

# Research Report



## Introduction

This research has been conducted in order to provide [REDACTED] with actionable insights into how [REDACTED] can increase the number of high-quality applicants to its graduate program.

This report addresses the second and third phases of a three-phase project requested by [REDACTED]; findings from an earlier qualitative phase impacted the design of a quantitative survey (Phase 2) and a web intercept survey (Phase 3).

The interviews were originally performed between [REDACTED]

The online survey was in market from [REDACTED]

## Objectives and Specific Aims

The objective of the quantitative research phase and, ultimately, provide [REDACTED] with insight into how prospective students research and select a graduate program in social services.

## Research Objectives

- What draws students to social work – an interest in working with individuals, children and families or policy and administration, or other factors?
- How did students go about identifying graduate study options?
- What is their program selection criterion?
- What schools have students identified, considered, selected (if applicable)?
- Did they rely on *US News & World Report* ratings? What media did they access for information, online and off?
- Discover the level of awareness and perception of the University, the College and the program within this audience.

## Respondents

### Online Survey

The Client provided a data file that contained potential students that met the following criteria (see below). We then emailed this list, inviting them to participate in the online survey. Those that responded to the online survey were qualified using the following criteria:

- Education
  - Recent graduates (B.A./B.S.) that earned their undergraduate degrees between 2009 and 2013
- Age:
  - Between 22 and 30 years of age
- Work Experience:
  - Two or more years post-graduate work experience preferred
- Geography:

- Live in the United States
- Interest in social services/social work
  - Strong desire to work with individuals and families;
  - Strong desire to create policy that impacts individuals, families and society as a whole.

### Pop-up Survey

The survey had no qualification or screening questions and simply asked visitors to respond to four (4) questions addressing:

- Location in the process of enrolling in a graduate program;
- Respond to statements applying to their personal interest in social services;
- Personal description for the College;
- Websites used most frequently for personal reasons.

### Key Findings

**Low awareness is a problem.** Very few of the respondents (19%) were aware of the [REDACTED] and of those aware of the [REDACTED], most (74%) responded with “Neutral, Somewhat or Extremely Low” when asked to describe their familiarity with the [REDACTED] program.

**Broad degree program interest beyond “social work”.** The audience is searching across a broad array of program names which can make it more difficult for the [REDACTED] to become part of their consideration set.

**Digitally driven audience.** This audience turns to the Internet for information gathering – and when you combine low awareness and broad degree program interest, the College and the Program are less likely to be found and considered. For example, branded searches (school name, program name) require the individual to know the brand which does not appear to be the case here. And program name searches for [ex] Master of Public Policy are unlikely to identify the Program Name at the College.

**No clear driving motivator or resonating message for the [REDACTED] program at [REDACTED].** When asked to describe the [REDACTED] program, there was no clear message selected by the respondents. Strong brands have a single message or benefit that they strive to clearly communicate so their audience understands “What’s in it for me” – this places the [REDACTED] program at a disadvantage to other institutions and programs that have a clear position in the minds of the audience.

### Details

#### Online Survey

The online survey provided insight into the following key questions:

- What draws students to social work – an interest in working with individuals, children and families or policy and administration, or other factors?
- How did students go about identifying graduate study options?
- What are their program selection criteria?

- What schools have students identified, considered, selected (if applicable?)
- Did they rely on US News & World Report ratings? What media did they access for information, online and off?
- What is the level of awareness and what are perception of the University, College and Program within this audience?

What draws people to social work? Based on the survey, these people are interested in making a “big impact” – and for most, that means policy and administration that will help society. Working with individuals and families is viewed as important experience to have but for the majority, it is not where they feel they can make the greatest impact.

Google and other online search engines, US News and World Report, former faculty and advisors, colleagues and friends are the most common way this audience identifies graduate study options. Interestingly, social media (Facebook, Twitter) are not often used by this audience – yet when asked to name online and offline media that they access, social media (Facebook, YouTube, LinkedIn) are listed by most respondents. This implies that they are not using social media for their graduate study search but they are using social media for other reasons.

The audience is searching for a broad array of degree/program names ranging from Master of Public Policy to Master of Public Health and Social Work, Social Work, Public Administration and more. With this audience focused more on digital sources of information, this broad array of program names could produce online search opportunities that fail to identify the Program at [REDACTED].

Additionally, the presentation of findings from searches can impact the [REDACTED] program. For example, the US News and World Report site offers a prominently displayed “Select a program” search option that provides a random list of institutions when used to search for “Social Work”. What this means is that when a potential student uses the online search tools, it is possible for the [REDACTED] not to be listed in the results at all. Please see the following screen capture.

The screenshot shows the U.S. News and World Report Education website. The navigation bar includes 'Home', 'Colleges', 'Grad Schools', 'High Schools', 'Online Programs', 'Community Colleges', and 'Global Universities'. A search bar is located below the navigation bar, with a dropdown menu set to 'Select a program (required)'. The search results are for 'Graduate School Search - Social Work Programs'.

School	Program Rank
Abilene Christian University Abilene, TX	#187
Adelphi University - School of Social Work Garden City, NY	#44
Alabama A&M University - Graduate Social Work Department Normal, AL	#187
Andrews University - Department of Social Work Berrien Springs, MI	#148

Figure 1 US News and World Report Screen Capture

When it comes to “program selection criteria”, “Cost of Tuition and Fees” and “Financial Aid and Scholarships” are at the top along with “Reputation of the specific program” and “Location”. These are key topics that need to be clearly addressed early in the selection process in order for an institution and program to become part of the final consideration set.

The focus on reputation and quality in current [REDACTED] content, specifically the website, may be a reason for so many respondents telling us that they were interested in the program but so few applying and being admitted. These topics were addressed in Question 7, 8 and 9 in the online survey and the results showed that the [REDACTED] ranked 2<sup>nd</sup>, behind Columbia University, in terms of interest (24 out of 141 respondents) but only three (3) applied and none (0) were accepted.

Awareness of the [REDACTED] is very low (19%) with this audience, and 74% of those that stated they were familiar with [REDACTED] admitted that that were not familiar with the [REDACTED] program. Again, this lack of awareness and familiarity will impact online search which will impact consideration, inquiries, applications and enrollments.

Finally, when asked what would motivate them to apply to the [REDACTED] program at [REDACTED], the respondents had no clear stand out response. The responses were spread out across several factors ranging from reputation of the institution to availability of funding, reputation of program, faculty credentials, time to complete degree and more.

And when asked to select a response that best reflects their reaction to phrases that are used to describe the [REDACTED] program, there were no clear stand-outs. So the low awareness and the lack of a clear value proposition/benefit statement will impact the desire to apply and enroll in the [REDACTED] program.

## Pop up Survey

The key findings from the Pop-up Survey included:

- 61.8% of respondents were “just starting to gather information and identify programs”
- 60 of the 68 respondents “expect to receive some form of financial aid such as scholarships, stipends, assistantships or need-based financial aid award.”
- More than 40%/29 elected not to “...describe the [REDACTED] program” but 40%/31 were positive.
- Like the online survey, respondents most frequently visit Google, Facebook.

## Conclusion and Next Steps

Based on the findings of these surveys, we found that:

- The audience has low awareness of [REDACTED] and the [REDACTED] program
- The audience is digital and gathering information online is very different from reading hardcopy of US News and World Report.
- Of those aware of [REDACTED], there is no clear understanding as to why they should apply and enroll in the [REDACTED] program.

Also based on the findings of these surveys, [REDACTED] should consider:

- Improving awareness so that potential students are more likely to perform branded search and/or directly type in the institution’s URL into Google
- Improving SEO so that [REDACTED] and the [REDACTED] program benefit from higher listings via organic search, and/or utilizing paid media (PPC/Adwords) to appear in paid search results
- Improving presentation of information on the website including an easier to find, relevant web form to request more information and information on tuition/fees as well as financial aid/scholarships/funding
- Evaluation and testing of messaging, offers and creative presentation in order to find ways to increase inquiries, applicants and enrollments with existing resources (human, financial, technology).
  - Content marketing could allow you to showcase your faculty, students and alumni while also helping generate results via owned media (website, SEO and blog), shared media (social media), earned media (added coverage from reputable and relevant 3<sup>rd</sup> parties such as news, professional associations etc.).
- Identify highly desirable ‘feeder schools’ and develop a formal outreach process/program with those schools so you are focused on highly desirable potential students.
- Evaluation of processes in order to ensure responses to inquires/potential students are fast and appropriate.

Regarding that last bullet point, studies have shown that speed to response has a significant and positive impact on converting inquiries into applicants and applicants into enrollments. Some institutions will send an automated email immediately upon submission of a web form and then

upload the data from the web form into the CRM and assign it to an appropriate enrollment specialist who will call the individual within as little as 10 minutes. Obviously, not all institutions have the resources necessary to do this – but it’s important to understand that this level of responsiveness exists and your potential students are experiencing it at other institutions.

However, while searching for the “Request for Information” form on the [REDACTED] website, we could only find a link to a form that was for the University (the form listed under ‘Program of Interest’ the [REDACTED]). And under “Area of Interest” the choices includes “[REDACTED]”, [REDACTED], [REDACTED], and more.

The email that was sent was text based with numerous hyperlinks – but lacking a clear call to action such as a “Click here” or “Apply Now” etc.

Few potential students would search as long as we did for the Request Information web form, and few would know what do with the email because of the lack of a clear call to action.