MarketingNews

AMERICAN MARKETING ASSOCIATION **AMA.ORG** SPECIAL ISSUE

SCHOLASTIC DISTANCING

Traditional college marketing tactics can't pass in the age of COVID-19—what schools can do now to make the grade

AMA | AMERICAN MARKETING ASSOCIATION

From Streamers to Live Streaming

There's a vehicular phenomenon that's grown throughout the nation over this past month of the pandemic: the rise of the graduation minivan. Parents or guardians (or perhaps even the students themselves) deck out the family car with balloons, streamers and painted notes of congratulations to the high school class of 2020. Also take note of the graduation yard sign—sometimes featuring the grad's face plastered on the side—and balloon sculptures that boast the graduate's high school colors.

Just as these families are getting creative in celebrating a milestone, higher ed marketers are deftly responding to the new reality of virtual courses and limited campus access. In our special issue of Marketing News on higher ed marketing during the COVID-19 pandemic, we cover a few of these efforts: from highlighting a school's research prowess (page 3) and leaning on community-university partnerships (page 5) to how schools may ethically promote a higher ed degree as the job market experiences a downturn (page 14). Finally, staff writer Steve Heisler takes a look at five traditional higher ed recruitment tactics and how they can be adapted during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The same cars draped in celebratory grad trimmings may not be able to drop off incoming freshmen to campus this year, but a good higher ed marketer knows that's just one page in a much greater university's story.

SARAH STEIMER
Managing Editor

Inside This Issue

Marketing Research Institutions' Best and Brightest

Whether attracting future scientists or offering updates on COVID research, it's vital to pass along a school's research stories

BY SARAH STEIMER | MANAGING EDITOR
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April 12, 2020, marked the 65th anniversary of a critical announcement in the world's fight against infectious diseases: The University of Pittsburgh, under the scientific leadership of Jonas Salk, shared that the polio vaccine it had been working on was deemed "safe, effective and potent." The school has long worn this discovery as a crown jewel and holds it up as an example of how university research programs can make a global impact. Now, it's pointing to this historical success as proof that research institutions will once again help the world overcome a health crisis.

Universities are emphasizing their leadership and research capabilities during the pandemic, reminding both current and prospective students, as well as the world at large, about the impact of higher education institutions on our daily lives—a role that's underscored as people look to schools' research labs and graduates to solve pandemic-related problems. Whether it's attracting the next generation of front-line medical workers, communicating about the lab work to discover a vaccine or bringing together resources for the greater community, higher ed marketers and communications teams are telling stories of their school's efforts. Highlighting these stories helps to motivate prospective and current students to get involved in the fight against the pandemic, while reassuring the rest of the world that the brightest minds are hard at work.

So Students Can See Themselves in the Solution

About half of the University of Pittsburgh's fall 2020 incoming undergraduate class plans to major in a health-related field. According to Molly Swagler, executive
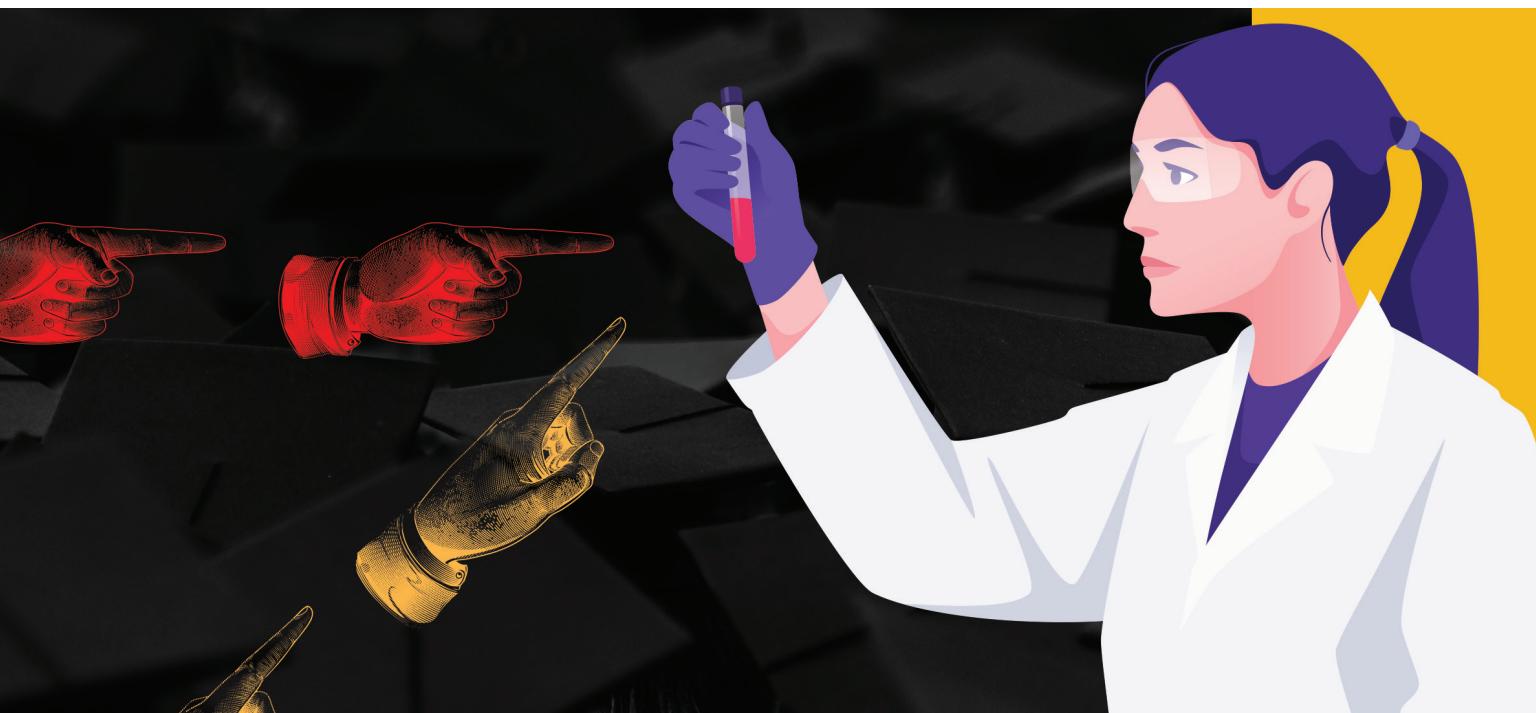
director of enrollment outreach and assistant vice provost for enrollment, the school had this in mind when it set up a first-of-its-kind Pitt Interprofessional Center for Health Careers for undergraduate health and pre-health interprofessional education. As a leader in producing graduates in healthcare fields even before the pandemic began, the center plays a particularly important role now in shoring up a need for such professionals.

"Undergraduate research is a big component of why a student would choose the University of Pittsburgh, because they're going to be able to work on major research," Swagler says, noting that the school was one of the few in the U.S. to receive the live coronavirus early in the research process, and that Pitt was the fourth-highest National Institutes of Health-funded institution in 2019, receiving $217 million through 472 awards.

"There's hundreds of ways to fight this disease or to even be a part of the solution," Swagler says, explaining that the interprofessional center helps connect the dots for students early in their academic careers to where they fit in the healthcare ecosystem. Want to help fight the coronavirus but aren't interested in a vaccines program? Consider a career in respiratory therapy to help those recovering from the virus.

Swagler says the school works to personalize the stories it shares with students to help them imagine how they can play a role in overcoming the crisis. "'How are you going to be a part of the solution?' We absolutely use that language," she says. But it's important that they tell the daily stories as well, not just the big-picture final solution. The school is also being transparent about what "being part of the solution" looks like in the current environment. For example, how does lab research work amid social distancing guidelines? Yes, the University of Pittsburgh wants current and prospective students to see themselves following in the footsteps of Salk, but they also want to be clear about how students' own stories may be different.

There's an opportunity for students to bring their talents to a well-funded and lauded university, but Pitt's also being transparent about how the nature of this research is different today. "We are all still trying to figure out how to do research safely in this pandemic, and what that looks like and how we manage the safety first of our students, researchers, staff and faculty," Swagler says.

The school posts its updates to Pittwire Live, which highlights school-developed communications and news involving university research and experts. In addition to COVID-19 vaccine-related work, the site includes information on how others at the school are lending their hand to fight the virus: Tips from an organizational behavior professor on helping teams manage fear, suggestions from a professor of health and physical activity on how to move your body during distancing and news on the founding director of the school's Institute for Cyber Law, Policy and Security taking a leave of absence to oversee how federal COVID-19 relief funds are spent.

So the World Can See the Important Work Being Done

It's soothing to know the brightest minds are hard at work finding solutions to our problems. Similar to having the best pitcher in the league playing for your favorite baseball team, it means the chances for success are that much higher. It's yet another function for higher ed marketing and communications professionals: Let the world know how a school's research teams are working toward not just a vaccine, but solving the problems created by the coronavirus, such as redesigning high-touch areas or tracking the rate of contamination.

Researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology are working on a contact tracing solution to help determine who may have come into contact with a person infected with the coronavirus. Adam Conner-Simons, communications and media relations manager and senior officer at MIT's Computer Science and Artificial Intelligence Laboratory, says it's been his job to spread the word about the team's advances.

Of course, he's not the only person pitching stories to journalists about COVID-19. To cut through the noise, Conner-Simons is intentional about who he reaches out to, utilizing a list that includes journalists with whom he has existing relationships. He also considers how he can pitch a story on the ramifications of the research itself.

"We can reach out to a number of reporters who cover privacy, computer cybersecurity, other topics like that," Conner-Simons says. "That's one way that PR professionals can think more creatively and have better results, to be able to think, OK, where are the cross sections where I could pitch this to multiple different types of reporters who have different types of goals?"

The aim for these communications efforts, Conner-Simons says, is for the lab to be seen as a hub of innovation in its space and leading the charge on globally important issues. While it may sound a bit hollow for a company that makes packaged foods to tell customers, "We're here for you," quite the opposite is true when schools that play host to some of the world's leading researchers say, "Our best are on it."

"Hopefully, it's inspiring for people to hear the extent to which researchers are collaborating across disciplines to try to solve these problems," he says. "When a global crisis emerges like this, it is heartening to see that people are really coming together and doing the difficult task of working with people who have very different vocabularies and interests and trying to figure out how our respective expertise can be combined to create something that's larger than the sum of its parts." **MN**

Harnessing Community-University Partnerships to Move Through and Beyond the Crisis

Universities are a major part of their local ecosystems, and both parties require one another to survive and thrive after the pandemic ends

BY SARAH STEIMER | MANAGING EDITOR
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The university-community relationship is an ecosystem constantly in motion. At its most basic level, the school churns out professionals who go on to work in the community, and the community sends in students to learn at the school. Dig deeper and you'll notice the internships at area businesses, the visiting professionals at the university, and the shared data between city and research labs. It's a relationship that both parties rely on—especially in times of crisis.

For example, Mahauganee Shaw Bonds, an independent researcher and consultant at Buoyant Consulting, studied how colleges managed disruption caused by hurricanes—specifically those campuses that experienced either Hurricane Katrina or Hurricane Rita. What she found was that survival is a group effort between school and region.

"When it comes to the university-community partnership, what really stood out was how difficult it is for an institution to come back into normal operations if their surrounding community is not in normal operation," Bonds says. "A lot of the time, we think of universities as being sort of self-sufficient—and in a lot of ways they are. They can be miniature cities themselves: Students live there, they eat there, they work there. ... But the reality is that so much of campus operations really does depend on having resources and partners in the local community."

Natural disasters aren't the only example that underscores the importance of community-university relationships during times of crisis. We're already seeing examples of how, during the COVID-19 pandemic, marketers can deftly leverage their local relationships to maintain the university-community ecosystem.

"That the ways [in which] we build and support our shared lives and our shared communities together is crucial to how successfully we emerge from this crisis," says Julia Smillie, marketing and communications manager at the University of Michigan's Edward Ginsberg Center—the school's community and civic engagement center. "While we may not know what it's going to look like moving forward, we do feel confident that it's going to depend on sustaining and supporting these relationships."

During the Pandemic

Many community-university programs—particularly those involving students working with local organizations—required in-person interactions that needed to be reevaluated with the onset of the coronavirus pandemic. The first step for many departments and professionals who organize and maintain these partnerships was to quickly communicate with all parties involved and start coordinating next steps.

Smillie says that at the onset of the pandemic, her team identified students who were trying to complete community engagement projects and met with them virtually to determine the status of that work.

"[We worked] with community partners to see if these were projects that could be completed, if they had to be refocused under these new circumstances or where we had to put a pin in some work," Smillie says. "But overwhelmingly, our commitment has been to help our students continue their leadership and community engagement education and be able to work on projects— just under different circumstances."

She gives the example of a student who may have been engaged in offering medical checkups at a residential nursing home. If that's no longer a safe option during high-risk times, the center could help the home and student determine if there were other ways to leverage their partnership, perhaps through data collection or reaching out for donations.

While some of the community partnerships that the University of Michigan maintains are scholastic-focused, others are geared more toward leadership and service work—and therefore ripe for pandemic-related duties. Thanks to the partnerships that the school has maintained in the community, its staff members and students were able to quickly mobilize and help with food donations and drop-offs, for example. They also amplified community calls for support via social media.

"It's that sort of deep-seated connectivity that you cannot conjure up in the wake of an emergency if it wasn't there to begin with," Smillie says. Marketers need to maintain those relationships between school and community and tell the stories and amplify the voices on both sides to keep all parties activated and helping one another.

"In a time of crisis, community and civic engagement becomes even more important than it was before," Smillie says.

During the Rebuild

The recovery phase of a post-pandemic world will be largely economic in focus, as the country and much of the world has seen some of the steepest unemployment figures in modern history. In addition to employees being able to return to work at the campus itself, schools have an opportunity to train the local workforce as the economy recovers.

In some cases, universities may build out programs in those industries most affected by the pandemic. Bonds gave the example of a school in the New Orleans region that built out its entrepreneurship program as a reaction to many small businesses being unable to reopen after devastation caused by the hurricane. The goal was to train a new generation of business leaders who could help rebuild the area's local economy.

Reinvigorating the local workforce requires a journey beyond traditional high school-to-college pathways: Those who lost their jobs and want to recession-proof their careers—or those who had to leave their degree programs to enter the workforce instead—will need to be reconnected with higher education.

Dawn Medley, associate VP of enrollment management at Wayne State University, says the Detroit Regional Chamber employs an adult reengagement specialist who connects interested individuals with appropriate area higher ed institutions. Wayne State also launched a Facebook Messenger chatbot, part of the DetroitEd411 program, that uses AI to anonymously answer locals' questions related to higher education and point them in the right direction—whether that's where to obtain a degree in their area of interest or how to sign up to take the GED.

"[We'll likely] see continued use and expansion of the chatbot because there's just going to be more adults looking for information on how they can upskill and reskill to be competitive, and have positions that aren't necessarily so dependent on them being able to walk into an office every day," Medley says.

Similar to the expansion of an entrepreneurship program in New Orleans, Medley foresees that higher ed institutions and local chambers of commerce will work together on future studies to predict skills gaps as regions shift into economic recovery mode.

"There are going to be a lot of joint efforts with our own chamber, with community college partners, with community-based organizations and then also with workforce development," she says. "You're going to see universities not just looking at baccalaureate degree completion, but also—how is that going to impact work? Because we now know—because we were all forced to jump on the bandwagon—that remote work is going to remain something that we do in the future. … You're going to see some big shifts and some big changes as we look to support the chamber and the businesses in our area as they adapt to that."

Beyond educating and preparing the workforce, Bonds sees an opportunity for schools and communities to arrive at creative solutions as the country begins to open back up. For example, there may be more dynamic service-learning opportunities in the community, or universities abiding by distancing guidelines may result in partnerships with local hotels to house students.

"[You may] see some partnerships with businesses or companies in the area that are able to provide services that may otherwise have to be severely scaled back on campus," Bonds says. "You might find businesses … figured out that maybe they don't actually need that large space that they're renting or paying mortgage every month—maybe they'll start renting conference space on the university campus when they need to come together in person." **MN**
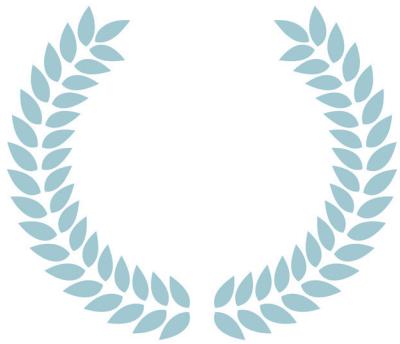
Higher Education Marketing Statistics

Before and During the COVID-19 Pandemic

$600+ billion

Value of the higher education industry.

$x2 + px + q = 0$

$(a + b)(a - b) = a^2 - b^2$

$df = f'(x0)$

$a0\ bm + a1\ bm-1$

$(x3 - a3)$

1.5 million

Number of U.S. faculty members...

70%

of whom had never taught an online course prior to the pandemic.

2.4 million

Number of undergraduate students who attended classes entirely online in fall 2019, representing...

15%

of the total national undergrad student body.

3.6 million

Number of students enrolled in one or more online courses while otherwise attending classes on campus (fall 2019).

Four-Year Undergraduate Fall Enrollment (2018)
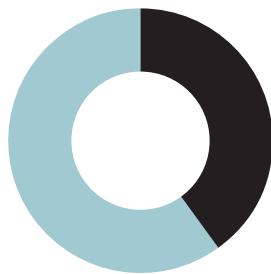
40% of high school seniors who have already decided on a school for fall 2020 say they are not receiving adequate information about how COVID-19 may affect enrollment.
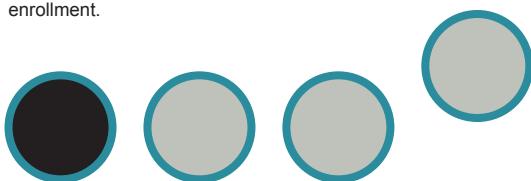
1 in 4 current college students rate the quality of their institution's communications around COVID-19 as "fair" or "poor."

87% of campuses worry that future campus visit requests will decline.

46% are adding live events on social media platforms.

**26%** of enrollment leaders are implementing virtual tours.

14%
Only distance education courses

21%
Some distance education courses

66%
No distance education courses

How likely are decided high school seniors to change their minds about the college they want to attend as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak (as of April 2020)?

HIGHLY UNLIKELY	**44%**
UNLIKELY	**34%**
TOO SOON TO SAY	**10%**
LIKELY	**10%**
HIGHLY LIKELY	**4%**
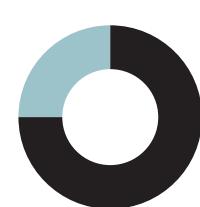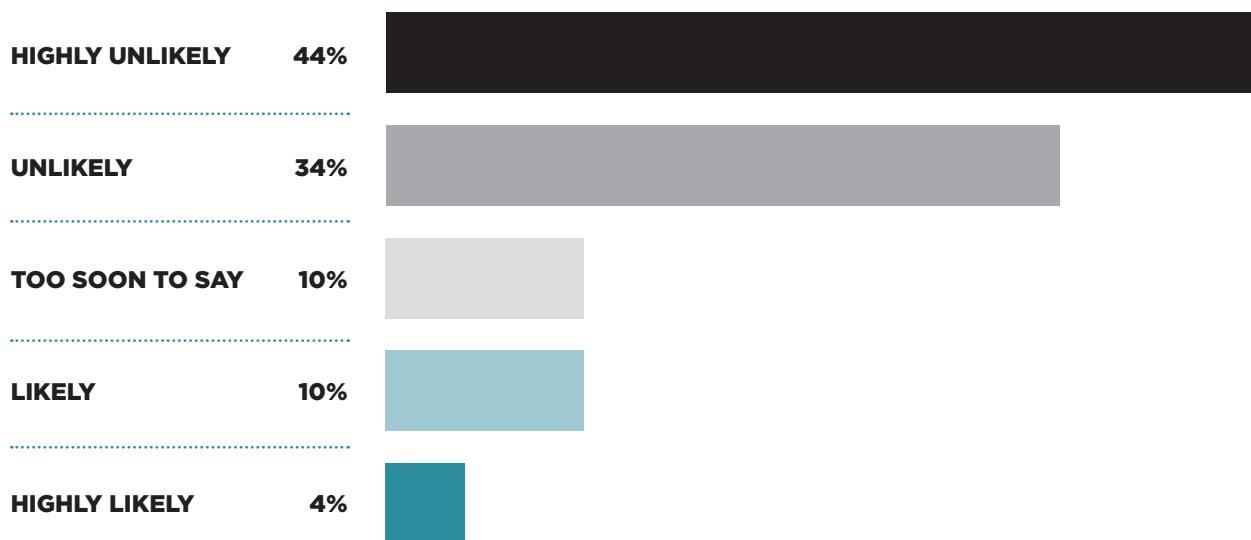
75% of undecided high school seniors say they are taking COVID-19 into consideration as they continue their college decision process.

How likely is it that high school seniors will NOT go to college next term because of the COVID-19 outbreak?

HIGHLY UNLIKELY	UNLIKELY	TOO SOON TO SAY	LIKELY	HIGHLY LIKELY
35%	33%	11%	15%	5%
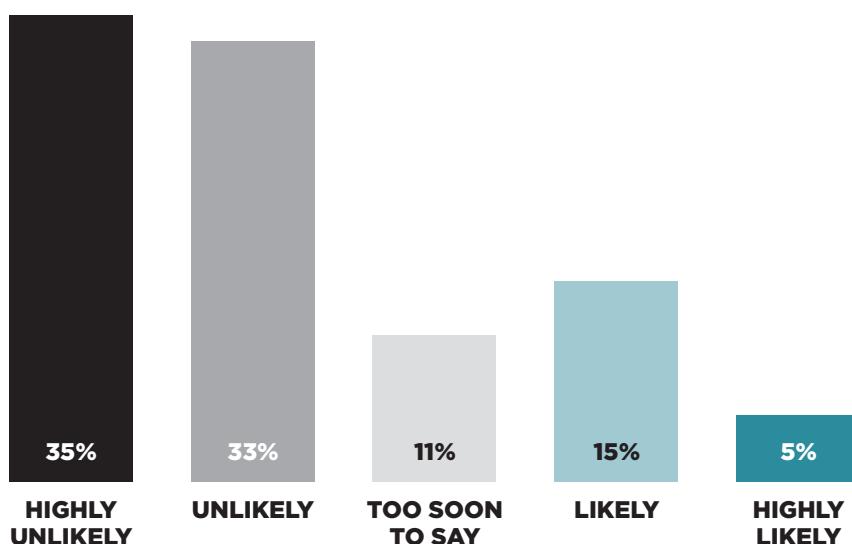
Survey of Higher Education Institutions (91% U.S.)

58%

are considering or have already decided to remain fully online for fall 2020.

62%

are considering decreasing or have decreased the number of in-person courses for fall 2020.

73%

are considering increasing or have increased the number of online and/or remote courses for fall 2020.

NEW STUDENT ENROLLMENT INDICATORS

FALL ADMISSION NUMBERS

UNCHANGED
31%

DOWN
45%

UP
24%
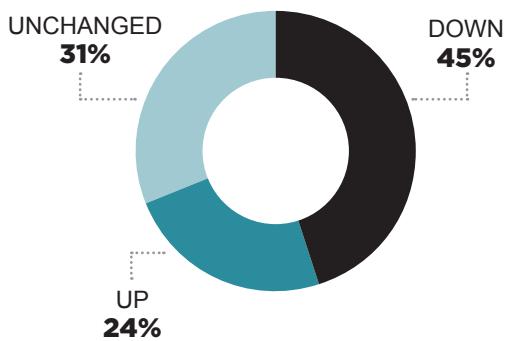
TRANSFER STUDENT ENROLLMENT INDICATORS

FALL REGISTRATION NUMBERS

UNCHANGED
24%

DOWN
53%

UP
23%
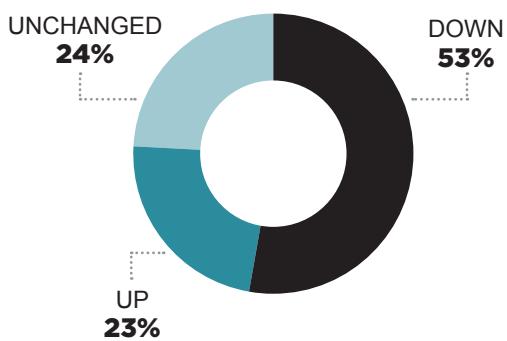
CONTINUING STUDENT ENROLLMENT INDICATORS

FALL REGISTRATION NUMBERS

UNCHANGED
43%

DOWN
44%

UP
13%

SOURCES: BLOOMBERG BUSINESSWEEK, EDUVENTURES, NATIONAL CENTER FOR EDUCATION STATISTICS, EAB, SIMPSONSCARBOROUGH, AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF COLLEGIATE REGISTRARS AND ADMISSIONS OFFICERS.
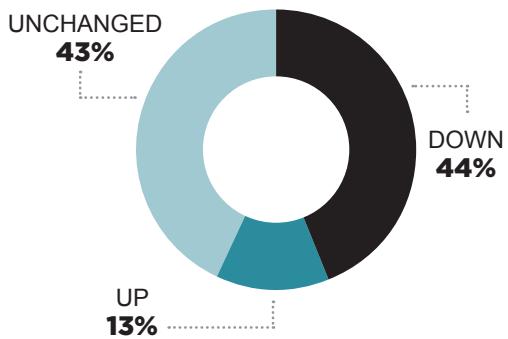
Free College Hits Students by Surprise

Southern New Hampshire University confronts the financial crisis brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic by reducing its tuition to zero

BY STEVE HEISLER | STAFF WRITER
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GOAL

In accordance with its mission to increase access to affordable education, Southern New Hampshire University, a private school with about 4,000 in-person and 87,000 online undergraduates, has aimed to reduce its tuition to $10,000 a year since 2019. Its projections initially targeted 2023 as an achievable endpoint for the goal, but the timeline was hastened as a reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic.

"SNHU has long been a helper in a crisis," says Alana Burns, CMO of SNHU and a member of the school board. "Our president [Paul LeBlanc] always talks about [how] you can always find people to run toward a problem to fix it."

First, the school board directly addressed the crisis on a medical level. The school crafted safety protocols for frontline and essential workers about how to reenter their homes contaminant-free. They also reached out to the city of Manchester, New Hampshire, offering their gymnasium as a makeshift hospital space, if needed, and volunteering to prepare lunches for displaced elementary school students.

Then they turned their eyes toward the SNHU student body and immediately made good on their promise to reduce tuition—and then some. Starting with the incoming class of 2024—which includes more than 1,100 students beginning fall 2020 set to attend in person—tuition would be free for their first year and then $9,600 per year after. This represents a significant reduction from the original price of $31,000 per year, currently being paid by students until at least fall 2021.

The board attached no strings: Should a student want to leave after their freshman year, they would owe nothing and the price reduction would be applied whether campus opened in the fall or not (though it wouldn't cover room and board).

"There's so much uncertainty from a consumer perspective; we're all sort of out of control," Burns says. "[We] wanted to tell the freshman class—these are the kids that were born [post-]September 11 and are having no prom and no senior year—we wanted to offer them some certainty."

The school's marketing team was tasked with preparing for and making the announcement, which required communication with university staff and crafting the perfect message for admitted students and their parents.

ACTION

After the decision was made, Burns and the marketing team wanted to communicate the free tuition to students via email as soon as possible. They also knew that once the message hit students' inboxes, the rest of the university would be inundated with calls asking for clarification. They spent a few days preparing to walk faculty, staff and admissions representatives through the logistics of how the coming 2020-2021 school year would work. All freshmen are provided with a general education program, attending classes that consist primarily of fellow freshmen. They

will be further divided into cohorts to encourage camaraderie in smaller groups and given the same opportunities any other freshman would receive, such as the ability to participate in campus clubs and, if the dorms open up, the option to live on campus. The marketing department prepared supporting documentation, including an F.A.Q.

President LeBlanc composed an email to students and parents, in collaboration with the marketing and communications departments, that dubbed the initiative an "innovation scholarship." The message followed many of the best practices that brands have adopted in response to COVID-19: It acknowledged that the world is topsy-turvy at the moment and that the safety of SNHU students was a priority. The letter explained what the university was doing to address the crisis head-on—in this case, providing families with the assurance of an education, regardless of any financial burden the pandemic might create or exacerbate.

Once the pieces were in place, marketing sent its message and included other important members of the community: alumni, current students, donors and other internal stakeholders. In communicating with the media shortly after, the team reached out to contacts directly, rather than just send out a press release on PR Newswire.

RESULTS

In addition to the expected onslaught of questions, phones rang off the hook with gratitude. Many prospective students shared that they were about to turn down the offer of admission due to cost or take a gap year as things in the world settled down, but the tuition news changed their minds. Parents opened up about their financial hardships and how meaningful it was for SNHU to deliver such bright news during such a dark time. One mother praised the school's ability to understand student needs, raving that, "The email was incredible and in tune to our reality."

The next two days shattered records. After the announcement was made, the school received 350 deposits for enrollment within one week—compared

Southern New Hampshire University

ORGANIZATION
Southern New Hampshire University

HEADQUARTERS
Manchester, New Hampshire

CAMPAIGN TIMELINE
April 2020

CAMPAIGN RESULTS
87 press articles across 11 states for a potential reach of 270.2 million people. SNHU's webpage containing the press release earned 50,000 views and its social media channels had 15,000 impressions.

to securing 88 deposits in one week in late April 2019. SNHU has so far collected more than 1,000 deposits.

The story continued to spread. News of SNHU's tuition reduction was covered in 87 articles across 11 states, with a potential reach of 270.2 million people. Notable publications included Forbes, The New Yorker, The Boston Globe and WGBH. Posts went up on Twitter and Facebook linking to the statement on SNHU's website, resulting in 15,000 impressions on social and more than 1,400 clicks through to the site. (The page itself earned more than 50,000 clicks on its own.) And while the school's average engagement on Facebook and Twitter each hovers at about 1%, this news saw a 14% engagement rate on Facebook and 8% on Twitter.

Lauren Keane, assistant VP of communications at SNHU, says the tuition decision can serve as a case study in building lasting value.

"Regardless of industry, marketers and communicators must put their customers and audiences first—be flexible, demonstrate that you care about them as humans and show empathy," Keane says. "That is what consumers will remember when the pandemic is over." **MN**

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snhu SNHU ✓
@SNHU

Today we announced plans to reimagine our campus-based learning model to bring more accessible degree pathways to students and families.

SNHU Sets Out to Reimagine Campus-Based Learning
🔗 www.snhu.edu

2:00 PM · Apr 22, 2020 · Twitter for Advertisers

39 Retweets 75 Likes

The Ethics of Marketing a Degree in an Economic Downturn

Higher education is hyped as a means to successful ends—but that guarantee is in question during volatile economic times

BY SARAH STEIMER | MANAGING EDITOR
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The great driver for those hemming over the affordability of higher education has often been the likelihood of a degree that all but guarantees lasting employment.

That was, until the country began careening toward staggering unemployment rates.

The ability for college marketers to publicize their graduates' employability becomes exceedingly difficult when jobs and internships—long touted as one of the best routes to full-time employment—are disappearing every day. The April unemployment rate for those with some college experience or an associate degree was 15% and those with a bachelor's degree or higher was 8.4%. Is it possible to convince families to spend dwindling paychecks on an education that may not lead to immediate or well-paying jobs?

Even before the coronavirus pandemic, the ethics of higher education marketing were paramount. John Bradley, a consultant psychologist with The Educational Guidance Service in the U.K., breaks down three key reasons why: Higher education is an expensive product, the value of the experience can only be judged once students begin their studies and the standards of promotional accuracy are expected to match those of the school's academic research.

"[T]hese issues of ethical marketing are put into sharp focus in the current COVID-19 context," Bradley says.

According to ZipRecruiter, U.S. job openings fell 47% between mid-February and the end of April. And a New York Times article noted residual effects for recession-era grads: Historically, college students who graduate into a recession have settled for lower-paying jobs at less prestigious companies, and an economic theory known as "scarring" suggests the effect can last for 10 or 15 years of higher unemployment rates and lower salaries. It begs

the question of whether families would want to spend the money if the payoffs are narrowing.

But reduced opportunities for college grads doesn't mean these opportunities no longer exist, and higher ed marketers need to find the silver lining without sugar-coating the facts: Yes, the economy looks much different today than it did earlier in the year—but the right degree from a strong institution can still offer a leg up.

Know What Data to Highlight (and What Not to Use)

Not every industry—and therefore not every college or major—is being affected in the same way. For example, figures from ZipRecruiter show that postings for jobs in education fell 48% from mid-February to the end of April, postings for healthcare jobs fell 46% and those for jobs in the finance and insurance industries fell 52%. On the other hand, positions that have seen a lift in job postings since mid-February include e-commerce specialists (266% lift), travel nurses (245% increase) and financial consultants (52% increase).

"There will be differences across schools in terms of what industries their graduates tend to go into, perhaps what part of the country they're in," says Peter Golder, a professor of marketing and faculty director in the Tuck School of Business at Dartmouth College. "It's important for each school to look at their own situation, look at their career placement and adjust the messaging accordingly."

The best data to direct prospective students to, in lieu of underscoring typical graduation-to-employment figures, may be job posting trends for the prospective field. In general, employment and earnings figures tend to be misleading even in the best economic times. The lag between job stat collection and the point of graduation for prospective students, for example, can be particularly misleading.

"If you take a typical four-year course, the graduate statistics they publish will typically be at least one year, sometimes two years old," Bradley says. "They are read by potential students who have not yet applied and so won't start the course for another year. There will then be four more years before those new recruits graduate themselves. The time span between the data quoted and the graduation point for the recruits will be six years or more."

It's also important to consider what types of students you attract. Students from families that are inexperienced with higher education may be under the impression that a degree is a golden ticket to employment, so communications should be carefully crafted to avoid making unintended promises.

"The groups of potential students at greatest risk from any exaggerated marketing claims are those who have the least familiarity with higher education," Bradley says. "This will be two groups in particular: students from backgrounds where there is no history of higher education and so no sources of 'informal' information, and overseas students who may be unfamiliar with U.S. society, geography and higher education."

Long-Term Benefits

Perhaps the most ethical way to suggest the resilience of a college education is for the school to lead by example. Few, if any, institutions have been untouched by the pandemic. When colleges are deft in their pivots and revamps in relation to the economy, safety and regulations, it provides a template for students to become flexible and fact-driven professionals.

"It's really a chance for schools to put into practice what we've always been striving to teach our students for years through this accelerated environment," Golder says. "I do believe there are enhanced learning opportunities and it's incumbent upon schools to take advantage of these opportunities. In that sense, you're looking at an enhanced education rather than a diminished education."

For the school to ethically promote the benefits of its rather expensive product, it needs to emphasize—or create—programming that will give its graduates a leg up. If internships are being canceled or postponed, schools should provide clear messaging that points to its alumni network or alternative programs that provide hands-on experience.

And while there is the concern of economic scarring for those entering the job market during a recession, there is still a long-term benefit to having a degree.

"Churning out graduates that are more ready to operate in these dynamic, uncertain times that are part of business life in general and have been increasing over the decades—certainly that rate of change has increased dramatically in this current situation—but the underlying dynamics of change and uncertainty, those are not going away and the managers who can operate in those environments—those managers will be rewarded over the course of their careers," Golder says.

But like every institution functioning during the pandemic, the most ethical communication may be the most exhausted one: acknowledging that things are uncertain, but that the school is keeping an eye on developments. When the product is as costly and future-defining as higher education, it's best not to make promises that cannot be kept. **MN**

Thoughts from the [Virtual] Quad:

How Higher Ed Marketers Are Working Remotely

Every industry is feeling the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and higher education is no exception. As work has moved off campus and students, professors and staff wonder what happens next, higher ed marketers are tasked with communicating those changes and offering some semblance of normalcy to the audience. We asked marketers from small colleges and large universities about their challenges and successes thus far.

In the immediate term, what's the biggest challenge your team is facing?
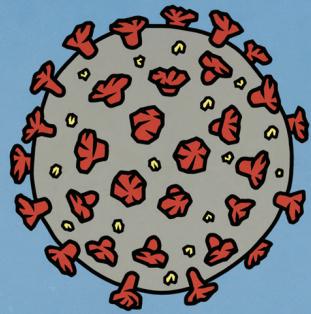
'**W**e have a responsibility to communicate essential information while balancing the need to still tell [our] story in a meaningful way. It's about maintaining a balance.

Effectively brainstorming and coming up with a strategic plan through virtual meetings. So much of our process prior to COVID-19 included getting in a room with a whiteboard and letting our ideas flow until we narrowed in on a plan of action. Far more difficult through a laptop camera from our basements.

When at-home orders were implemented, many of us thought it would be for just a couple of weeks. As that has dragged into a couple of months, we've needed to strategically engage stakeholders who are disappointed and frustrated.

Keeping everyone connected and informed. Coordinating work that is even busier than ever, and at a distance, while our team members have families to worry about, employment concerns, technology issues and many unknowns for the future. It's hard to keep up.

Trying to spark ... creative energy via Zoom. We might not be able to gather around the whiteboard, but I'm constantly impressed by how our team is able to bring their innovative ideas and creative solutions to the challenges we're now being faced with in this new setting.

A spending freeze has been put in place. We are splitting our time between developing and utilizing no-cost marketing ideas and contacting advertising representatives to try to terminate some [signed] contracts for which the tactics have not yet been implemented.

Making sure that our event marketing is effective and [successful] despite having to change all events to online.

PLANNING FOR THE UNKNOWN. IT'S CHALLENGING TO FORECAST WHAT MARKETING INITIATIVES WILL BE MOST NEEDED AS WE APPROACH OUR NEW NORMAL.

How is your school communicating with its audience about the changes it's implementing?

'**W**e've used both internal and public-facing channels such as email, intranet and social media. To ensure accurate and consistent information during a rapidly changing situation, all of our messaging related to COVID-19 has pointed back to a landing page on our website.

Email communications and a separate webpage dedicated to COVID-19 responses for each of our programs. These sites are continuously updated regarding admissions, testing, events, etc. We've also included banner alerts on every page on our website with a direct link to our COVID-19 response efforts.

Social media has been our primary channel and our PR team has been working nonstop to communicate the changes, initiatives and new programs at breakneck speed. Our social channels are augmented with longer-form, timely and consistent updates from our president, which we're then able to integrate onto our main landing page for COVID-19 updates.

We are using every channel at our fingertips: email, website updates, video, paid and organic social content, texts, traditional media advertisements and earned media.

To easily explain a seemingly complex new pass/fail grading option available to our students, our college created a video that was shared with students via email and on our website. What were once monthly executive team meetings with our dean, department heads and senior staff have now become weekly Microsoft Teams meetings. At the university level, we have a weekly "Keep in Touch" newsletter that our university president sends out campus-wide that highlights all we are accomplishing even while remote.

The emails have received positive reactions and our president has personally created weekly updates of the university's reaction and plans for the future. He's a rock star, so those are always welcome with our audiences.

We created several [videos for students] to let them know how we support them. Professors and staff created instructional videos for other faculty on how to [transition] courses online. Traditional marketing outlets such as info sessions and print material are not as effective right now, so we are switching many tactics to digital platforms. Many of these adjustments just accelerated the direction we were going anyway.

Which of your marketing skills are most crucial right now?
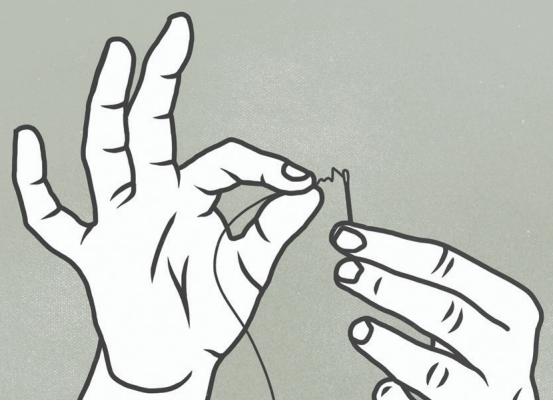
'**A**daptability. As with all schools, we had to quickly pivot from business-as-usual to crisis communications to overhauling our content strategy entirely.

Listening and communicating. Our internal partners are having a hard time knowing how they can best interact with their audiences, and we're here to help lead them in the right direction.

Being nimble and working as one team. We've implemented digital and direct marketing tactics to help move prospects through our enrollment funnel in different ways than ever before.

Soft skills. Discussions with upper-level administrators regarding marketing theory, ROI and other analyses, budgets and tactics, as well as talking with vendors about making adjustments to contracts and marketing plans that are already negotiated, signed and in place.

We've noticed a positive response rate with personalizing communications to our audience based on programs they've noted as an interest. We steer clear of bombarding prospective students with information about a program they've no use for. Our goal is not to over-communicate or have our emails fall through the cracks with the vast amount of COVID-19 emails going out. Segmenting emails is key.

Marketing strategy is critical right now. This is uncharted territory but we can make educated guesses. Our audiences are even more engaged right now and [we] need to keep that conversation going and find them where they are. Data seems to be working because leads are pouring in.

HAVING THE RIGHT MESSAGING STRATEGY IS ALWAYS KEY TO DIFFERENTIATING OUR UNIVERSITY AND ACADEMIC PROGRAMS, BUT ESPECIALLY NOW WHEN THE CONCEPT OF CAMPUS LIFE ACROSS THE COUNTRY AND THE WORLD HAS TAKEN ON NEW MEANING.

"Hands-down, the ability to be nimble. The agility with which the marcom team has handled the influx of new initiatives the university has strategically implemented to deal with the impact of COVID-19 is nothing short of miraculous. All higher ed institutions are figuring this out, together, as we go."

What changes are you implementing right now that you think will outlast the coronavirus?

'**W**ithin the first month of our campus closing to visitors, we launched virtual visits, a digital viewbook and an online community for admitted students. These are ways to engage current and future students wherever they are, and we'll continue to offer options like these even after this crisis ends.

Our temporary shift into the virtual space has pulled us out of our comfort zones and required us to quickly learn the ropes of remote instruction and online collaboration—skills that will continue to benefit us long after stay-at-home orders have been lifted and in-classroom courses resume. We have learned new ways to reach broader audiences of prospective students, supporters and fans.

We have created campaigns around the application deadline using email marketing and paid advertising—among other strategies—that have helped nurture the leads we have in our funnel. We also will implement more virtual events.

The push to be online is happening in our classrooms, too. We need to be innovative, adaptable, open-minded and connected with the data. The challenges are not unsurmountable. It's just a lot of work.

Working remotely. It's become pretty evident that we can all do our jobs on the marketing team remotely to some extent. We'll never be a fully remote team, but it's logical to believe that we'll shift our work schedules to allow the team to work from home as a part of their regular schedules.

We're experiencing that not everyone has to be in the same physical space to achieve success, complete projects and be creative. The lessons learned through our analytics from the digital strategies we've implemented and our use of video will continue to guide our marketing strategy moving forward.

Brainstorming and collaboration among marketing and recruiting professionals to develop new ways to reach potential students outside of the pipeline and working more diligently with those already in the pipeline.

PLANNING FOR THE UNKNOWN. IT'S CHALLENGING TO FORECAST WHAT MARKETING INITIATIVES WILL BE MOST NEEDED AS WE APPROACH OUR NEW NORMAL.

Recruitment Gets a Crisis Overhaul

As campuses remain closed and COVID-19 weighs on the minds of prospects, it's time for higher ed marketers to reconfigure tours, social media strategy and other traditional recruitment tactics

By Steve Heisler

As campus tours went kaput across the country due to stay-at-home orders and strict social distancing guidelines, Siena College in Loudonville, New York, concocted a way to show off its buildings while keeping visitors safe. The marketing and admissions departments worked closely with public health officials and configured a route for cars to enter campus and observe surroundings—a drive-thru campus tour.

On a Saturday in May, a small parade of 14 cars made its way around the grounds, flanked by signs reading "Be Loud and Green." The car radios were tuned to campus radio station 88.3 FM "The Saint," playing prerecorded student testimonials on a loop.

Higher education marketers are adapting traditional marketing methods that can't coexist with the coronavirus outbreak. The pandemic canceled or conflicted with many typical channels, whether because in-person events became too risky or marketing budgets evaporated.

The audience itself is cautious as well, with parents and prospective freshmen already beginning to reevaluate next steps. Art and Science Group, a higher education consultancy, found that as of April, 40%

of students had yet to make a deposit at their top-choice school because the majority is unsure whether they'll attend. Those abandoning their first-choice school are doing so because of affordability, health concerns, the inability to stay for an overnight visit or simply because they didn't like that school's response to COVID-19.

Higher ed marketing must adapt in a way that's sustainable and safe yet still effective. In some cases, that process requires a significant paradigm shift, while other strategies are only in need of a few tweaks. We've taken a closer look at five marketing channels in particular—campus tours, social media, open house events, paid ads and direct mail campaigns—and broken down big-picture changes into manageable steps. We've also

created a ranking system, with five being the greatest level of change required and one being the least.

Not every example that follows is a perfect substitute for traditional tactics, but even then—and even if it's not perfectly executed—remember that your audience still wants to hear from you.

"People have a very high level of grace right now," says Krista Berend, director of social media at Texas A&M University. "The quality of your livestream, the quality of your ad or the fact that you're Zooming in and the cat knocks over the camera, or the kid runs into your bedroom or whatever … I mean, when we're living in a world where [if] Al Roker is doing the weather from his kitchen table, then anything's possible."

Tours – 5/5

IN THE PAST: Student-led tours around campus, which included lecture halls and dormitories. Group Q&A sessions with admissions. Customized routes based on major, division or school.

NEW OPTIONS: General information video posted online. Google Maps tagging of important areas around campus. Student testimonials crowdsourced from current tour guides and ambassadors. Q&A sessions conducted over Zoom.

Rush Materials Online

Campus tours are one of the most effective tools in a higher ed marketer's belt. A survey by college search platform Scior found that 80% of high school juniors and 84% of parents rated campus visits as either "very important" or "extremely important." Schools agree, with 98-99% of 115 nonprofit universities, surveyed by the higher ed firm Ruffalo Noel Levitz, labeling visits as "effective." The tours must march on, even if nobody is physically marching onto campus.

While nothing can truly replicate the experience of a visit, marketers can adopt a piecemeal approach in offering prospective students a taste from afar, starting with an audit of materials that already exist.

Accomplish the simpler tasks first: Any hard copy brochures handed out before tours can be digitized and emailed directly to prospects. Capture video of preview presentations that occur before tours, as they'll provide a concise overview of the school that's not only easily digestible from afar but can be watched any time.

Live presenters will need to be replaced, but this might allow for marketing to play a larger role in crafting the message. For example, Bucknell University started with a slide deck and transformed it into a standalone video that includes voiceover and messages from school administrators and faculty who may otherwise not have the time to swing by a live session.

Student Speakers

Student involvement remains paramount to recruitment. "When somebody visits the college, it's not the director of admissions that gives the walking tour—it's always a current student," says Robert Carroll, co-founder of digital tour platform CampusReel. "Content made by students … more effectively captures [some] of the most important elements of an in-person visit, which [are] people and community elements. People can go on Google Images and see the quad and the dorms. What people are really trying to figure out [in person] is, 'Can I see myself among [the students]?'"

Solicit video testimonials directly from campus ambassadors. This material allows students to speak more freely about their experience and showcase the personalities that make up your student body. Upperclassmen can cover what your university is like under some semblance of normalcy, such as campus life, annual traditions and extracurriculars. Rising sophomores may speak to how the second half of their freshman year was upended by COVID-19 and how the university responded to the outbreak.

Your existing roster of tour guides is a great first place to look for your on-camera personalities, particularly because those students have already been cleared to speak on behalf of the university and possess basic presentation skills: They know to smile, speak in an engaging fashion and let their personalities shine.

Google Maps

Google Maps is an easy way to virtually walk around neighborhoods and can be used similarly on campus. Even when tours were in full swing, prospective students and their parents had the option of using the tool to preview school grounds. Although it's a great way to admire your school's architecture, it fails to present much else, including the ability to customize a route based on major.

Schools might consider working with a company such as CampusReel to evolve the process of poking around Google Maps into something that more closely resembles an in-depth tour. CampusReel's software is built on crowdsourcing—students may shoot short videos and upload them, tagged to a particular location in Google Maps. Schools can also add prerecorded video from inside buildings and display facts about the university, saving prospects from having to consult multiple documents.

Not all schools have the financial resources to work with a third party, but tech-savvy marketers can take full advantage of Google's functionality to include custom markers on maps; it takes a bit of coding, but the site's tutorial helps. Don't forget to venture off campus by identifying popular restaurants, shops and other attractions, with links to Yelp reviews.

Social Media – 3/5

IN THE PAST: Regular updates on campus events and news. Student-run accounts. A mix of current and archived content. Playful tone.

NEW OPTIONS: Increased engagement. Emphasis on student voices. A less playful tone.

Watch Your Language

Berend, of Texas A&M, says her day-to-day responsibilities have not changed much since the pandemic hit in mid-March. What has changed is the mindset of prospective students who have likely been inundated with messages about COVID-19 across every possible social media channel.

"They're living in a world dominated by screens," Berend says. "What's helpful for marketers in thinking about them is that most of us—our lives have been upended in some regard, too. It's easy for us to think about, 'How would I want my student [to receive] this?'"

The answer, she says, is to simply be honest and direct. For example, it's advisable to post about your university's response to COVID-19, particularly how you are ensuring student safety when they return to campus (all while avoiding the phrase, "In these trying times…").

Berend recommends striking an upbeat but tempered tone, so do away with text that conveys an abundance of elation. Eschew exclamation points and all-caps words, which may read as feigned enthusiasm. There will be plenty of time for genuine excitement once campus is humming again.

Separate Social Channels

The competition for eyeballs, likes and shares right now is particularly fierce. "Before COVID, families might visit one or two campuses as they start to think about college choices," says La Dawn Duvall, executive director of visitor and parent services, communications and public affairs at the University of California, Berkeley. "Because [there's] potential for a family to visit 15, 20 colleges … from the comfort of their own home, it's more important now to create methods by which someone knows how to get to you."

Incoming freshmen also have little time or patience for digging through your social media feeds to find relevant information. Consider opening separate accounts with the sole purpose of sharing relevant content to high school students. Reserve the main channels to focus on bigger-picture university news, such as research studies, while the marketing-focused channels can talk about campus life and be run by students themselves—which feels more personal.

Post from the Past

In the absence of new events and happenings to document, archived content can do the heavy lifting of filling up your feeds and telling incoming freshmen the story of what campus will look like soon, even if it's not until their sophomore year. Archive photos can highlight dorm and campus life, which have mostly fallen by the wayside during stay-at-home rules.

No need to dig too deep, either: Feel free to repost content that has already enjoyed a long shelf life on social media. Just don't forget to clarify exactly when this content was created, as it'll likely depict students interacting without social distancing.

Instagram remains the most popular social channel among college-aged students, according to Business Insider, so stay on the platform but consider increasing the frequency by which you post Instagram stories—schools can better control exactly when this content is viewed and won't need to comb their main feed and delete posts, because Instagram stories disappear automatically after 24 hours. "If there is a huge announcement or outbreak … it doesn't matter how well-crafted or well-strategized your message, it's going to fall on deaf ears if it goes out at the wrong time," Berend says.

Open Houses – 4/5

IN THE PAST: In-person Q&A sessions with faculty and admissions officers. One-on-one meetings with professors from different departments.

NEW OPTIONS: Video call Q&A sessions. Increased number of spokespeople. Earlier contact with classmates.

Don't Zoom Onto Zoom

"The biggest mistake I see clients making right now is just … "Hey, let's roll out a PowerPoint slide, we'll have a bunch of talking heads and we'll open it up to questions at the end," says Scott Rhodes, senior strategist at the higher ed agency Echo Delta.

Instead, take this opportunity to break up what was once a catchall explanation of the general university. Offer more sessions than normal and specialize them by major, interests or geographical location—whatever makes the most sense for your university. Large groups on video calls can be intimidating and are not conducive to the kinds of casual conversations before and after the session that might arise in person and connect potential students with each other.

If possible, include one-on-one breakout conversations as part of your open house schedule. Individualized attention sets your university apart. "It really is a way to showcase how hands-on you are as an institution," Rhodes says.

Make More with Less

Duvall oversees Cal Day, an immersive, annual event in mid-April that offers 500 in-person sessions and draws more than 40,000 prospective freshmen. This year, with the understanding that students are trapped at home with a lot on their minds, they made the event more manageable by expanding it to Cal Week while still offering upwards of 250 sessions.

Cal Week was a success not just because it required a massive, last-minute rework, but for its ability to include students who may not otherwise have visited the campus due to financial or logistical restrictions. This group is significant: In 2017, the Jack Kent Cooke Foundation found that 44% of students did not visit their first-choice school during the admissions process, and 75% said it was due to financial constraints.

To increase the accessibility of prospective freshmen weekends and accommodate stay-at-home orders, higher ed institutions can consider moving some or all open-house events online even after pandemic restrictions are lifted. This move also serves to attract more alumni because they wouldn't have to travel to be a presenter; their perspective can directly address parents' concerns about the ROI of a college degree and the doors it opens.
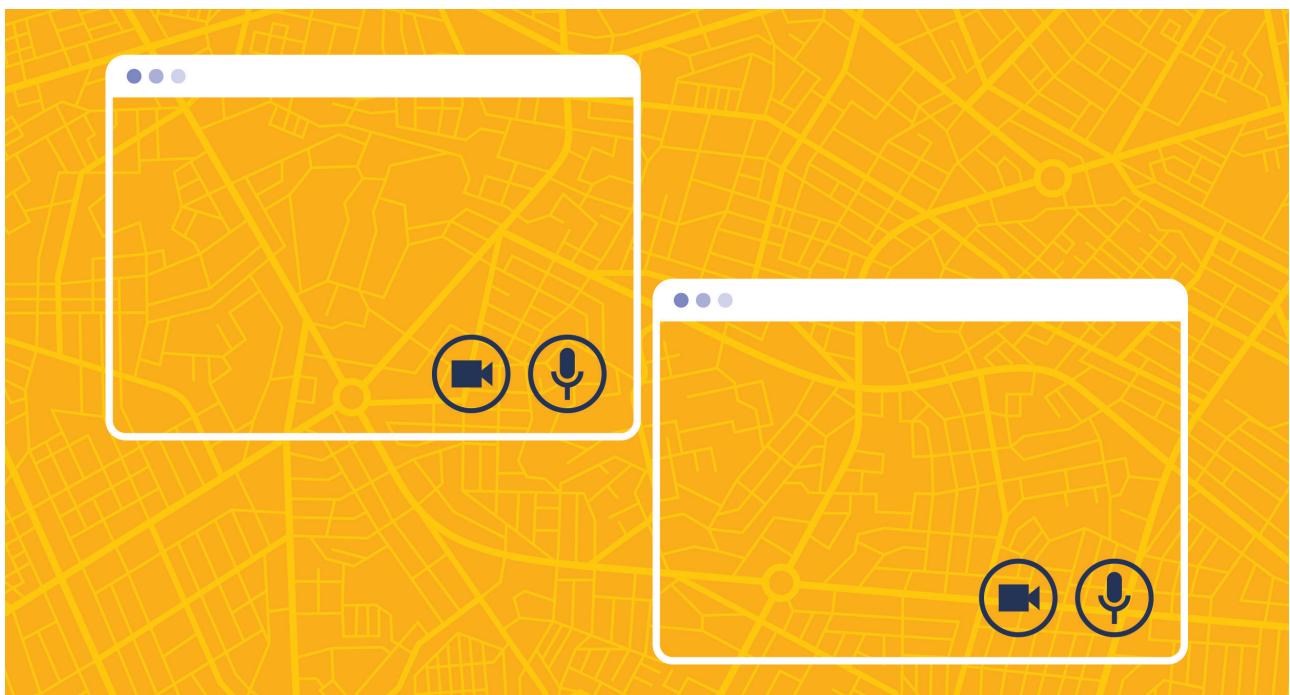
Paid Ads – 3/5

IN THE PAST: Advertising is a staple in marketing budgets and depicts the entire college experience.

NEW OPTIONS: Consider redistributing the funds to other areas, and if not, focus away from student life.

Is Now the Time?

Just because other brands and schools are expressing their feelings on the pandemic doesn't mean your school is required to weigh in right away. "Being reactive is not the best strategy," Berend says. "It might not be the best time to advertise, and that's OK. A lot of times, marketers don't want to miss the next big thing … but I am definitely in the camp that you speak when you have something to say."

However, advertising space is purchased far in advance, and it may be too late to receive a refund. In that case, consider replacing your planned ad with something that speaks to how your university is addressing the pandemic. For example, after SXSW was cancelled, Texas A&M found itself with billboard and newspaper space to fill, but without the audience it expected. They chose to put together a piece that showcased one of the school's researchers who, at the time, was receiving attention for their tuberculosis vaccine and how it might help in the fight against COVID-19.

Direct Mailers – 2/5

IN THE PAST: Communication with parents. Primarily focused on attending classes and living on campus.

NEW OPTIONS: Share COVID-19 news. Promote online courses.

Remember the Parents

Parents of college-bound high school seniors are having second thoughts. According to recent data gathered by Lipman Hearne, 32% of the 300 parents surveyed are weighing possibly abandoning their child's first-choice school, and more than half expect a discount on tuition if next semester exists online-only.

They continue to focus on the pragmatism of a college education. "It comes down to … that question of, 'What is the value of a higher education degree?'" says Jessica Stoddard, director of marketing and brand management at D'Youville College in Buffalo, New York.

"They want to get [their kids] into the places that will get them jobs."

The USPS is a great way to get brochures that might otherwise be distributed on campus or at college fairs into the hands of parents. They may not be privy to emails sent by universities directly to students, but they still check the household snail mail.

School Safety

Most of the material in your university's direct mail can remain the same, but the increased competition for eyeballs and dollars means that personalization will win the day. Names can be printed in big letters and the pieces can be further customized to include information about online classes and what the university response has been to COVID-19. Alleviate fears that parents may have about safety and the ROI of college, particularly one their child may not be attending in person next semester.

"We're telling colleges to be crystal clear on the steps that they have taken to make the campus safe for the fall," Rhodes says.

A step-by-step guide to your university's cleaning protocol and quarantine procedures reminds parents that your school is erring on the side of caution, even as stay-at-home orders vary by state. But just as important is the diligence of ensuring none of the photos could trigger a social distancing alarm. Remove shots of in-person graduation ceremonies, packed freshman orientation events and homecoming games. Right now, the priority is getting students in the door, even if it's a virtual one, so you can later provide them the full college experience they've been looking forward to. **MN**