

The Future of Higher Ed Marketing

The pandemic's effect on higher education, how your digital presence should evolve, trends to embrace in 2021, and other helpful tips from a panel of industry experts



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Introduction

While college and university enrollment has been declining by 11% since 2011, we can't underestimate the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic has had on higher education institutions.^[1]

According to a study conducted by Clearing House, undergraduate enrollment was down by 2.5% in the fall of 2020. It should be noted that public two-year institutions experienced the largest decline, while the majority of four year schools saw much less change.^[2]

Regardless of institution type, every college and university had to quickly adapt to a new reality. Most courses were delivered online, on-campus events were canceled, and on-campus living was heavily reduced.

IT departments had to implement and maintain an infrastructure to support remote work, course delivery and exam proctoring, while Marketing and Communications needed to keep students, staff, and the community informed at all times.

What does the impact of COVID-19 mean for higher education in 2021 and beyond? What do colleges and universities need to do in order to stay competitive? And how will higher ed's digital strategies change as a result?

In addition to our own research, we asked our partners for their thoughts. This white paper will provide an overview of the challenges and opportunities for higher education marketing and provide actionable recommendations.

Thank you to the following contributors:

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The Pandemic's Effect on Higher Ed

How has COVID-19 impacted higher education budgets and strategy?

As the pandemic started to spread, most higher education institutions responded in similar way as businesses: by making budget cuts, restructuring departments and responsibilities, and, in some cases, eliminating positions.

However, while the initial reaction was one of caution, higher education was—and still is—keenly aware of the value of digital marketing. In fact, some organizations reported that decision-makers are recognizing the importance of a strong digital presence and CMS more than before.



Curt Kotula
Creative Director
Fastspot

"With projects that are underway, it is more important than ever that the web CMS be easy to use, easy to learn, and tailored to fit the scale of the new content team."

In an effort to balance the need to be financially conservative with the need to improve their web presence, an iterative approach to website optimizations and redesigns has become a popular approach.

Rather than revamping the entire websites, many colleges and universities are enlisting the help of consultants to perform content audits, make recommendations for an improved content strategy, and to give their website a facelift.



Fran Zablocki
Director of Integrated Strategy
Fastspot

"Clients still want to do the big stuff, but many have been frozen in place. That has allowed us to pursue smaller low hanging fruit projects to keep momentum going until things open back up."



Sandra Fancher
Chief Innovation Officer
Stamats

"The website's goal was focused on visit sign-ups or getting people on campus for a tour. With COVID-19, the strategies had to shift immediately. This meant content had to tell a story, replace the personal conversation, and showcase the school. And all of this had to be done quickly while transitioning to online learning. It was like changing the wheels on a moving car."

Adjusting to a New Reality

What will be different in 2021 and beyond?

Experts have predicted that college-aged students will have to wait until summer to get the vaccine. In addition, only half of them said that they are willing to get vaccinated.^[3]

Not only will colleges and universities have to find ways to make up the financial shortfall of the past year, but also navigate a way forward. This includes revamping program offerings, streamlining processes, reworking the value proposition of certain degrees, collaborating with businesses, embracing new technologies, and changing the approach to their digital presence.



Damon Borozny
Director of Project Management
Nebo

“We’re starting to see a little less caution as we enter 2021. In 2020, there was a deep concern about budget and appropriateness with messaging. There’s a general sense that while things are still different, there will be a turn towards more normalcy as the vaccine is distributed. Demand for graduate degrees is soaring, which is common during years of economic uncertainty. We expect this trend to continue through 2021.”



Fran Zablocki
Director of Integrated Strategy
Fastspot

“We predict a huge growth of interest, investment, and effort toward the student services and information platforms. Enrollment and marketing have been on board with modernizing their digital efforts for years, but other areas have lagged far behind. I think we’ll see more focus on good user experience across the student to alumni lifecycle.”

What we can expect is for Marketing and Communications departments to work with both IT and third-party vendors to connect data from multiple systems like CRMs, recruitment software, and CMSs to deliver a smoother, more holistic user experience.

A development that will continue is an increased shift to the Cloud. While this is not a new trend, choosing SaaS-based systems over on-premise environments is gaining more momentum as COVID-19 revealed the need to pivot on a dime, including unburdening IT from datacenter and software maintenance.

Profiles of Successful Organizations

What characteristics will define the organizations that continue to thrive?

COVID-19 has certainly disrupted higher education; and disruptions like this can have the ability to level the playing field. Whoever is able to best adapt to the new challenges will persevere. This includes taking a fresh look at new program offerings, collaborating with businesses to develop real-life opportunities, and effectively addressing the needs of a diverse student body.

Digital strategy will need to play an integral role in supporting all of those initiatives.



Curt Kotula
Creative Director
Fastspot

"Take an honest and open approach to messaging how COVID-19 has changed your long-term institutional priorities. Has this unprecedented experience altered your 5 or 10 year plan? How has your institution applied what's been learned from this experience and how they will invest in future student experience?"

Delivering superior customer service across the board, from the first visit to your website through the application and college experience, will be more important than ever. One of the prerequisites for this is a deep understanding of each segment of your audience.



Tommy Doyle
Business Development Manager
Fastspot

"Institutions should be in touch with their students and their needs, and the ability to message strongly about new initiatives and new offerings is important. Especially where undergraduate students are concerned, we know that Gen Z is frequently concerned with the future of the world that they are to inherit, and are looking to create significant change as it impacts issues important to them such as the environment and social justice."



Abu Noaman
President
Elliance

"Gen-Z and Millenials are race-blind, faith-blind and gender-blind. As part of the most diverse generation in U.S. history, they take diversity for granted. They accept, not just respect, others for who they are – irrespective of their race, religious beliefs, and their gender preferences."

In order to deliver the best possible experience to your current and prospective students, consider performing an audit of all processes, including applying, registering, and making payments to identify and mitigate friction points.

Now that most on-campus processes are scaled down or even eliminated, it is of utmost importance to leverage technology to not just replace the in-person services, but also make things simpler while still providing a highly-personalized experience.

Emerging Digital Trends

What are some of the trends to expect in 2021?

As COVID-19 remains a part of higher education's reality, it is increasingly important to not just keep your website visitors up-to-date on the latest data, but thoroughly and prominently feature safety measures, precautions, and the organization's ability to be agile and deliver on innovation. This does not just include different ways to deliver courses, but also to foster the sense of community to which students and donors had been accustomed.



Fran Zablocki
Director of Integrated Strategy
Fastspot

"COVID-19 communications have gone from emergency to standard, and the best efforts have stopped treating the new normal as an ongoing exception and embraced it as the space we will be in permanently. It's no longer here's how we're changing our approaches and processes during COVID-19, but more like here's how we've innovated and evolved into something completely different, permanently."



Tommy Doyle
Business Development Manager
Fastspot

"Despite any initial growing pains to moving more events and publications to digital settings, many colleges and universities are recognizing the increased interactions with those who are part of the extended community, but may be located hundreds or thousands of miles away. Even as communities transition back to physical gatherings, many organizations will probably want to compliment in-person events with easily accessible digital offerings."

When speaking to higher education Marketing and Communication Directors, it became clear that university websites now have to fulfill multiple purposes, even more than before.

Traditionally, the primary focus of a higher ed website was to recruit new students. While this clearly needs to remain a priority, the importance and challenge of retaining existing students has now also come to the forefront as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.



Sandra Fancher
Chief Innovation Officer
Stamats

"Previous digital marketing trends are not going to be as effective in 2021. Popular tactics like geo-fencing past events will not be an option as those events didn't occur in 2020. Our analytics are also affected. Internal filters are not able to separate out those on campus and we will not be able to do a comparative year-over-year in the same way. These changes will require looking at data a different way, targeting our audience with AI and other advanced tools, and making sure our digital is performing at every step of the funnel."

Accordingly, organizations have to ensure that current students do not feel left behind. Colleges and universities have implemented additional email campaigns directed at current students, and are also looking at ways to make their websites, particularly their home page, more inclusive.

In addition, the current economic climate and the absence of the traditional on-campus college experience, coupled with a dose of skepticism regarding the quality of online learning, has made it more challenging to attract new students. We can expect higher education to showcase career outcomes and to provide insights in what it's like to be part of the university's community, even in an online environment.

Furthermore, the pool of prospective students is becoming more diverse. In fact, a recent study by Salesforce showed that 61% of students are not full time students between the ages of 18-22.^[4]

Finally, establishing a strong social media presence is more important than ever before. University Business reported that "Higher ed Facebook advertising increased 7% during the pandemic compared to the same 10-week period one year ago, with institutions collectively spending a total of just under \$55 million. Private online universities had the largest increases in spending. The average Facebook ads spend was \$131,402 per institution, or about \$54,000 per month".^[5]

In addition to social media ads, sharing content to social media platforms to reach a more diverse audience will be just as crucial as pulling crowd-sourced content into your website. Social media mash-ups will likely become even more prominent than before.

Helpful Tips for Marketers

What advice would you give to marketers for 2021?

The ability to deliver content that resonates with segments of a diverse audience will be a multi-faceted challenge that needs to be addressed.



David Poteet
President
NewCity

"Learn from the experience of international students to give prospective students a better sense of the institution, even though they're not able to visit in person. Some of the things you can do without having to rework your entire website include creating opportunities for direct interaction between prospective students and current students and faculty like Zoom video conferences, live chats, and live social media events featuring current students talking about campus life. Prioritize great photography and videos that show both campus and people rather than virtual tours."



Monica Sanchez
Account Director
Fastspot

"Conduct site audits in order to identify areas of improvement rather than looking at complete overhauls, especially if you're being asked to do more with less. We help highlight and prioritize needs for clients that are feeling overwhelmed with managing a long list of updates they feel they need, but don't have the budgets to make it all happen."



Abu Noaman
President
Elliance

"Amplify your blog and publications to achieve Google page 1 rankings. Weaponize your content based on your schools' thought leadership, innovation, and intellectual capital with a Keyword Lexicon and an ongoing search engine optimization campaign that attains top Google rankings and fosters social sharing. Invest in a more robust content mix for your academic blog, developing a deep archive of student and alumni stories that can be used by your enrollment counseling team. Prioritize stories of audiences that drive institutional revenue."



Sandra Fancher
Chief Innovation Officer
Stamats

"Evaluate your site as a prospective student. Start in Google and enter what you think they would enter. What page do you land on? In 3-5 seconds, what is your first impression? Can you easily get to the next step? Then watch others do it, even over Zoom screened share. Don't coach, just watch them find a task. Read your content out loud and critically assess if this is how you would talk to a prospective student or family. If it doesn't pass the test, start rethinking your content strategy and tone."



Jason Smith
Managing Director & Founder
OHO Interactive

"In 2021, brands should prepare to have less tactical data available from ad networks. Apple's iOS14 introduces functionality that makes it easier for users to opt out of Facebook tracking which in turn reduces (or removes) Facebook's ability to deliver highly-personalized and targeted ads based on user location, history, and behaviors. And last year, Google stopped producing their annual search terms report, and started omitting 10-20% of search query data, making it more difficult for campaign managers to recognize which queries and keywords are worth spending on and which aren't. We expect Google will continue to pursue its own interests in taking over the performance of campaigns, which may lead to additional obfuscation of your ad spend and gaps in data reporting and analysis."



Damon Borozny
Director of Project Management
Nebo

"Digital marketing is going to see an increase in competition in 2021. This means you need to plan your spend wisely as CPCs and CPMs go up. Also, with increased competition, it's essential to make sure your messaging is brand-appropriate and stands out against the crowd. Higher ed marketing tends to look and sound alike. For example, while rankings will always serve a place in marketing messaging, you'll need to think beyond that and understand your audience. Speak to them in an authentic way that speaks to how you can address their concerns."

Advocating for Budget

How can marketers make a case for increasing or maintaining budgets?

The issue of budgets can't remain undiscussed. Some colleges and universities are more dependent on digital marketing than others.



David Poteet
President
NewCity

"Institutions with strong brands within their areas of focus can afford to cut back on digital marketing without as much impact on their recruiting. But for everyone else, cutting back only ensures you will fall further behind. If you are facing budget cuts I would always recommend focusing on understanding ideal-fit students better and creating authentic, personal, substantive content that demonstrates the unique character of your institution. Excellent content on your own website and social channels is more valuable than digital marketing."



Tommy Doyle
Business Development Manager
Fastspot

"Reallocate the funds that used to be budgeted for on-campus events like open houses, information sessions, or campus tours. All of this needs to happen digitally now. Even after people are allowed to travel more freely, will your campus be the first place that they consider visiting, or will they have other priorities and look to the website to be the primary source of information before making a visit?"



Fran Zablocki
Director of Integrated Strategy
Fastspot

"Institutions, especially for prospective students, only exist virtually right now - so even if you weren't prioritizing digital before, you absolutely have to be now. Nobody can rely on a beautiful walk through the quad with frisbees flying, followed by a sample class, followed by a student pep rally and overnight visit to sell the place. All of that has to be done virtually. If you aren't doing it or doing it well, somebody else who is, taking students from you."



Monica Sanchez
Account Director
Fastspot

"Consider working with consulting firms on a retainer basis and ensuring that the firms are transparent and collaborative with how retainer hours will be used throughout the course of the year. If and when a project gets the green light, the client knows the hours are there and have been reserved. This also gives clients peace of mind that all hours will be utilized throughout the course of the year and nothing will go unused."



Abu Noaman
President
Elliance

“Focus on good storytelling and virtual tours that combine the best of still photography, student/alumni testimonials/quotes, and a sense of place and culture. Use the testimonials/quotes to convey your school’s culture, not as a way-finding device. Don’t show a dorm as a physical space, tell the story of a dorm friendship that endured for many years.”.



Damon Borozny
Director of Project Management
Nebo

“It’s best practice to always measure your marketing efforts. You should be in the habit of reporting on performance against KPIs and clearly showing the ROI/ROAS of your marketing. Additionally, budget is always needed for innovation, even though that’s often the first area that’s cut. Marketers can use tools such as Google Trends, Google Ads Keyword Planner, and SEM Rush to showcase market trends, understand marketing costs, and see what your competitors are doing.”



Sandra Fancher
Chief Innovation Officer
Stamats

“One of the biggest areas is ad spend strategies and mark-up. In 2021, campaigns should be targeted to smaller groups. Institutions should have dozens (if not more) ad strategies running per program. Spending less on ads can be a good thing, so make sure the agency is focused on optimizing ad spend regardless of their professional services plan. Make sure all the teams are working together. It was common that enrollment and marketing might have two parallel strategies, and I think we will see more collaboration in higher education in 2021 to streamline budgets and increase conversions.”

In addition, a low-cost way of sharing compelling content is to encourage student ambassadors to post authentic Instagram moments 2-3 times per week.

How Higher Ed Sites Can Evolve

How will sites change in 2021 and beyond?

One of the major challenges for higher ed websites is that they now bear much more responsibility to establish the sense of community that was a given for on-campus experiences.



Abu Noaman
President
Elliance

"We have entered a new era of natural language, sentence-based and question-based search with the advent of voice-activated search on mobile phones like Google Assistant, Siri, Microsoft Cortana and Amazon Alexa and gadgets like Amazon Echo, Google Home, Apple HomePod and others. Up to 30 percent of searches are now voice driven."



David Poteet
President
NewCity

"We expect to see more institutions anticipating a clearer connection between their digital efforts and return on investment. So we expect to see leaders growing in their ability to use qualitative and quantitative data to guide digital strategy and evaluate performance. In the case of student recruiting, that will require better collaboration and integration between marketing and communications (who often manage the main website) and admissions staff. We still see many institutions where these teams operate in silos with little coordination."



Tommy Doyle
Business Development Manager
Fastspot

"Faculty, staff, and students all really understood and felt the strength of the community when they were able to congregate all together on campus. As everyone has moved to remote learning and working, colleges and universities are realizing that not only do they need to find ways to foster that same type of community while they are distanced, but also that current digital properties don't accurately speak to the strength of that community was previously felt every day by those who spent their time on campus."

One of the prominent trends noted in an article by Cardinal Marketing is the heavy use of chatbots.^[6] In order to deliver good customer service with one-on-one interactions and immediate response times, expect to see higher ed-specific chatbot tools such as AdmitHub, atlas RTX, and Ivy.ai experience a surge.

In an uncertain climate, it is not unusual for current and prospective students to question whether the expense of a college education is indeed a good investment. Highlighting career outcomes can play an important part in making an argument for your university.

Examples include employment rates, industries, job titles, employers, salaries, new opportunities and job satisfaction rates. Career sections are also a good place to feature partnerships with corporations and other initiatives that show how a college is addressing potential gaps between employer needs and the skills of graduates.^[7]

In addition to featuring a school's value proposition in terms of experience, program offerings, and outcomes, colleges and universities are showcasing contributions to causes that are near and dear to the hearts of students, donors, and the community. Some of the strongest topics are contributions to combat the pandemic, helping those in need, supporting social justice, and being environmentally conscious.

To convey the value of online course delivery, colleges and universities will need to generate excitement in a number of ways including testimonials, research, videos that explain what the online experience is like, and images of virtual learning. Other avenues include statistics like success rates and satisfaction scores, research that documents the benefits of online learning, and crowdsourced content.

As traditional on-campus experiences are a long way from returning to normal, colleges and universities will need to find ways to foster community, recruit and retain new students, and maintain alumni relations for continued donations. Expect to see a lot of creativity in the way of chatrooms, small-scale events, virtual scavenger hunts, gamification, live streaming events, virtual town halls, online art exhibitions, and more.

Regardless of where we are on the projected timeline of going back to campus, in order to meet application and enrollment goals, higher ed institutions will need to focus on showing value, building community, highlighting the ways they've innovated in light of the pandemic, and delivering authentic content that resonates with their audiences. The latter will result in an effort to learn more about each individual visitor and adjust the content accordingly.

As continuing education is gaining momentum (1 in 2 adult learners is interested in continuing education), individuals thinking about enrolling in a truck driving program might not identify with content about program offerings that are not relevant to them.^[8] Or, a Gen Z student might be looking for quirky content that is infused with humor, which may be lost on other generations.^[9]

Getting Started With Personalization

What advice would you give to marketers interested in personalization?

Identifying what type of content different parts of your audiences need to see, as well as when and where they need to see it, is arguably one of the most challenging aspects of personalization.



David Poteet
President
NewCity

"In order to measure if your personalization efforts are paying off, you need to have a pre-personalization baseline. Be honest about your resources. Will you be able to develop and execute a strategy and can you commit to analyzing your results? Does your website get enough traffic to provide you with accurate insights in order to create a personalization strategy? When you're starting out with personalization, start small."



Fran Zablocki
Director of Integrated Strategy
Fastspot

"We've found that starting small and targeted allows for testing the personalization workflow to see if it's really what's needed or what you want to sign up for. Organizations have to deeply understand both itself and its audiences in ways that are much more nuanced than a simple set of personas provides."



Sandra Fancher
Chief Innovation Officer
Stamats

"More schools will be evaluating their content story and investing in personalization and online material. Personalization is about making it easier for the user to complete their task. If your process is significantly different for an audience, I would start there. Also, start with one path and write it out the touchpoints, the messages, and the conversion strategy. Then, most importantly, make sure you are monitoring it."

New Content Sections to Consider

Recommended elements for your higher ed website

Chatbots

Why? To deliver great customer service by allowing website visitors to get answers instantaneously and maintain one-on-one interactions even when on campus visits are not possible. In addition, chatbots may allow you to learn more about your audience, identify content gaps, and leverage the data you collect for personalization.

How? There are many tools available, most of which can be implemented quickly by adding embed code to your site. AdmitHub, atlas RTX, and Ivy.ai are chatbots focusing on higher education.

Crowdsourced content

Why? Keeping students engaged with your college or university is more important than ever, now that people are feeling increasingly isolated. In addition, crowdsourced content can help foster a sense of community and deliver social proof.

How? Social media mash-ups, encourage users to create TikTok videos.

Career Outcomes Sections

Why? Especially in uncertain times, when prospective students are skeptical about the investment in a college degree, it is crucial to have a strong value proposition.

How? List employment rates after graduation, average salaries, job titles, demand, employers, and example career trajectories. Feature success stories and partnerships.

Content about causes you support

Why? Prospective students are becoming more invested in topics like social justice and climate change, so it is important to them to be affiliated with a college or university that shares their values and is working on making the world a better place.

How? Feature your causes boldly on the homepage. Consider dedicated pages to the most important causes. On pertinent program pages, show the contributions of your faculty and staff and graduates.

Links to and data from other systems

Why? Students get frustrated when they have to answer the same questions multiple times or go to multiple places to find answers. You want the online experience to be as frictionless as possible.

How? Link to your LMS, student portal, and all systems that your students may need to access. Be sure to do an audit of all processes, such as applying to updating information, registering for classes, and making payments to identify points of friction.

More online services

Why? With on campus visits being severely limited, you want to make sure that students have access to the services they need and are able to have personal one-on-one attention. You also want to ensure that those services are prominent on relevant sections of your portal and website.

How? Links to telemedicine (where possible), ability to schedule video conferences with advisors, admission reps, and financial aid.

Content focusing on what the online experience is like

Why? Students and their parents may still be questioning the value of online education. Some may feel anxious about being left to their own devices and not getting the help or be able to access the resources they need in order to be successful. Others may think that by foregoing the on campus experience, they're missing out. Show them what the reality of the online experience will look like.

How? Interviews and videos of faculty and students, FAQ's, ability to submit questions, show map of WiFi hotspots.

Content focusing on what the on campus experience will be like

Why? At some point, you will go back to an on-campus experience or transition to a hybrid curriculum delivery. Get your prospective students excited about the future and also alleviate the concerns of those who worry about exposure to the virus.

How? Put safety front and center, not just in our on campus initiatives and protocols, but also on your website. Have a dedicated COVID-19 section on your site. Implement emergency alerts on your site and allow students to sign up for notifications. Create a dashboard with pertinent COVID-19 statistics.

Content that fosters community

Why? In the absence of mass events, you want to ensure that students and donors continue to feel a sense of community and belonging.

How? Promote online volunteer opportunities and student organizations and clubs, show "a day in the life" videos of students, staff, and faculty, showcase student spotlights, stream live events, and allow students to showcase their work.

Storytelling

Compelling stories about individuals tend to resonate more deeply with prospective students than statistics or broad narratives.

Gamification

Why? Gamification can be an excellent way to make the application process less intimidating, appeal to a younger demographic, and start nurturing community spirit.

How? Virtual scavenger hunts, fitness challenges, or even a game where you accumulate points for completed steps in the application process that can be cashed in for university swag.

Notable Alumni Section

Why? Your notable alumni can be great ambassadors for your organization, especially in a time where prospective students might consider putting their college education on hold. Inspire them by showing them what's possible.

How? Dedicate a section on your site to notable alumni, feature videos of their accomplishments and include pictures of them as students. If possible, ask them for a quick video interview or speech.

Social Proof

Why? Another method of conveying authenticity and sense of community is to deliver social proof. After all, your audience is likely to trust their peers more than anyone else.

How? Links to review sites, callouts with quotes from reviews, and testimonials.

Personalization

Why? Your audience is becoming more diverse and digitally savvy. In addition, the pandemic has made us feel disconnected, so users appreciate it when they receive personalized attention. In fact, most consumers only engage with organizations who provide personalized, relevant content.

How? Customize images, banners, calls to action, and inline content based on the data visitors volunteer to you, their location, and their digital body language on your site.

Where to Show Personalized Content

Areas of your site to use for targeted content delivery

Banners

As it has been proven time and again, carousels don't work.^[10] In fact, they tend to hurt conversion rates. It's better to stick with one banner image, so make it count by showing an image and a message that resonates with individual visitors based on their program of interest, their preferred type of learning experience (online, hybrid, or on campus), or their age group.

Images

Images are arguably the easiest way to deliver targeted content to your audience, as you don't even have to write any content at all. A high school student who is excited about the on-campus experience will respond favorably to images showing fun group activities or your dorms. A working parent looking for continued education might prefer to see images that more accurately reflect their situation.

Calls to Action

A Hubspot study showed that customized CTA's perform 202% better than generic ones.^[11] Use personalization to deliver CTAs that not only resonate with your visitors based on their persona (prospective student, current student, donor, etc), but also based on what makes the most sense for them at the time of their visit and where they are in their journey.

Contacts

Connect future students with the right people instead of presenting them with a generic contact us form or phone number. Show them the admission reps or advisors dedicated to their region, country, or degree type.

Suggested Links

You never want your visitor to feel stranded, which is why you should show them additional content of interest. Leverage what you know about them to link them to other relevant pages.

Completion messages

A simple way to deliver personalized, instantaneous content is through form completion messages. For instance, if someone fills out a "request more information" form and they indicate that they're a transfer student, you can show them a completion message that links them to a transfer student checklist. Or if they ask a question about COVID-19, you can add links to your dedicated section, your state's department of public health, or other resources based on the content of their question.

FAQs

FAQ sections can get extensive. While you may have unlimited real estate on your page, your visitors don't have unlimited attention spans. Consider re-ordering your frequently asked questions based on the visitor's persona.

Testimonials

We trust people who are like us. When you display quotes from students, try customizing them based on your visitor's program of interest or demographic information.

Callouts

You may display program, student, or faculty spotlights based on a variety of factors like programs that the visitor is interested in, their background (for instance, are they a member of the military or a veteran), or their preferred course delivery format.

Events

Instead of showing the same events to each visitor, you may customize the list based on a visitor's location (for instance, show recruiting events in their area) and their interest (athletics, clubs, lectures).

News

You may want to customize which types of news stories are featured for segments of your audience. You may even let them choose the topics that they prefer to see, which will allow you to use this data point for further personalization on your site.

Videos

Whether you have CTAs with videos or a virtual multimedia center, you will increase conversion (watch) rates if you optimize which videos a visitor sees. You can do this based on previous videos watched or on form submission data.

Forms

Don't frustrate your visitors by showing them forms that are not relevant to them. For instance, if someone has already subscribed to your newsletter, you don't have to continue to show them the sign-up form. Instead, use the real estate for something else.

Exit Pop-ups

If a visitor is about to move away from your site, you could consider showing them an exit pop-up with an additional step to take. If the message is targeted and you truly deliver value, you may be able to keep them on your site longer. For example, if your visitor is a prospective nursing student, show them a link to a quiz or scholarship opportunities for healthcare workers.

Conclusion

As higher education continues to struggle with challenges resulting from COVID-19, it has become clear that in addition to innovating program offerings and processes, digital marketing needs to be re-thought. The colleges and universities that are intentional and thoughtful about investing in their strategy will have a competitive advantage.

Developing a strategy that will render the desired results starts with a deep understanding of both your organization and each segment of your audience. It's not enough to know your college or university's mission statement, org chart, and program offerings. Know what good you're doing in the world (collectively as an institution and as individuals), what you stand for, what you're doing to keep everyone safe, and how you've innovated and continue to innovate as a result of the pandemic.

Most importantly, be aware of the fact that your audience is more diverse than ever before, and you must understand their needs to feel connected and be recognized as individuals. Once you have developed this level of understanding, use your insights and your technology to deliver superior customer experiences.

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Founded in 2001 and based in Atlanta, Georgia, Hannon Hill is the maker of Cascade CMS, an enterprise web content management system, and Clive, a real-time personalization tool and form builder.

Cascade CMS is the #1 most-used enterprise web content management system among colleges and universities. It is currently implemented by over 300 prominent institutions in the United States, Canada, and around the world and powers over 50,000 sites. And those numbers continue to grow each day.

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