To the uninitiated, technologies like geofencing and beacons may seem like two sides of the same coin. Because both tools provide location-based messages to a targeted list of participants — and because smart devices are the ultimate destination for those messages — it may be just as easy to assume that an institution really only needs one or the other to get by. Deploy both, some argue, and there will be too much overlap.

Integrating geofencing and beacon-based technologies into universities can improve on-campus experiences for administrations, faculty, and students.

But this outlook — while understandable — isn't particularly accurate. In higher education, hyperlocal, local, and regional communications all play an important role in the institution's lasting success, so by foregoing one solution in favor of the other, an institution severely diminishes its ability to reach out to prospective and current students, among others.

Beacons and geofence-based initiatives aren't just highly useful in tandem. With college-age people spending an ever-increasing amount of time engaging with their mobile screens, as reported by Statista, these technologies are becoming necessities. Here are some key considerations for higher learning institutions as they explore ways to utilize the tools:
Geofencing and Beacons: What's the Difference?

Consider a driver who owns a panel truck and a small, fuel-efficient coupe. The hypothetical driver wouldn't use the truck for daily city driving any more than they'd use the car to haul a couch.

Beacons and geofence techniques follow the same close-but-not-quite philosophy. The former is used for local transmissions — for example, a specific area of a particular on-campus building — while the latter should be used for larger areas of the map, such as the area surrounding campus or a targeted high school. Each presents solutions to specific technological needs: A beacon requires the organization pushing the campaign to have a small hardware device (a beacon) on-site, while geofence-based initiatives are all handled over-the-air from the institution's perspective.

This subtle difference leads to a rather drastic split in the ways universities are able to deploy these tools. Imagine that a large university is hosting several notable alumni at a home football game as part of a large donation drive. A geofence solution could be deployed to alert VIP handlers when certain attendees — who have downloaded a special alumni app in advance — have crossed a predetermined border and are thus drawing close to the event; beacons, meanwhile, could be used to provide a multimedia-enhanced tour of the stadium, with various areas of the venue triggering context-dependent on-screen messages.

Geofence Campaigns: Another Perspective

Since it doesn't require a specific physical hardware presence, geofencing can also be used effectively for off-campus initiatives.

With the sheer (and increasing) amount higher learning institutions spend on student-recruitment efforts, geofence-based initiatives are extremely useful. A regional campaign could target phones located at area high schools or "feeder" community colleges, for example,
allowing a university to place messages directly in front of the receptive eyes. "Geo-conquest" campaigns might deploy a similar strategy to different ends: An institution, noting the time of a large recruitment event at a rival college, could use geofence-collected data to serve ads compelling students and parents to visit their school as well.

Diversity campaigns, a large part of almost every college's larger recruitment effort, can also benefit from the power of geofenced messages. As recruitment news site ERE notes, schools recruit specific populations that can be made far more niche by smart use of geofencing, giving colleges easier inroads into communities they may have previously struggled to recruit from.

Beacons and geofencing serve numerous critical tasks on- and off-campus, with each technology providing a specific set of benefits and possible initiatives.

Returning to Campus: Beacons

If geofence-backed campaigns are better for off- or whole-campus use, beacons are excellent additions to any targeted campus initiative. The trick is finding useful ways for opt-in users to benefit from their presence. Because messages spread via beacons come through apps — just as big-box sellers use the tools for personalization in retail — knowing the audience is as important as knowing how they'd like to interact with the institution.

Promotional events at campus retail locations and self-guided, phone-enhanced tours are two immediate examples of ways beacons can serve useful content for an audience that has already expressed willingness to see it, but the medium's data-collection strengths are also significant. A large university noticing extremely high traffic at its main bookstore, for example, could push notifications to users suggesting they visit a smaller location across campus, or an institution trying to get a feel for how people most use a new facility can get an excellent cross-sample of the movements of its app users, giving the organization useful insight for everything from marketing campaigns to future expansion plans.

Faculty and staff could also benefit from a beacon-backed, in-app program that helps them find the best possible routes to various campus buildings or alerts them to public transit locations and times — with beacons providing the precise location data needed to make its suggestions pinpoint-specific.

With all these use cases and countless others, beacons and geofencing serve numerous critical tasks on- and off-campus, with each technology providing a specific set of benefits and possible initiatives. While it may be easy to think of them in similar terms, the roles they fill and duties they enhance are very different in terms of utility and geographic range — an important distinction for any higher learning institution to grasp, and a compelling reason to use both of these technologies in tandem.