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Visits vs. Viewbooks

Shadow Programs That Seal the Deal



We live in a society that places great emphasis on technology. Parents can turn on the “Google Machine” and learn everything they need to know about any school they might be considering. Viewbooks, virtual tours, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter are examples of tools used daily to research the benefits of potential high schools. All competitive schools utilize these vehicles in one way or another to stay relevant. Unfortunately, most of that data is similar and can be packaged in a number of ways to market any school. Successful schools must drive student and family visits and ensure that the experience establishes the relationships that will create the desire to enroll.

Most Catholic high schools offer some form of a shadow experience for prospective students. The format and structure of these days varies from limited opportunities each month to any day that works for the visitor.

Some schools host large groups of students on the same day (Step Up Days and class visits) with events scheduled specifically to entertain the group. Others restrict the time to half-day tours and Q & A sessions.

To maximize the impact of the shadow visit, provide the prospective students with an opportunity to experience their first day in high school.

- ◆ *By allowing visiting students the reality of a day at the school, they are more likely to visualize themselves as students.*
- ◆ *By providing a real day in the life of a student at the school, they overcome many of the fears that plague the discernment process.*

At Mullen High School, our Touchpoint Surveys indicate that the realistic shadow visit was the single most important factor in the enrollment decision for 82% to 87% of the families.

The Game Has Changed

During the height of Catholic school enrollment, the decision to attend the local Catholic high school was fairly simple. The parents told their children that they were attending the school; they registered and started when the school opened its doors. The parents, many times, were products themselves of Catholic schools and they sent their children because that was what was expected.

Today, as the cost of tuition increases, the effectiveness of public school programming becoming more attractive, and with peer pressure to follow the group, Catholic schools are becoming far less of an automatic choice. It also appears that the students are having far more input in the selection process.

Some parents share that “it is their decision” referring to the student making a choice. Ultimately, the decision of which school to attend is made by the family. **For that reason, marketing tactics, messaging and brand differentiation must be targeted at two separate audiences.**

The parents need to know that there is a return on the investment and the students need to feel comfortable. The shadow visit is the best method to accomplish both.

Creating Culture and Climate

Objections to increasing student visits are numerous.

- ◆ *Shadows can be distracting.*
- ◆ *They can occupy too much class space.*
- ◆ *They take away from instruction time.*
- ◆ *What do we do with them during tests and quizzes?*

*“My son came home from his shadow day and had me cancel his other visits. He knows where he wants to go!
I hope he gets in.”*

Class of 2024 Parent

All of these statements are valid arguments and objections to increasing the number of visitors.

The first step to building a successful shadow program is for the entire school community to recognize the importance of the program for the sustainability of the school. **All faculty members must realize that the best lesson plan is useless without the students.**

Each member of the school must recognize the importance of these visitors and work to create a welcoming and warm climate. The key element in making this happen is to downplay the event portion of the shadow visit and allow the class to continue as if no visitors were present. The faculty should expect increased enrollment and approach the day as if the class size is twenty-nine rather than twenty-five on a day that four shadows are present. **Prospective students should be expected every day on campus and be assimilated into the class as if they are enrolled.**

Successful implementation of this approach requires faculty to prepare for additional students in multiple ways. Some faculty have collected a drawer for “shadow toys” that the visitors could use during a short quiz. Others have created a poster that every visitor signs and then they review it the following year in their class with those teachers. In the event of tests, consider allowing the student ambassador host to connect with a friend in another class that might be doing something more engaging. Allowing the student hosts the freedom to make decisions for a better visit is very effective.



About the author ...

Frank J. Cawley

Frank Cawley is the Director of Admission and Enrollment at Mullen High School in Denver, Colorado. Mullen is a Lasallian, Catholic, college-prep, co-educational high school with 900+ students. Under Frank's direction, Mullen enjoyed a 20% increase in enrollment over a five-year period. Innovative, aggressive and targeted communication and marketing techniques based on data-driven decision-making led to the enrollment success.

Frank earned his Master's in Speech Communication from the University of Northern Colorado and a Bachelor of Arts in both Political Science and Speech Communication from the University of Denver.

Frank serves Catholic School Management as an adjunct consultant specializing in enrollment and marketing.

The shadow host (i.e., student ambassador, tour guide) is critical to the effectiveness of the program. For the most impactful marketing effort, the culture of the school must ensure that all the students are ambassadors and play a significant role in the success of the program. Representatives from the admissions office should have time at class/grade/level meetings to challenge the students to make every shadow feel welcome. Small rules like never referring to the student as a shadow, but to use their names on the nametags, create a sense of welcome. Establish an environment where current students feel honored to host visitors with annual Student Ambassador Awards, verbal recognition in the hallways, and other reinforcements that link their roles with the school's success.

It is important to control for quality. After the first meeting, have students complete a student ambassador application so that each can be matched with shadows who have similar interests. Offer a brief training to introduce the group to the policy and procedures that work for your institution. **Do all you can to instill the feeling that being a student ambassador is special and important, and grow that enthusiasm over time.**

Cultivation

Once the structure is in place, the excitement surrounding the program is contagious. Allow the prospective family the opportunity to request their host student. Once the current students and families know shadow visitors can request them, the word of mouth marketing takes off. Parents contact each other and students do the same. Current freshmen reach out to friends in eighth grade at their former schools. The prospective families enjoy the idea that the visit will be with someone known, thereby reducing concerns over spending the day with a stranger.



Additionally, the use of social media and school websites can be retooled. Instead of messaging the traditional college matriculation numbers, standardized test scores and athletic accomplishments, marketing messages focus on inviting the audience to shadow. Those statistics are essential and should not be abandoned. Share them not with the expectation that it will prompt a family to enroll, but rather to peak interest in a visit. **The visit is far less of a commitment and much more likely to elicit a response.**

Online registration is essential and should be available without numerous clicks on the school website. The registration information must allow the family to select from a number of open dates. Schools should make dates available as many weeks in the year as possible but limit the openings to a working number each day. Along with the selection of the date, the family will provide the student name, current school, emergency contact information, parent permission and other information that will allow the admissions office to find a suitable host if one is not requested. Athletic, academic or club interests are excellent starting points to find a good match. Provide the opportunity for the family to request a host and make every effort to accommodate that request.

“I was not sure where I wanted to go to high school until I visited. After I shadowed I knew I was not going anywhere else.”

Class of 2023 Student

CSM SERVICES	Strategy		Planning			Leadership	
	School Assessments Program Audits Enrollment Marketing	Mission Clarification Advancement Alumni Capital Campaigns Feasibility Studies	Enrollment Technology Annual Fund Development	Marketing Communication Social Media Plans Strategic Planning Financial	Governance Administrative Structure Search Board Training/ Development Professional Mentoring	Workshops and Webinars Retreat Facilitation Keynote Presentations Individual Seminars and Series	

Visit Day

The night before the visiting student arrives on campus, the host has been provided with the contact phone number and will call the student to answer any last minute questions and confirm the instructions that had been sent in a confirmation email. **Host students report that the parents are very appreciative of the call and hang up impressed with the customer service element and the professionalism of the student hosts.** Upon arrival on the morning of the visit, the guest is introduced to the host and given a lunch ticket and nametag. They are then told to enjoy the day and report back to the admissions office after the last class period of the day.

After the students begin the shadow experience, the parents are now the focus of the admissions office. Parents are encouraged to stay and take a guided campus tour at dropoff or pickup. These individual or small group visits allow the admissions personnel the opportunity to demonstrate the many factors that the parents read about on the website and in the social media messaging.

- ◆ *For some, listening to the school prayer is what they want to hear.*
- ◆ *Others want to watch a passing period and see how the students interact.*
- ◆ *Many just want to have their questions answered in a friendly and personal fashion.*

In all these instances the chance to develop the relationships unique to Catholic education are present.

Introductions are key. During the day, hosts introduce their guests to all their friends; in the classroom they introduce shadows to each teacher, and teachers invite the host to introduce the shadow to the class. During the period, the students sit together but the shadow is encouraged to participate as a regular student in the class.

The school provides lunch and the shadows are given the privilege to go to the front of the line. During lunch the hosts give their guests a campus tour and introduce them to any coaches, club moderators or administrators that might be important to them. This time is essential for many students considering your high school. **Lunch is a major factor in the decision-making process!**

Close the Decision

At the conclusion of the day, both the host and the shadow are asked to return to the admissions office to check out. Each visitor is given a T-shirt as a gift. The admissions office asks about the day and makes sure that students are escorted to their parents who are there to pick them up.

The student is sent a handwritten thank-you note and encouraged to visit again if they feel they missed anything or have additional questions. The admissions office will also solicit feedback from both the student host and the faculty. Do they think the shadow was a good fit? Was the student personable? Could the faculty see the student in their classroom next year? **The realistic shadow day also allows the school a window to observe the candidate and envision an optimal future together.**

Conclusion

Clearly there is not only one way to facilitate student visits to Catholic high schools. The specific details are unique to each individual market and learning environment. There are, however, a few elements of the visit that lend to increased effectiveness. At Mullen, the more realistic the visit, the higher the enrollment yield. **The positive feedback and word of mouth marketing bounce that result from visits versus viewbooks are tangible.** Once the entire school population understands the importance of the shadow visit to the sustainability of the institution, the more excitement each visitor feels. That smile and enthusiasm directly translates into registrations.

The sense of relationship and connection is the single most important catalyst for families to make the high school enrollment choice, and the shadow visit is the number one way to make that happen. Establish the relationship and grow the numbers. The shadow visit is truly more important than the viewbook.



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