

Why Your High Schooler Gets So Much Mail

College admissions teams have found that good old snail mail is an attention-grabbing novelty to the digital natives they target today

By [Mindy Charski](#) | March 29, 2024 | [Money & Policy](#)

Michael Cummings received plenty of postcards from colleges before he applied to schools about 25 years ago. But the father of five has been surprised at what seems like a "deluge" of mail addressed to his oldest daughter, who is in her junior year of high school.



"It made her feel good to get some of the pieces that were presented to her and especially from some of the tougher institutions she hadn't necessarily considered applying for," | Credit: Joel Moysuh

"It feels counterintuitive that my daughter is getting more physical mail than I did," says Cummings, a professor at the University of Arkansas.

Of course, the college application process is a whole new ballgame these days. Many schools are intensely competing for applicants even as many applicants are intensely competing for spots at schools.

Today, if students want to be contacted by a bunch of colleges, they can easily opt in to share their address and other information when they sign up for standardized tests like the PSAT, SAT and AP.

Perplexing Resiliency

But the resiliency of mail through it all can be perplexing for many reasons. For one, mail isn't exactly having a heyday: [Total mail volume](#) has been on the decline since hitting a peak in 2006, the year many current applicants were born. There are also less costly ways to reach prospects. Perhaps most curious of all is that colleges are targeting a generation of digital [natives](#).

"There is a sense of trust that's associated with print."

So why do so many schools still include direct mail in their marketing mix along with social media, digital advertising, email and other means of communicating? It turns out that mail has unique advantages that help schools

grab and keep attention.

"The reality is, [mail] still works," says Allen Shapard, a spokesman for [CCA](#), a higher-education marketing agency in Troy, New York. "People still feel that it makes a difference in moving the needle."

An Informational Treat

The fact that teens don't get a lot of traditional mail is actually pretty useful for schools that send [postcards](#), letters,

multipage "view books" and other materials. "This is a novelty for this generation to get mail," Shapard says.

Tamy Bobbitt, a mom and businesswoman in Chicago, says her high school senior has enjoyed getting so much mail.

"She would come home and one of the first things she would do is look in the mailbox," Bobbitt says.

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"It made her feel good to get some of the pieces that were presented to her and especially from some of the tougher institutions she hadn't necessarily considered applying for," Bobbitt adds.

In the Cummings home, Dad typically helps screen the five to ten mailers that arrive each week from schools across the country. Pieces that look interesting go into what has become a six-inch-thick file.

**"The reality is,
[mail] still**

Schools anticipate that parents or others in the household may catch a glimpse of mail as it travels

works."

from the mailbox to its final destination. "Students are not doing their college search in a vacuum," Gina Zandy Ohnstad, vice president for communications at Whitman College in Walla Walla, Washington, says.

"Families are very involved, and they're big decision makers," she adds. "They are searching alongside their students in many, many cases, so we really think about that too when we send things home to students."

Ohnstad also says "there is a sense of trust that's associated with print" for Gen Zers who are used to digital ads and emails that might seem "spammy."

Less Clutter in Mailboxes

Meanwhile, marketers know that there's a lot less going on in mailboxes than in inboxes. "It gets harder and harder to stand out among the sea of emails that people get," says Kylee Heyerdahl, assistant vice president for marketing and communication at the University of Hartford, a Connecticut institution known informally as UHart.

Today about one-third of UHart's marketing strategy involves mailed printed pieces; Whitman's use of print pieces is similar.

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Both schools are intentional about how they use mail. Cost is a consideration, but they also realize that many Gen Zers value [sustainability](#). "We try to make our print pieces meaningful and not something that's going to go directly in the trash," Ohnstad says.

"Sometimes these mailers, the choice of what they decide to send you, is

Students who don't want to receive mail can ask schools to stop sending it, but many who are neck-deep in the college search may be looking for useful information, no matter its form.

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a deep dive on
the website."**

"Schools are savvy in the sense that they are sending materials to students and their families at a moment when they are focused intensely on this need, so that is something which they would welcome,"

Shapard says.

What Works, and What Doesn't

Bobbitt's daughter ended up applying to some schools that mailers put on her radar. Likewise, Cummings says a couple of colleges his family wouldn't have otherwise thought about had they not received info in the mail.

He has found that some printed pieces are witty and compelling while others feel like a school is trying to be relatable in a way that comes across as inauthentic.

"It's hard to know what going to school is going to be like until you're actually there, but we kind of have to operate on the information that's available to us," Cummings says.

"Sometimes these mailers, the choice of what they decide to send you, is maybe more informative than a deep dive on the website."



Mindy Charski is a Dallas-based business journalist, content writer and ghostwriter currently covering marketing, personal finance and small business. [Read More](#)

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