

Dear reader:

This "Writing Samples" page comes from an **electronic newsletter column** I write for Integrated Enrollment Solutions, a student retention consulting services company in Texas. Their monthly newsletter features articles or columns by professionals they partner with to provide various services to colleges and universities throughout the United States and Canada. This column covers electronic communications, including editorial and strategic services.

You may find Integrated Enrollment Services online at www.enroll2grad.org.

If you would like me to write a column for your business or organization, please e-mail me at:
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One of your marketing objectives this year should be Search Engine Optimization

It's amazing – roughly 95% of Web sites that I review are not optimized for search engines! It's common across all groups: schools, businesses, and other organizations. However, with thousands of schools as competitors, it is an especially urgent issue for college and university marketers.

You may wonder what "optimized for search engines" means. Put simply, it means that potential students can easily find your school using Internet search engines. Joe High School Grad or Ella College Transfer should be able to go online to Google or Yahoo! (or any other major search engine), enter a few relevant keywords, and when he or she clicks the Go button it should bring up a page of results that includes your school within the first three pages of results. Of course, the closer your place to page 1 in the results, the better. (Note: Most people won't look beyond the first three pages of results.)

Is name recognition enough?

Now it is true that many colleges and universities have strong name recognition. Their Web addresses are often easy to remember: www.harvard.edu or www.stanford.edu, for instance. But others may not be: Does www.cmu.edu belong to Carnegie Mellon or Central Michigan University? Who is panther.acp.edu (would you believe Albany College of Pharmacy)? How about www.scc.losrios.edu (Sacramento City College)?

Good search engine optimization ensures that students and parents can find you when they don't know your name or are uncertain of your Web address. So, you want to make it as easy to find you as possible. One way is to maximize the way search engines index and communicate about you.

How does your school fare with search engines?

Is your school optimized for search engines? To find out, do a few sample searches to see where your school shows up in a search. Try it on two or three search engines. Use your school's name – right now, that's where you're most likely to show good results. Then try just using school, college, or university. See if your results improve if you add the city or town where your school is located. Add the state or province. Try adding the academic subjects you offer. Did your school show up? If not, you have some work to do.

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The real test of your site's search engine moxie is, if you enter keywords that describe your school or what it specializes in and you show up on those first three pages of results. If you are a veterinary school, for instance, how do you place if you enter vet, veterinarian, or veterinary medicine? What about animal health or animal doctors? Pick words potential students and their parents would use to find a school like yours.

With thousands of schools with Web sites on the Internet, having yours show up in the first three pages of results would be a major accomplishment. Seem unimaginable? Remember, approximately 95 percent of sites are not optimized. So, the more work you do to maximize results the more likely you will beat out the other schools.

It's easier to do than it sounds

The good thing about search engine optimization is that it's relatively easy to do. It will take some study to get it right. And it is harder to do when a site is already built – the best time to optimize for search engines is while you're planning and writing the site. But someone who knows what she is doing, with a little patience, can accomplish a lot. It would make a great project for your students and faculty, or there are any number of professionals who can help you. The thing is, to do nothing is to lose an important ally in the promotion of your school. In today's technological society, and with thousands of colleges and universities to compete against, that could be a fatal marketing mistake.

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Alan Eggleston, a Web writer, editor, and site strategist, has specialized in Internet communications since 1995. He has helped launch and maintain dozens of Web sites for businesses, universities, and organizations.

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