Generation Z Requesting Information, An Opportunity to Reach a New Adult Learner Post-Pandemic

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Overview

UPCEA conducted a groundbreaking study of how professional, continuing and online education units interface with the public, particularly Generation Z. UPCEA assessed 100 higher education institutions' continuing or online education inquiry forms. In total, 18 were deemed acceptable, 52 tolerable, and 30 failed our test.

Generation Z, or those born between 1997 and 2012, currently make up 25.9% of the U.S. population and are expected to account for about 40% of all consumer markets by 2020.[1] Compared to Gen X (born between 1965 and 1980) or Millennials (born between 1981 and 1996), Generation Zers have grown up in an environment vastly shaped by technology and have become main players in both the workforce and as consumers. It is therefore important to understand how they view and approach the world.[2] They were raised in a digital age, have a limited attention span, and are hesitant to provide information. They differ from earlier generations when researching and choosing an option which best fits their needs, particularly a college or university. They are "serial daters."

Let's say that your institution is a candidate on either of the TV reality programs, The Bachelor or The Bachelorette. Your goal is to stay in the running for as long as possible, with the hope of being chosen as the lifetime partner. Who is this bachelor or bachelorette? They are a Gen Zer online shopping for their best-fit college.

Your institution is just one of 10 other candidates vying for the bachelor's/bachelorette's attention. All of the candidates are impressive: some with rock climbing walls, some with lazy rivers, some classic types with a plain old degree. You know you want to appear normal, not crazy or clingy. But when do you decide to start standing out? The competition dwindles as they eliminate one after another. You hope this means that you're the winner who gets to be their final choice.

Gen Zers' approach choosing a college is much like the popular reality TV shows; they date many candidates at the same time and start eliminating them, one by one, if they're not a good fit. They hope to end up with the one, perfect soul mate institution at the end of their quest. What criteria do they use to determine this good fit? Oftentimes, small things like request for more information and contact us forms make a difference. One thing's for sure, this generation prefers privacy. Is your institution a creepy stalker bachelor/bachelorette candidate with no hope of making it to the final rose ceremony?

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[1] https://www.oberlo.com/blog/marketing-strategies-generation-z
[2] https://www.businessinsider.com/generation-z

Gen-Zers were raised in a digital age

Generation Z is known as the first generation of digital natives, growing up in a world where the internet and all of its by-products were a given. They do not know life without being connected to the digital world. Gen-Zers experienced the advent of smartphones, which has had an even greater impact on them than the internet had on Millennials.[3] Given their free and immediate access to information, Gen Zers have grown up with different expectations of technology, having had to learn how to protect themselves from terrorists, cyberbullies and predators while preparing for a future that has direct access to their digital footprint. Therefore, Gen-Zers have always valued trust and transparency.[4]

Gen-Zers have a limited attention span

According to the Digital Marketing Institute, the average attention span of Gen-Zers is eight seconds— compared to 12 seconds for Millennials.[5] This decreasing attention span is due to how Gen-Zers, who average five digital screens and around four hours daily online, have spread themselves thin in not only the number of platforms but in the amount of time they are subject to advertisements and information.[6] As they have grown up in the fast-paced environment of digital technology, they appear to live by the mantra, "If you can't say it in 140 characters or less, don't say it at all."[7] Therefore when marketing to Gen-Zers, information should not only be short and to the point, but must have enough visual and authentic appeal to attract their attention.

Gen-Zers are hesitant to provide information

Given that they grew up with the internet and social media, Gen Zers have been exposed to the various dangers of sharing information and protecting one's privacy. Recent privacy breaches such as Facebook's relationship with Cambridge Analytica and Google's unauthorized location tracking have further led Gen-Zers to question their trust in online privacy.[8] According to Echoworx data, over three quarters consider leaving brands after a data breach.[9] This focus on information privacy and protection has led to efforts such as the California Consumer Privacy Act of 2018 which took effect on January 1st, 2020.[10]

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[3] https://www.ey.com/en_us/advisory/how-contradictions-define-generation-z?WT.mc_id=10789101&AA.tsrc=paidsearch&gclid=Cj0KCQjwoub3BRC6ARIsABGhnyYvr3btukVpPbMDDz2SA7kh_gbOn8iAbfXDMRlc9FqD2jD3GZYDKFkaAmV8EALw_wcB

[4] Ibid.

[5] https://www.forbes.com/sites/deeppatel/2017/11/27/5-d%E2%80%8Bifferences-%E2%80%8Bbetween-%E2%80%8Bmarketing-%E2%80%8Bto%E2%80%8B-m%E2%80%8Billennials-v%E2%80%8Bs%E2%80%8B-%E2%80%8Bgen-z/#42d0e1ef2c9f

[6] https://www.mbuy.com/blog/snapshot-of-gen-z

[7] https://www.cpapracticeadvisor.com/small-business/news/12363404/gen-z-and-millennials-obsessed-with-digital-footprint

[8] https://psmag.com/ideas/gen-zers-are-more-cautious-online-than-previous-generations

[9] https://medium.com/@Echoworx/generation-z-personal-data-and-digital-trust-unlike-any-before-e4378677562b

[10] https://psmag.com/ideas/gen-zers-are-more-cautious-online-than-previous-generations

Gen-Zers are serial daters

Gen-Zers have unlimited information at their fingertips and they are unlikely to zero in on one option quickly, rather preferring to remain open to many, but scrolling and swiping to eliminate those that aren't a good fit. With a high aptitude for technology, a limited attention span, and a keen eye for internet creepers, Gen-Z is likely to be quick at decision making and have a low tolerance for in-depth question asking; they don't want to get too serious too quickly.

What does this mean for higher education?

- In order to stand out among the thousands of similar options, institutions must provide clear information about what makes them special.
- Assume you're one of many options rather than the only one.
- Institutions' inquiry forms must remain short enough that they do not dissuade prospective Gen Z students from requesting information.
- Institutions must be careful of the amount of information they request, focusing on the essentials.

Executive Summary

- Gen-Z is the newest generation entering higher education and the workforce, and carries different expectations for interactions with institutions. Having grown up in the digital world, Gen-Zers have high expectations for meaningful and efficient communications. They have much shorter attention spans compared to their Millennial predecessors and are more interested in controlling their digital footprint.

- In this study, UPCEA assessed 100 higher education institutions' continuing or online education inquiry forms in order to determine how effectively they are communicating with Gen-Zers. The assessment pinpointed some of the best and worst practices regarding these forms.

- To complete this assessment, UPCEA utilized a scoring methodology that evaluated the number and type of questions institutions ask their inquirers. Upon completing this scoring methodology, UPCEA ranked all 100 institutions and ultimately determined which were the best and worst performing inquiry pages.

- Once these institutions were scored and ranked, UPCEA took note and identified the best practices in engaging Gen Z inquirers.

- Finally, UPCEA examined how institutions can better capitalize on Gen Z marketing trends.

Methodology

How Are Institutions Gathering Information?

UPCEA defines inquiry forms as the various questionnaires that institutions use to request contact, demographic, and general information from prospective students. There are multiple ways in which institutions engage and collect information from inquirers, both in format and types of requested information.

Figure 1 highlights the three the most common formats institutions use to collect information from prospective students: request for information forms, contact us forms, and subscription forms. Request for information and contact us forms are inquiry forms requesting only basic contact information in order to allow the institution to follow up with prospective students. Subscription forms are those that require the prospective student to subscribe to either a newsletter or an email chain to obtain information on their program of interest.

Figure 1: Types of Inquiry Forms

SCOPE OF STUDY

Request for Information Forms	Contact Us Forms	Subscription Forms
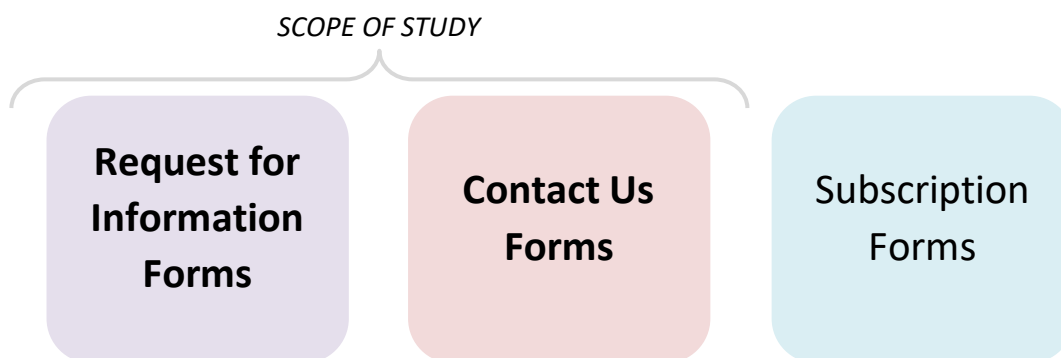
The study focused on request for information and contact us forms primarily due to their similar formats. Subscription forms varied widely and were used infrequently and were excluded from the study.

The forms that institutions use to gather prospective student information vary in website location. Figure 2 highlights the three different locations on institutions' websites where the inquiry forms are found: the institution's main site (18%), continuing education site (51%), or online education site (31%). The forms were located on either the general page of the site, the degree or credential level page, or on the individual program's page.

Figure 2: Location of Inquiry Forms
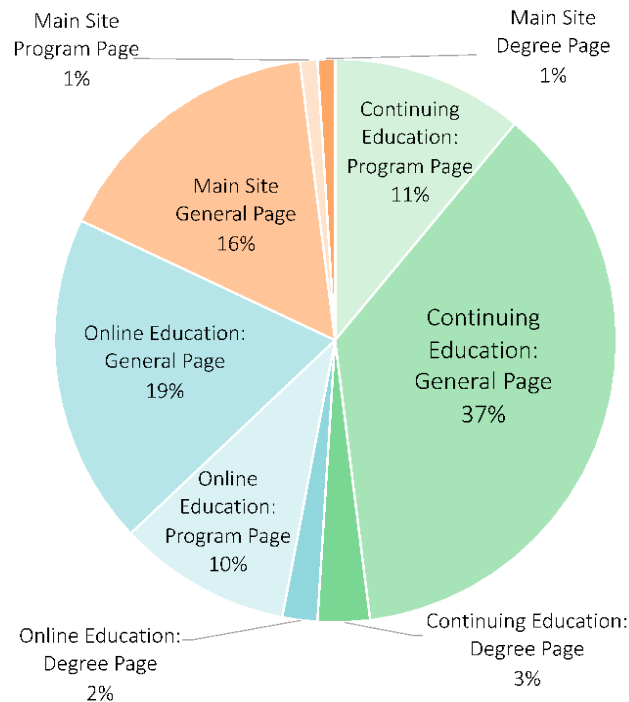
In this study, UPCEA focuses on assessing the various inquiry forms of 100 institutions' continuing or online education programs to determine best and worse practices when utilizing these forms in engaging with prospective Gen Z students. The goal was to understand and evaluate what practices might turn away Gen-Zers who have grown up with a very different attitude towards sharing personal information and being susceptible to traditional marketing approaches.

For the request for information or contact us forms, the number of questions/fields, the number of required fields, and the specific questions were recorded for comparison. Other information was gathered to add context to the study, including the location of the form, the institution's name, and the size of the institution.

Once this data was collected, the recorded questions were divided into three categories: essential, unnecessary, and excessive questions.

After categorizing the questions, each was given a score with the maximum obtainable score 100 points. The points score was divided into four categories: essential questions (30 pts), unnecessary questions (30 pts), excessive questions (30 pts) and number of fields (10 pts).

Finally, after each of the 100 institutions was given a final score, they were ranked on a scale titled the Gen Z Creepiness Index which placed the institutions' forms into one of five categories: acceptable, tolerable, intrusive, invasive, and creepy. Utilizing this scale, UPCEA was able to

determine best practices and common mistakes for institutions' inquiry forms as well as conclude how institutions can best engage with Gen Zers.

Additional information on all scoring criteria can be found in the following Study Results section.
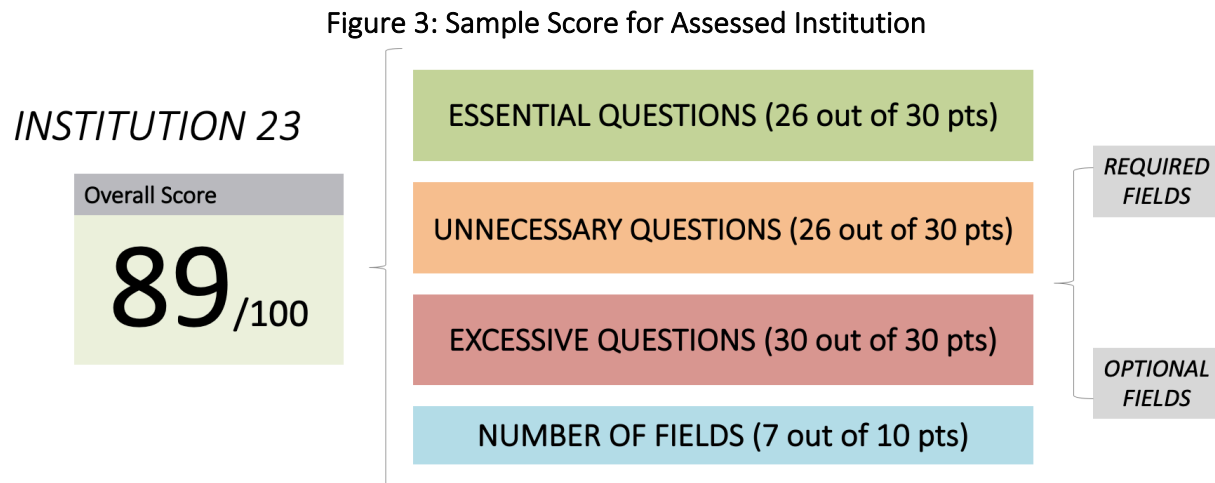
Study Results

Scoring Criteria

In order to accurately score each of the 100 institutions' inquiry forms, UPCEA divided the questions into three categories: essential, unnecessary, and excessive. Each institution was then given a score out of 30 points based on the number of required and optional questions for each category. A fourth category accounted for an additional score (out of 10 points) for the total number of questions/fields on the form. A definition and examples for each four are displayed in Table 1.

Table 1: Scoring Criteria

Scoring Criteria			
	Essential Questions (30 pts)	**Unnecessary Questions (30 pts)**	**Excessive Questions (30 pts)**	**Number of Fields (10pts)**
Definition	Questions that collect the essential information from the inquirer. These questions are expected and acceptable in an RFI.	Additional questions that collect reasonable yet unnecessary information from the inquirer. This information could be requested at a later stage of the process.	Questions that are too personal for this early in the stage.	The number of questions or fields the inquirer needs to complete on the request for information form. These can be categorized into either required fields or optional fields.
Questions	First Name Last Name Email Address Any Questions? Degree or Program Selection	Phone Number Type of Program Delivery Term of Entry Type of Applicant Address How did you hear about this program? Educational Background Professional Background Ethnicity Gender Date of Birth Military Affiliation Citizenship Middle Name	Confirm Email Address GPA GMAT/ GRE Score Captcha Prefix Secondary Citizenship Work Phone Home Phone Do you want to share family contact information? Do you want to tell us about high school? Extracurricular Interests What is your application status? What online program would you like for us to offer in the future?	

Once an institution was assigned a score for each category, the points were added, and the institution was given an overall score out of 100 points. Figure 3 shows a breakdown of the score for a sample institution.

Figure 3: Sample Score for Assessed Institution

INSTITUTION 23

Overall Score

89/100

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS (26 out of 30 pts)

UNNECESSARY QUESTIONS (26 out of 30 pts)

EXCESSIVE QUESTIONS (30 out of 30 pts)

NUMBER OF FIELDS (7 out of 10 pts)

REQUIRED FIELDS

OPTIONAL FIELDS

Interpreting the Scores: Gen Z Creepiness Index (CI)

Once the inquiry pages of each institution were scored, they were then classified on the Creepiness Index (CI) - a scale developed to understand the successes and failures of the inquiry forms.

The CI was divided into five categories:

- Acceptable (highest scoring institutions)
- Tolerable
- Intrusive
- Invasive
- Creepy (lowest scoring institutions)

A breakdown of the scoring index is illustrated in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Breakdown of the Scoring Index

Institutions scoring 60 to 70 are deemed Invasive, asking too many questions for this early in the stage

Institutions scoring 70 to 80 are deemed Intrusive, asking enough questions to possibly de-incentivize inquirer

Institutions scoring 80 to 90, are deemed Tolerable, asking a few more questions than necessary

Institutions scoring 59 or lower are deemed as Creepy, asking an excessive amount of personal questions

Institutions scoring 90 to 100 are deemed Acceptable, organization is requiring the essential questions

Scoring Methodology

Below is a breakdown of how the final score was calculated for each of the 100 institutions assessed in this study. Scoring is weighted relative to whether a question is required or optional. In order to demonstrate the detailed procedure, *The Ohio State University* which scored 95 is used as an example.

Step 1. Essential Questions Score (30 pts)
Five questions were considered essential (see Table 1). If a question was required on the inquiry form, it was weighted by a factor of 6, and if optional, weighted by a factor of 4. To calculate the Essential Questions Score, the following formula was used:

$$(\text{Number of Required Essential Questions x 6})$$
$$+ (\text{Number of Optional Essential Questions x 4}) = \text{Essential Questions Score}$$

Ohio State's inquiry form contained all five of the essential questions, four of which were required and one which was optional. Its essential questions score was calculated as follows:
$$(4 \times 6) + (1 \times 4) = 24 + 4 = 28$$

Step 2. Unnecessary Questions Score (30 pts)
If an unnecessary question was required, it was weighted by a factor of 2 and then subtracted from a maximum of 20 points; optional questions were not weighted, and the number was subtracted from a maximum of 10 points.

$$[20 - (2 x Number\ of\ Required\ Unnecesary\ Questions)]$$
$$+ [10 - Number\ of\ Optional\ Unnecesary\ Questions]$$
$$= Unnecessary\ Question\ Score$$

Ohio State's inquiry form had only one unnecessary question, which was required. Its *Unnecessary Questions Score* was calculated as follows:
$$[20 - (2 x 1)] + [10 - 0] =$$
$$18 + 10 + 28$$

Step 3. Excessive Questions Score (30 pts)
Required excessive questions were weighted by factor of 6 and optional ones by a factor of 4; these totals were added and the sum subtracted from a maximum of 30 points:

$$30 - [(Number\ of\ Required\ Excessive\ Questions\ x\ 6)$$
$$+ (Number\ of\ Optional\ Excessive\ Questions\ x\ 4)]$$
$$= Excessive\ Questions\ Score$$

Ohio State's inquiry form had no excessive questions and its score was calculated as follows:
$$30 - [(0 x 6) + (0 x 4)] =$$
$$30 - [(0+0)] =$$
$$30 - 0 = 30$$

Step 4. Number of Fields Score (10 pts)

The methodology for determining of number of fields score is outlined in Table 2.

Table 2: Scoring Criteria for the Score of Number of Fields

Number of Required Questions	Score (5)	Number of Optional Questions	Score (5)
1 to 4	5	0 to 2	5
5 to 6	4	3 to 4	4
7 to 8	3	5 to 7	3
9	2	8 to 9	2
10 or greater	1	10 or more	1

Ohio State's inquiry form had a total of six questions, five of which were required and one which was optional. The five required questions are assigned a score of 4 and the one optional question a score of 5 for a total of 9 points.

Figure 5 highlights the percentage of institutions in the study that fell into each of the five CI categories.

Scoring Results:

- The average score was 82.31/100.
- Only 18% of assessed institutions had an acceptable score in the Creepiness Index.
- More than half (52%) of the institutions fell into the tolerable category.
- 30% of assessed institutions scored below average. (20% Intrusive; 6% Invasive; 4% Creepy)

Figure 5: Scoring Results Breakdown

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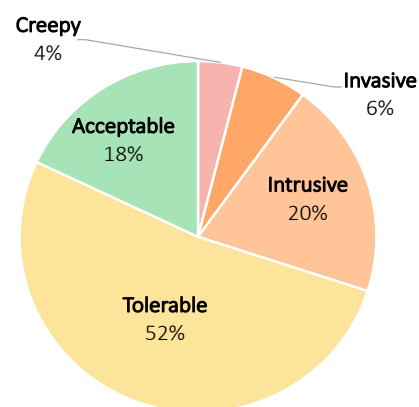
Table 2 shows the 10 top scoring institutions in the study, each with final scores between 91-95 points.

Table 2: Highest Scoring Institutions (Top 10)

Rank	Institution Name	Overall Score (100 pts)	Total Essential Question Score (30 pts)	Total Unnecessary Question Score (30 pts)	Total Excessive Question Score (30 pts)	Total Score for Number of Fields (10 pts)
1	The Ohio State University	95	28	28	30	9
2	Georgia Institute of Technology	93	24	30	30	9
3	Houston Community College	93	30	27	30	6
4	Montana State University	93	28	27	30	8
5	University of Connecticut	92	22	30	30	10
6	Rice University	92	22	30	30	10
7	University of North Carolina Chapel Hill	92	24	29	30	9
8	Pace University	91	24	28	30	9
9	Emory University	91	24	28	30	9
10	University of Miami	91	24	28	30	9

Good Practices

These top scoring institutions only requested essential contact information from the inquirer. They also included a section for additional comments and questions, further individualizing the experience. Generally, these institutions avoided asking for demographic or personal information. Each question asked was necessary, ensuring that the forms were neither lengthy nor invasive.

Table 3 shows the 10 lowest scoring institutions in the study. With scores from 58-69, each of these institutions scored well below the average.

Table 3: Lowest Scoring Institutions (Bottom 10)

Rank	Institution Name	Overall Score (100 pts)	Total Essential Question Score (30 pts)	Total Unnecessary Question Score (30 pts)	Total Excessive Question Score (30 pts)	Total Score for Number of Fields (10 pts)
91	*Institution A*	69	22	21	20	6
92	*Institution B*	69	22	19	22	6
93	*Institution C*	66	18	21	22	5
94	*Institution D*	66	24	19	20	3
95	*Institution E*	65	18	27	12	8
96	*Institution F*	65	28	19	16	2
97	*Institution G*	58	12	30	6	10
98	*Institution H*	58	18	17	18	5
99	*Institution I*	53	18	21	10	4
100	*Institution K*	52	18	16	16	2

Bad practices

Some of the bad practices that penalized these institutions in the scoring were long forms, extensive number of questions, and required questions regarding demographic information at the first stage of inquiry. Additionally, several institutions require prospective students to login or sign in to request information.

Length of Inquiry Form

The average length of these forms was 10 questions per form, with seven of the 10 being required questions. Figure 6 shows the number of inquiry forms from the 100 institutions that had 0-4, 5-9, 10-14, or 15+ questions. Of the 100 institutions profiled, five had less than five questions, half had 5-9 questions (51) and 44 had 10 questions or more.
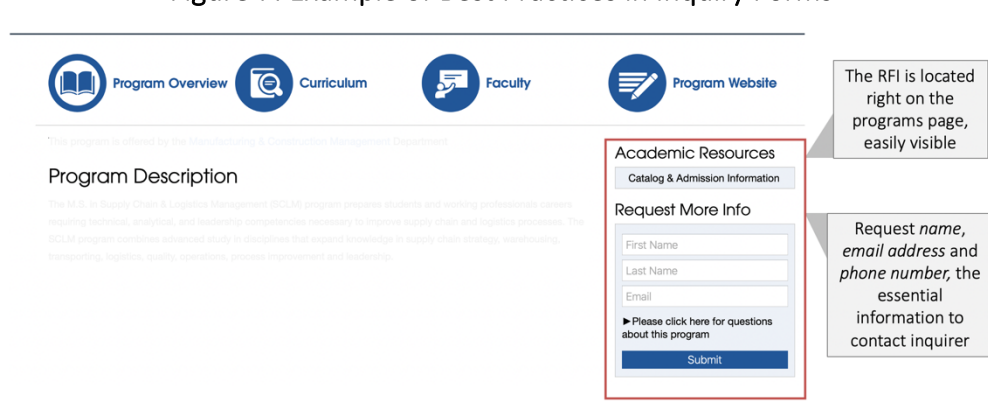
Figure 6: Length of Inquiry Forms
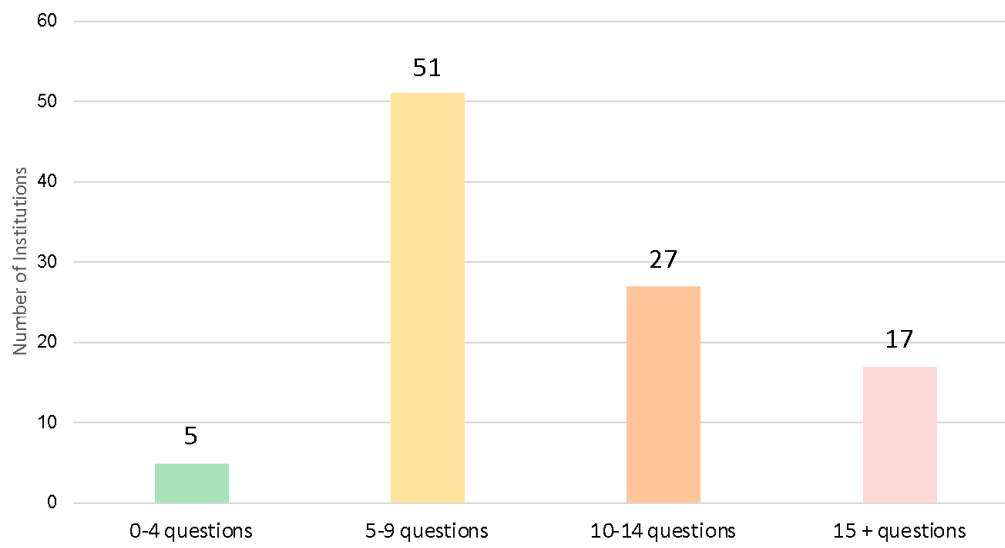
Best Practices and Examples

Best Practices Checklist
Request for Information form…

…has less than 7 questions or fields	
…asks for inquirer's name	
…asks for contact information (email preferable)	
…asks for program of interest	
…has space to ask questions	
…is found in the same place as the program description	

Figure 7: Example of Best Practices in Inquiry Forms

Common Mistakes
- Asks demographic questions (e.g., gender, ethnicity, etc.)
- All questions are required
- Has more required questions than optional questions
- Has more than 10 questions
- Asks very specific, personal questions (e.g., education history, etc.)
- Asks for more than one phone number
- Uses the same form for all students (e.g., undergraduate, graduate, continuing education, etc.)
- Requires specific contact information questions (e.g., address, phone number, etc.)

Figure 8: Example of Poor Performing Inquiry Forms

Impact on Higher Education

Normally, Gen Zers would be entering higher education in droves by now. But the fear and effects of COVID-19 are changing the attitudes of Gen Zers and their parents. Rather than taking the next step in their educational journey, traditional age college students are taking time off and staying safe at home.[11] The coronavirus not only affected college admissions processes such as the taking of standardized tests like the SAT and ACT, but has also decreased the number of applicants seeking college admission.[12] It is imperative for higher education institutions to get this right. With enrollments on the line, they cannot afford to put off interested students by invading their privacy on simple informational forms. It is necessary, now more than ever, for institutions to take a look at their websites through the eyes of their target audience. What worked for Millennials will not work for the panicked Gen Zer.

Without too much difficulty, higher education institutions could take a hint from dating app culture and gear their websites to their market audience. Gen Zers may be more likely to actually complete and submit more inquiry forms if less information is required. This step, although simple, is the first of a very important relationship-building process.

Unlike their Gen X or Millennial parents, Gen Zers can be expected to explore many options. Instead of taking a deep dive into two or three, they are more likely to scan through at least 20 to 30. And if an option doesn't seem like a good fit or not interesting, they will move on to the next one. Higher education needs to focus on wooing its incoming students rather than stalking them. Because they grew up alongside technology, they are wary of scams and on high alert for potential creepers.

Without gearing the inquiry form to the market audience, colleges and universities risk losing potential students to other institutions. With unlimited options at their fingertips, Gen Zers will just as easily move on to a different school. So much has changed in higher education due to COVID-19. Institutions have figured out how to conduct classes, advising meetings, and exams virtually while maintaining some semblance of normalcy. But there will soon be no need to deal with those problems if there are no incoming students.

Institutions need to reassess their inquiry forms, targeting an acceptable score that will make them more attractive to prospective Gen Z bachelors/bachelorettes.

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[11] https://www.nytimes.com/2020/05/01/us/coronavirus-college-enrollment.html
[12] https://www.npr.org/2020/08/12/900173338/how-the-coronavirus-has-upended-college-admissions