pain, push yourself, find the right fit, and put your hands on some cash (Learn More Indiana 2010a). This short and clever list is designed to be easy to recall, uses youthful language, and keeps the message simple.

Another feature of CAM that is described in the literature is *alliances*. CAM efforts are most effective when they are undertaken in collaboration with organizations such as governments, foundations, corporations, and schools. According to Coles and Krywosa (2007), CAM must engage key stakeholders and identify partners. Coalitions are pivotal to the success of CAM efforts. Some organizations even brand their partnership initiatives. For example, the State of Indiana has branded a “College Success Coalition” with an identity and a charge to support the journey to college (Learn More Indiana 2007b). This formalized approach unites organizations for the benefit of connecting, collaborating, convening, and communicating (Learn More Indiana 2007b). To launch the Ohio College Access Portal, the State of Ohio partnered with the Ohio Board of Regents, the Ohio Department of Education, the Ohio College Access Network, and GEAR UP to achieve its goals (Ohio Board of Regents 2010). Legislative mandates about collaborations and partnerships have been recommended. In North Carolina, as in other states, partnerships play a critical role in keeping stakeholders informed and engaged (English and Tillery 2009). Gastwirth (2007a) asserts that collaboration is necessary because “there are so many moving parts involved in the college-going process” (p.13).

The non-profit Pathways to College Network is a leader in CAM. It created <www.collegeaccessmarketing.org> in order “to provide advice, support, and resources to college access marketing practitioners” (Southern Regional Education Board 2010). The premier destination for CAM researchers, implementers, and proponents, it is a repository of links to college access Web sites as well as to multiple state case studies. The site has impressive search functionality, linking to 35 state and national CAM campaigns. Despite the lack of content in the news section, the site is a rich resource for college access marketers.

At the core of CAM efforts is the delivery of information intended to better prepare students for college. Thus, most CAM campaigns focus on such topics as academic preparation for college, applying for college, paying for college, and career planning. The North Carolina Web portal described above intentionally matched its content to Tafel’s “five As of college access.” Thus, *aspiration* served as the theoretical basis for the site’s career planner; *academic preparation* was addressed through the site’s student planner; *affordability* was achieved through the “paying for college” section of the Web site; *availability* through an online college fair; and *applications* through links to online college applications (Watts 2009).

CAM is a strategy being implemented at the national, state, and local levels. Nationally, organizations including the Ad Council, the Lumina Foundation, and the American Council on Education (ACE) (among others) partnered to launch the “KnowHow2Go” campaign. At the state level, CAM efforts are under way: Thanks in part to funding from the Kresge Foundation and community-based foundations, the Michigan College Access Portal (MiCAP) recently launched. At the local level, the University of Michigan–Dearborn (2010) branded a “Thinking About Tomorrow Program” designed to help students focus on their future (the marketing theme originated with the song “Don’t Stop Thinking about Tomorrow”).

A few sources in the literature—for example, awareness studies by the Ad Council and an evaluation report by the CFNC organization—describe the results of CAM efforts. Because of its involvement with the KnowHow2Go campaign, the Ad Council conducted national surveys in 2006 and 2009. The 2006 survey evaluated the attitudes, behaviors, and perceptions of students and parents. Benchmark data indicated that college aspirations were high; that

teens rely on themselves to navigate the college search process; and that parents play an important role (Ad Council 2006). While not specifically tied to CAM, these data were used to make decisions regarding the future direction of the knowhow2go.org campaign. The 2009 survey, which focused on attitudinal and behavioral measures, found that awareness of the campaign’s messages appeared to be strong (Ad Council 2009).

Also in 2009, North Carolina published a 76-page summary report on “best practices for a statewide college access Web portal” (Tillery and English 2009, p. i). The authors focus on the “planning” and “applying” portions of the College Foundation of North Carolina (cfnc.org) Web site. Although a student awareness study was completed, the authors cite neither the date nor the source. Tillery and English demonstrate growth in student account creation, but it is unclear from the report whether inactive accounts were being purged annually. (If inactive accounts were not being purged, the data could be misleading.) A limitation of the study is that it uses first-time freshman counts to measure cfnc.org’s performance. A significant section of the report features Web analytics on 32 Web pages within cfnc.org. The report concludes with seven recommendations on topics such as education partnerships, Internet platforms, awareness and marketing, training and outreach, needs assessment, financial resources, and staffing. Overall, the scope of the report is very limited, focusing on the Web portal rather than on the entire state’s CAM efforts.

METHODS

Having defined and reviewed the various aspects of CAM, the next level of understanding of CAM can be attained by evaluating its effectiveness. According to Gastwirth, the “evaluation of ‘social marketing’ campaigns is extremely difficult because measures of success are often unclear or elusive and it is difficult to demonstrate causation” (as cited in Fox and Kotler 1980). If the ultimate goal of any CAM is to increase the college-going rate, then there are some specific ways to evaluate its effectiveness. One measure is application milestones, but the most common way is to measure changes in college enrollments (Dougherty, Long and Singer 2009). Both of these measures have limitations. For example, even though CAM may be claimed

as one factor, many more factors conduce to increase applications to college.

Data collection and analysis are critical to measuring success. It is no different for CAM. Currently, results of CAM are measured in very specific ways: Web site usage of portals, actual college enrollments, percentage increases, and behavioral changes. Swail (2007) proposes evaluating CAM from three perspectives: process evaluation, impact analysis, and cost analysis. These components comprise a comprehensive approach by which to determine effectiveness. There is little evidence that statewide campaigns, portals, and Web sites are making a difference, primarily because little research has been conducted. While a site might have factual and informative content and an eye-catching message and graphics, it cannot fulfill its purpose if prospective college students either do not use it or do not find it appealing. Even though CAM is young, it needs evidence of success in order to maintain credibility and longevity.

RECOMMENDATIONS

CAM was designed to serve as a means of increasing the college-going rate. However, the limited literature is not results oriented and so does not enable validation of that intention; it is unclear whether CAM is having an impact. It is ironic that researching CAM is analogous to a high school student searching for information about college: A variety of recommendations can be made.

The drawback of individual state CAM campaigns and Web sites is that they constitute a fragmented approach rather than a cohesive national effort. While state portals and models promote interests in each particular state, there are limitations. For example, a transfer student from out of state might not know about the existence of an “in-state” portal and so might fail to access important content. A “states portal clearinghouse” with links to all state portals could benefit national and regional transfer students.

Because college marketing Web sites are so numerous, little is known about which content is most valuable to users. Surveys, focus groups, and usability studies should be conducted to make this determination. Of course, a limitation of this recommendation is that students do not always know what they do not know—a phenomenon known as *agnosognosis* (Thornton II and McEntee 1995).

An element missing from the CAM Web sites is an overview of their marketing aspect. For example, no stud-

ies of the “brand” of the sites or marketing attributes such as taglines, graphic elements, etc. seem to have been conducted or published. This merits further research, particularly given states’ need to differentiate their sites from those of other states.

Given the lack of assessment of CAM initiatives, the National College Access Network (NCAN) could take the lead and become a repository of CAM evaluations. A leader in college access issues, NCAN could create a division devoted exclusively to CAM. This would fit its mission of sharing best practices—that is, those grounded in research and results.

Another recommendation is the development of universal college access indicators—a variation of key performance indicators (KPIs)—that could be used to evaluate the success of college access campaigns. Possible indicators might include awareness, actions taken toward application, and college entrance, among others.

Missing from the CAM literature is information about the role of colleges and universities. Higher education institutions could engage their admissions, marketing, and public relations offices to launch a CAM campaign. These offices typically have access to a wealth of resources that could be leveraged to raise awareness about access to college. Moreover, their experience marketing their own schools would have some transferability to a CAM initiative. Ultimately, institutions might set aside their competitive marketing in lieu of the common good of increased higher education enrollments.

Also unaddressed by the literature is the cost of CAM campaigns—and, by extension, cost-benefit analysis of CAM. Given the variety of CAM campaigns, there is likely to be a comparable diversity of financial investment. Effective assessments and evaluations of CAM must consider its cost, particularly when the success or failure of an effort is being measured. Since print and web-based media are expensive, cost is an important consideration.

Another component largely absent from the literature is commentary and reflection on the creative aspect of marketing messages and designs. This could be referred to as the creative capital of CAM. No real review or study of the aesthetics of the materials—print or electronic—exists. This merits further research.

Most important, research about CAM is limited. More empirical research is needed to fully evaluate the effective-

ness of CAM. Perhaps it is too early to assess CAM campaigns—particularly those targeted at the middle school population, for whom expected outcomes cannot be measured until at least five years later. More strategic plans and proposals for CAM should include a major component devoted to assessment, data collection, and evaluation. Overall, CAM is still growing into its own. By implementing these recommendations, CAM's presence and effectiveness can be strengthened.

CONCLUSION

CAM is striving to have an impact by increasing college attendance. With information, marketing, advocacy, and social mobilization as its foundation, CAM is both vast and specific. It has grown out of struggling economies, the need for a better workforce, and college access inequities (Mize 2008). According to the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (2009), preserving college access is a national priority. The overarching goal of CAM is to connect students to college through information sharing, interaction, and attitude shifting (Daun-Barnett and Das 2007). CAM is still considered to be an emerging field. More than a “movement,” it has become integrated into our work and plans and is essential for ensuring that college enrollments continue to increase. Ultimately, CAM will shape the future of American higher education.

CAM is now playing a pivotal role in pre-college guidance (Hossler and Palmer 2008). Daun-Barnett and Das (2007) stipulate that there are four broad dimensions of college access: accessibility of information, academic preparation, cost of college, and encouragement to attend. College access marketing works primarily to leverage the dimensions of “encouragement to attend” and “accessibility of information;” it touches only briefly on the other two dimensions.

Given the rapid expansion of social networking media, CAM will continue to wield influence in the electronic world. As other types of media are created and evolve, CAM will have opportunity to utilize technological tools to spread knowledge about college preparation and aspirations. CAM alone cannot and will not change the percentage of students enrolling in college. However, it can be a powerful influence. CAM is designed to mobilize young people to take positive actions toward college enrollment. Whether the goal is to increase access by a certain percent-

age or to bring thousands of young people to the doors of higher education, CAM has the power to shape the future. Only when the gap between the educated and the non-educated is closed will CAM be unnecessary. For now, the United States and its education advocates have a long road ahead. CAM seeks to shift, challenge, and change the mindsets of the American people.

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About the Author

CHRISTOPHER W. TREMBLAY is Executive Director of Enrollment Management and Interim Director of Financial Aid at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. He previously served as Director of Admissions at UM-Dearborn and Gannon University. Tremblay earned both his bachelor's and master's degrees from Western Michigan University. He has a post master's certificate in enrollment management from Capella University, and is a doctoral student at UM-Dearborn studying educational leadership. He has published articles in *College & University*, the *Journal of College Admission*, *Journal of College Orientation and Transition*, and the *Journal of Intergroup Relations*. He has presented at 30 association conferences for AACRAO (SEM), the College Board, NACAC, MACAC, PACAC, MACRAO and NODA. Active in college access initiatives, Tremblay serves on the advisory board of Project ACE, a Local College Access Network (LCAN) in the State of Michigan.

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