



***“What to Say and When to Say It: Student Recruitment Campaigns  
in a Post Pandemic Marketing Landscape”***

*- Sam Thorson, Growth Strategist*

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Marketing and Communication teams for higher education institutions are facing unprecedented challenges when it comes to recruiting and engaging with today's high school students. Colleges and Universities across the country are fighting for the attention of potential students with the hope that these young adults will choose their school over the competition.

Student recruitment campaigns are a staple in the yearly marketing strategies for every institution. For years, universities, colleges, tech schools, and every higher education institution have put into practice some variation of a marketing campaign with the objective to increase their total enrollment.

While student recruitment is not a new objective for schools, these campaigns have evolved over time to include new ways to reach and influence the decision of young adults interested in attending college. Modern marketing strategies have been incorporated into these recruitment strategies. Media spend accolated to digital media tactics increases every year.

As modern recruitment campaigns become more widespread across the country, school administrators have gained access to performance data and audience insights on a never-before-seen scale. Today, marketers have the ability to create campaigns that incorporate advanced interest targeting and personalized message variations to better connect with prospective students.

Additionally, campaign distribution has been revolutionized as well. New marketing channels and available ad placements have increase significantly in a short amount of time. Social media marketing continues to grow with the introduction of new platforms like TikTok. Other digital platforms like Google are advancing their machine learning capabilities to optimize campaigns to generate the best results for the lowest cost.

But with all of these marketing capabilities, schools across the country continue to have a similar problem of successfully increasing their year-over-year enrollment. Why is this?

Many marketers point to external factors being a primary cause for declining enrollment. Factors like a pandemic, economic hardship, or increased learning options for students. While all of these are valid reasons for the stagnant or declining enrollment numbers, there are other contributing factors that can influence a student's decision on whether or not to attend college.

This report will analyze ways in which schools can produce effective recruitment strategies that take into consideration the changing nature of student's decision-making process. The data will highlight ways in which administrators can better connect with prospective students to guide them toward choosing their school.



# Problems Facing Higher Education Pre & Post Pandemic



Higher education has battled a raft of other challenges over the years, including funding cuts following the Great Recession in 2008, the exponential growth, demand, and expectation for technology incorporated into the learning experience, and more.

In addition to these challenges, today's high school students have unprecedented access to information related to the schools they want to attend. Just ten minutes in a search engine will reveal everything a student needs to know about a school — some of which is outside of administrators' control. And many times, simple searches like this can lead to that individual making their decision of where they'd like to apply.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created another obstacle for schools to increase enrollment.

The serious concerns about student health, the push to remote learning, and the need for constant communication with students and parents - all of these issues have led to a pivotal moment in the history of higher education.

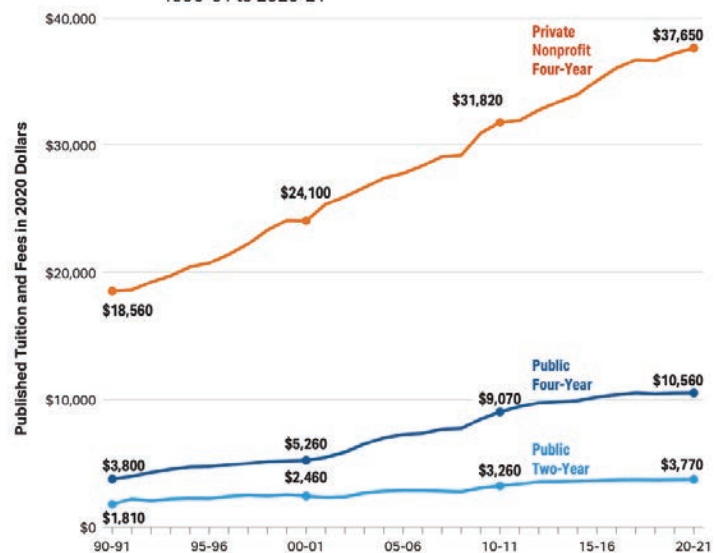
The global pandemic has put higher education at a crossroads - one path leads to a slow demise for institutions unable to make the necessary changes to survive the pandemic. The other is a road that has the potential to lead schools to prosperity if institutions are willing and able to evolve their processes and infrastructures to better connect to the student of the future.

How then, as marketers, can we encourage student to not only pursue a college degree, but to choose our school?

The future of higher education will continue to face challenges. However, by creating effective recruitment campaigns that focus more on genuine, personal engagement with students rather than rely on blanket message statements that fail to stand out in a crowded marketing environment, colleges and universities can enhance recruitment numbers and work toward growing enrollment.

Long before the pandemic, American higher education was already under fire from a society questioning the value of a college degree; The growth of technical and specialty schools and the cost associated with a college education have made people question why the value of a four-year degree.

**FIGURE CP-2** Average Published Tuition and Fees in 2020 Dollars by Sector, 1990-91 to 2020-21



# Marketing Solutions To Student Recruitment



In the mist of darkness, the smallest light shines through – while things for higher education may look grim, there are opportunities.

There are opportunities for schools to connect with students and provide an educational experience that is revolutionary in its own right.

Now, more than ever, communication to prospective students is critical. Not just for student recruitment, but for relationship building for the school.

This report will highlight the shift in prospective student's decision-making process as it relates to choosing a school. The data will be used to outline a roadmap for student recruitment that involves messaging value, accurately timed communication, and the best channels for communication with potential students.

## **Proving & Communicating Value**

Value is a relative term. What one person might consider valuable might be completely irrelevant to someone else. This section will break down the idea of a valuable proposition and how schools can use value messaging to communicate to prospective students on a personal level.

This section will also introduce the idea of Big Values and Small Values – both of which can be used to highlight the differentiating factors about a school, but also create a unique marketing message that stands out among the competition.

## **Timing is Everything – When and Where to Communicate**

There's no secret that timing plays an important role in the decision-making process for high school students. This section will take the idea of marketing timing and dive deep into data that sheds lights on new opportunities for schools to reach students earlier.

This section will also explore the strategies involving proximity saturation. A major concern for many colleges and universities is the local competition. The strategies in this section will help create brand awareness campaigns that target competitors and attract local attention from the target audience.

## **Marketing Tactic Selection and Building an Effective Recruitment Campaign**

The final section of this report will bring everything together and walk through the steps to create an effective recruitment campaign. Prospective students have their own reasons for wanting to go to college, it's the responsibility of the schools to understand those reasons and provide a path to ensure the student sees the benefit in choosing their school.

This section will build upon the framework created by Eugene Schwartz and his philosophy of the "five stages of awareness". The report will analyze each stage and illustrate how marketers can leverage this proven strategy to better connect with the intentions of the target audience and select marketing tactics that move students through their decision-making process.

A value proposition is NOT a new concept. Schools have been marketing their school's "value props" for years. But do today's prospective students understand the value you've laid out?

Today's high school students or anyone considering attending a college or university has access to an unbelievable amount of information at their fingertips. Basic research through search engines can, and will, answer any and all questions that these people have about your school.

Here are just a few of the online recourses students can use to narrow their college search. All of which are designed to help highlight the most valuable aspects of each school

### Popular College Search Apps for Students

College Board's Big Future	Cappex	College Insight
College Confidential	Niche	Unigo
College Navigator	College Simply	College Xpress
Peterson's	Naviance Student	Max U
ACT College Search	The Princeton	College Fair

The common problem with a value proposition is this: Too often a school's value statement to a target audience is too generic to effectively influence prospective students.

This list, a look at the top 30 university motto's from around the country, gives context to what schools consider their value. While there is a difference between a motto and a value statement, the idea is the same – in an industry like higher education, everyone is fighting to stand out and be noticed.

University Name	Value Statement
Oberlin College	<i>Think one person can change the world? So do we.</i>
Boise State University	<i>Splendor without end.</i>
Bryant University	<i>The character of success.</i>
University of California, Santa Cruz	<i>Thinking at the edge.</i>
University of Alaska, Fairbanks	<i>Naturally inspiring.</i>
Union College	<i>Experience the spirit.</i>



With this in mind, we have to introduce the idea that while the value statement is important, equally as important is the way by which we communicate that value to individual students.

The following section will highlight different ways in which schools can not only highlight the value of their institution, but also capture the attention of a potential student on a personal level.

## Big Value vs. Small Value



What is the value of a University? As we've seen, the "value" put on display by colleges and universities is often determined by differentiators that set the school apart from other schools. In theory, this is an effective way to grab the attention of prospective students.

But as we've seen through the evolution of digital marketing, almost every school across the country has taken this same approach to recruiting new students. Because of this, the "value" explained by these institutions have become less powerful and the marketing messaging has started to become generic.

As more and more ads are displayed to potential students everywhere they turn, less and less of them are consciously noticed by the average person. In fact, this is such a widespread phenomenon in the marketing industry that analysts have coined the term "Marketing Blindness" to associate with it.

***"Marketing Blindness refers to the ability of the average person to consciously block out advertising and marketing."***

How can a college or university prevent marketing blindness in their recruitment campaigns? There are a number of ways to stand out – eye catching creative, unique advertising placements, and personalization are just a few. But this does not solve the issue of communicating value to the student.

Understanding Big and Small Value statements can help in this situation.

A Big Value statement is considered a major differentiating factor that a school may have over the competitors. Examples of this would include – lower tuition cost, more scholarship opportunities, more diverse program selection, etc.

While the above-mentioned value points are important factors that a school should communicate to prospective students, they are also the same value points that almost every school will use in their marketing message. The widespread use of similar messaging has devalued these points. In order to prevent marketing blindness, schools should turn to highlighting Small Value points in their marketing.

A Small Value statement is a unique feature of an institution that is designed to capture the attention of an audience. These statements can pertain to a fun or an often-overlooked aspect of the school. Examples of a small value statement include – unique school traditions, notable accomplishment of faculty, or even something as small as a signature sandwich made on campus. Once we've captured the attention of the individual, we can introduce the Big Value statements to help nurture the decision-making process.

## + WHEN & WHERE TO COMMUNICATE TO PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS

In many situations, it's not necessarily the person with the best information that wins the minds of customers. Often, the person who shows up at the right time, during a time of need, that positions themselves as valued resource.

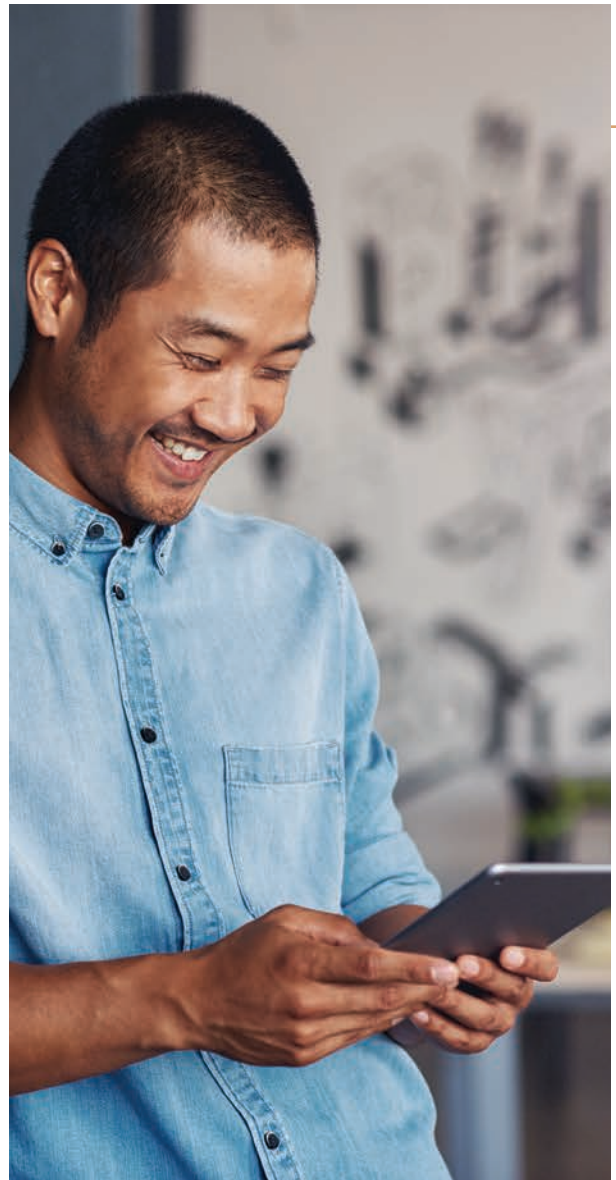
This is also a sentiment that is largely followed by the higher education community. Schools try and market to students as early as possible in order to begin building a relationship with a prospective student. As it relates to communicating to prospective students, timing is everything.

This can mean reaching out during key times of the year, but also making a connection early in a high school career.

Administrators have stated that they recommend students begin to think seriously about their college options in their freshman or sophomore years, but does this mean that we have to wait to begin building a relationship with these students until they're in those important years?

Not by a mile.

Once we know what to say and who we want to set out and recruit, we must then consider when we can reach out to them and how we can begin to associate our school as a viable option for the student in the future.





# Making Introductions with Prospective Students



First impressions matter – and the first impression a college or university makes with a prospective student will create a lasting impression that may dictate their future decision. Because of this, marketing messages need to consider the best way to open communication channels to these students.

As mentioned above, direct marketing communication to students typically begins freshmen or sophomore year. But if we expand the view of a modern recruitment campaign, we can identify different ways that a school can make introductions at an even younger age.

## **Events & Hosting Opportunities**

Events are a great way to bring students on campus, not just high school students, but junior high students as well. These events can include academic fairs, sport camps, music events/shows, etc. Events create an impression for students of any age, but a successful recruitment campaign looks beyond a first impression and works to establish a communication channel or a relationship building opportunity.

Using events as an example, look for ways to bring students back. For a sports camp – offer free tickets to the next game to the student and their family. Host meet & greet sessions with musician & actors after a show for students. Actions like these build upon a first impression and create a relationship with a young student that can be nurtured further with marketing as the individual gets closer to thinking more seriously about college.

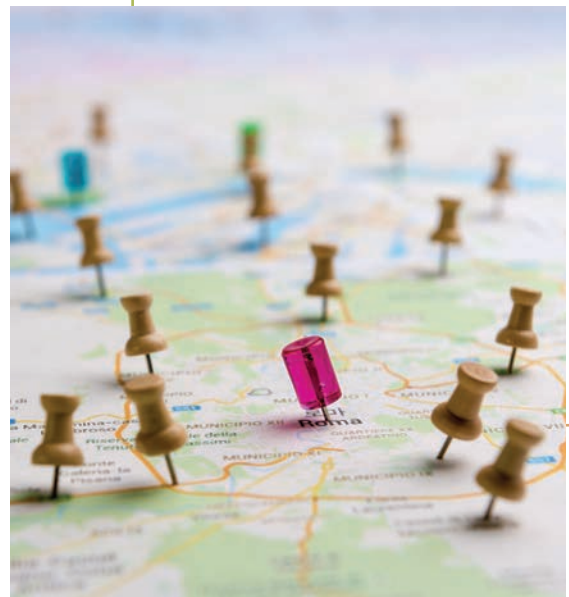
Always be on the lookout for different ways to introduce yourself. Consider reaching out to alumni with children. Offer them tuition benefits for their kids or host alumni events where their children can be exposed to the same school spirit that captured their parents.

These are just a few ideas that focus on making the most out of a first impression. Creating a recruitment campaign that incorporates these tactics extends the reach and influence of a school by positioning relationship building as a top priority.

# Proximity Saturation Marketing Strategies

The previous section discussed ways a school can make the most of their first contact with a prospective student. This next section will focus on analyzing competitive marketing strategies that relate to a school's geography and local brand awareness.

One of the first questions asked in any strategy development meeting is “who’s your competition?”. For many colleges and universities, the primary competitors are the ones who share a similar recruitment area. This could mean another school in the same city, same state, or same region.



When building a modern recruitment strategy, proximity targeting is a key component. In competitive terms, proximity recruitment strategies draw a line in the sand and attempt to beat out competitor messaging through brand awareness campaigns.

## Choosing a Location

The first step in a proximity recruitment strategy is choosing the best location to launch a campaign. A number of factors go into choosing these targeting including – area population, DMA placement options, forecasted impression totals, and competitor in the area.

Locations with larger populations are going to be more ideal for brand awareness strategies because they’ll allow for more segmentation and personalization in a digital marketing campaign. We must also consider the available traditional placements options as well – billboard, print, television, and radio placement rates will need to be considered. Larger locations will have more available traditional placements.

## Tactic Selection

Once a location has been selected, the next step in saturation marketing is to select the appropriate tactics that can be used to saturate the area. As we’ll discuss in the final section of this report, generating awareness often incorporates many traditional tactics.

Billboard, television, print, and radio are all valuable channels that can be used in proximity saturation campaigns. When purchasing the media for these placements, consider seasonal recruitment trends to influence either fall, spring, or summer enrollment.

In addition to traditional marketing channels, digital tactics are also critical. The best digital channels for this campaign will be high volume tactics. These are digital channels that have high volume impressions available. Consider Google Responsive Display ads, YouTube Pre Roll ads, and Facebook/Instagram ads. Each of these tactics will produced a high number of impressions at some of the best cost.

More information about tactic selection will be covered in the following section.

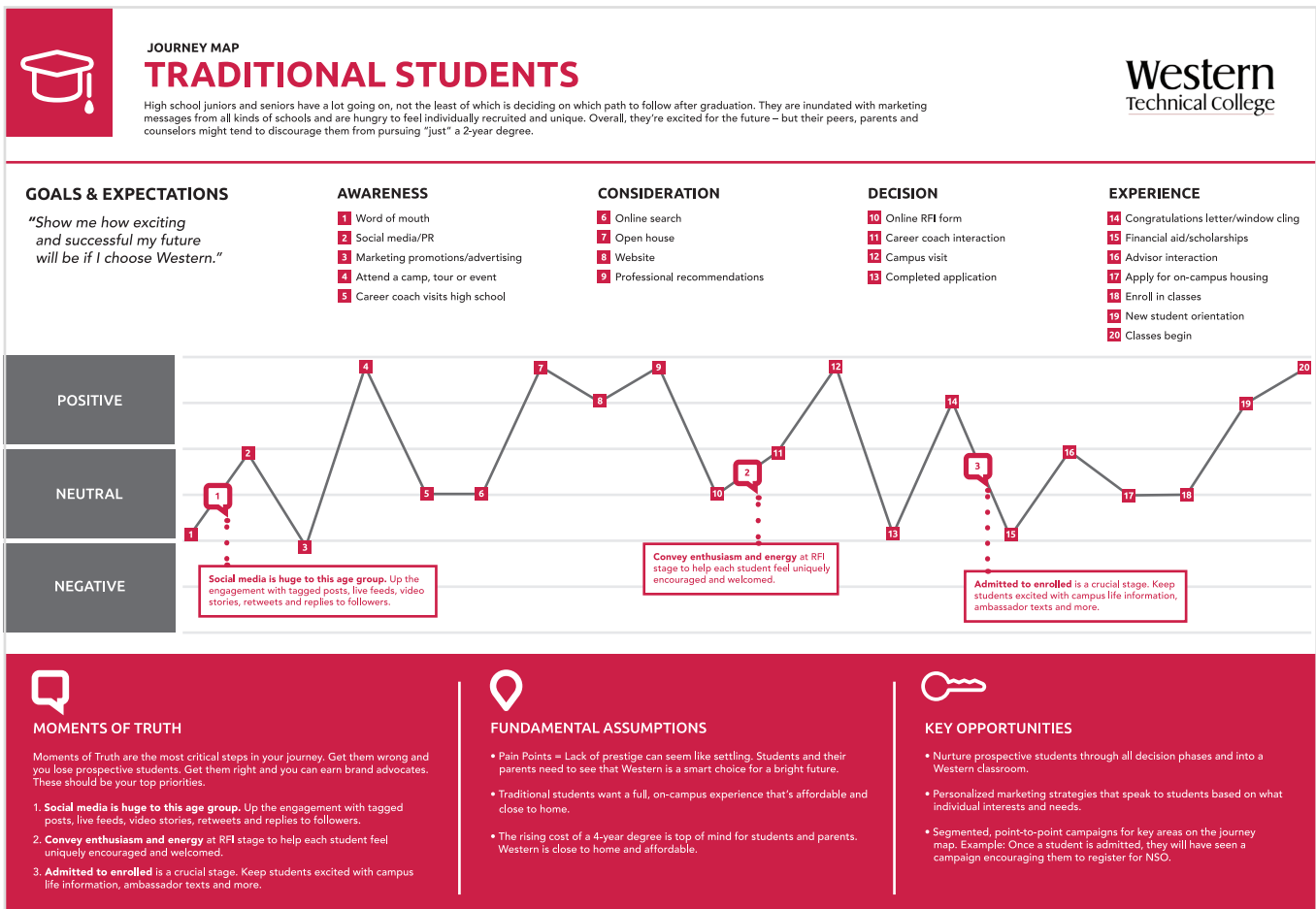
# + MARKETING TACTIC SELECTION & BUILDING AN EFFECTIVE RECRUITMENT CAMPAIGN



First impressions are crucial, especially when it comes to student recruitment. Colleges and Universities have to walk a fine line between salesmen and counselor. On one hand, it's the responsibility of the school to showcase the value of their institution (previously mentioned), but on the other hand, they must also help prepare these students for a major life decision.

When communicating to these students, we must take into consideration their decision-making process. Outlining important moments in this process will allow us to create a recruitment campaign that positions the university as a helpful guide rather than a pushy salesman.

There are tools and workshops that can be done to help identify these important moments. This section will review the importance of journey mapping and marketing tactic selection.



# The Five Stages of Awareness

The five stages of awareness are a fundamental marketing and communication approach to engaging with an audience. This same framework applies to modern student recruitment strategies as well.

Eugene Schwartz' "Breakthrough Advertising" is a landmark guild to not only copywriting, but marketing strategies for nurturing people through their decision-making process. In his book, Schwartz introduces the 5 Stages of Awareness.

This section will highlight the importance of each stage and how marketers can use this framework to select tactics and strategies to recruit students.

## Unaware

The student has no idea that your school exists OR they've never considered your school as an option.

## Problem Aware

They may be aware of your school, but is more concerned with the fear of choosing a school or the right reasons

## Solution Aware

These students know what they want out of a school, they have a career path in mind and are set out to find the school that offers the best options for them to pursue their career ... quickly and affordably.

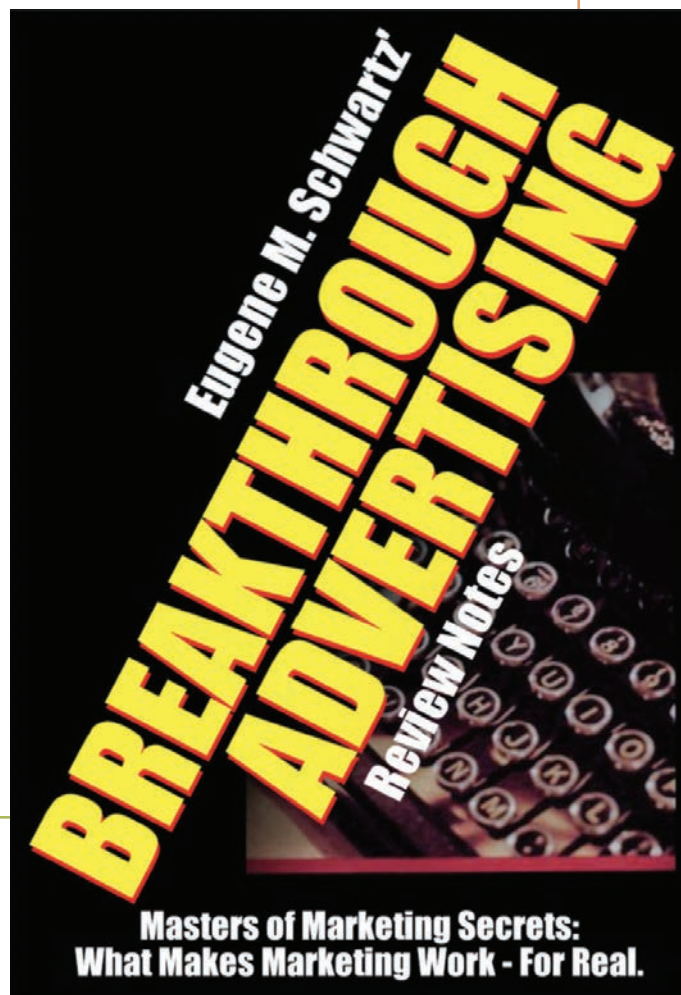
## Product Aware

These are students that have narrowed down their search for a few schools. They are actively comparing the details of each school to see what they want. Small differentiating factors could play a part for these students.

## Most Aware

These are students who not only know about your school but have long been excited about attending your school. But how can we use these students to excite and delight others?

More information about tactic selection will be covered in the following section.





# Choosing Marketing Tactics & Targeting

## Unaware Stage

Within this stage, the objective is to make a student aware that your school exists or that your school is an option that deserves serious consideration. Typically, this practice is referred to as “Generating Situational Awareness”.

Marketing tactics that we rely on for this objective include channels that are usually associated with awareness driving KPIs. This means audience targeting and total impressions are the focus.



## Unaware Stage Tactics

Traditional TV Spots

Traditional Radio

Outdoor Billboards

Social Media Ads

Over-the-Top (OTT) Ads

Print Ads

## Problem Aware Stage

The natural response to a problem is the search for a solution. Students in this stage are researching schools. They have questions about college and have turned to search engines for answers. The objective of this stage is to direct their searching to an online page where they can have their question answered.

SEM campaigns are the primary tactics to capture this audience. The CTR and CPC of a campaign are the KPIs to be reviewed for optimization.

## Problem Aware Stage Tactics

Google Search Ads

Bing Search Ads

YouTube Channels

Search Engine Optimization Strategies



## **Solution Aware Stage**

These students have an idea of their educational direction. An example would be someone pursuing a nursing degree. They understand that some school will have good nursing programs, so they've started searching with a solution in mind. The objective of this stage is to build the relationship with the brand and the potential students.

The user experience of a marketing campaign is the primary focus on this stage. We ask questions like "how are we presenting information to the visitor?" or "What additional information would be beneficial for this individual to know about our brand?"

### **Solution Aware Stage Tactics**

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Campaign Landing Pages

Website

Content Library (Videos, Blogs,  
Downloadable Content, etc.)

Social Media Profiles

## **Product Aware Stage**

As we approach the final stages, this is where the loyalties are tested. The modern online world has made school comparison quick and easy. People in this stage are ready to make a decision, but they want to be sure that they're making the RIGHT decision.

The objective of this campaign is to stay top-of-mind during this decision-making timeframe. This battle is won by staying present and increasing interaction. Repeat visits are a primary KPI for this stage

### **Problem Aware Stage Tactics**

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Remarketing Campaigns (Display,  
Programmatic, Social)

Promotions (Incentives)

Email Marketing

List Targeting

## Most Aware Stage

A common misconception for this stage is that it ends after someone converts – in this case – submits an application. This stage can also act as a transition between campaigns. When a recruitment campaign ends, a yield optimization campaign begins.

As mentioned above, these students are coming to the site with high action intent, therefore, ease of use is critical. Lay out the red carpet and limit the number of hoops these people need to go through to convert or submit an application.

Additionally, once they applied, ask yourself – what's next? A key component to this stage is the celebration. Welcome this student with open arms – this will strengthen their loyalty and increase the chances of them enrolling in classes

## Most Aware Stage Tactics

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Contact Forms (CTAs)

Workflows / Automations

Reward Programs

Social Media Groups

In review, student recruitment for higher education will continue to play a vital role in a school's marketing plan. As today's students prepare for their college careers, they have more questions than ever before. During this time, the schools which prove to be helpful to the student's decision-making process have the best chance at building loyalty.

### **Proving & Communicating Value**

Never forget that value is determined by perspective. If a college or university is only using one value statement to convince students to choose their school, the school may risk failing to connect with people searching for the right fit.

Big Value statements are important to help convince a student to choose a school, but they may not have the attention-grabbing pull they once did. In early or first touch point marketing messages to key target audiences, try using Small Value statements that are unique and fun. These can grab the attention of the potential student while they're on their phone or computer. Once we have their attention, Big Value statements are more easily communicated.

### **When & Where to Communicate to Prospective Students**

The process of building loyalty for a school can happen at any age. A modern student recruitment campaign doesn't wait until the student is already search for colleges to begin a conversation.

First impressions are critical for student recruitment. Events or hosting opportunities are great was to not only make a strong first impression but provide a memorable experience. Whenever possible, look beyond the first contact and find ways to open up communication channels. This could be incentivizing return visits or making them members of a community.

Recruitment strategy must also take into consideration the proximity of their competition. Awareness campaign can be used to target new locations. In these campaigns, start by identifying areas large enough to handle a robust awareness push. Once the area is chosen, select a marketing tactic mix that incorporates both traditional and digital tactics.

### **Marketing Tactic Selection & Building an Effective Recruitment Campaign**

When it's finally time to put everything together, remember that different students will be motivated in their school search for different reason. Some may have never heard of you while others could be comparing your school with three others. Using student journey maps and the 5 stages of awareness for tactic selection will create a recruitment campaign designed to nurture prospective students all the way through application submission.



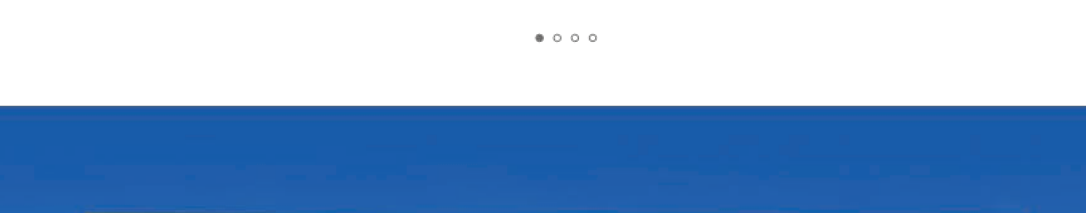
## + SOUTH DAKOTA STATE UNIVERSITY

### Built By You & SDSU

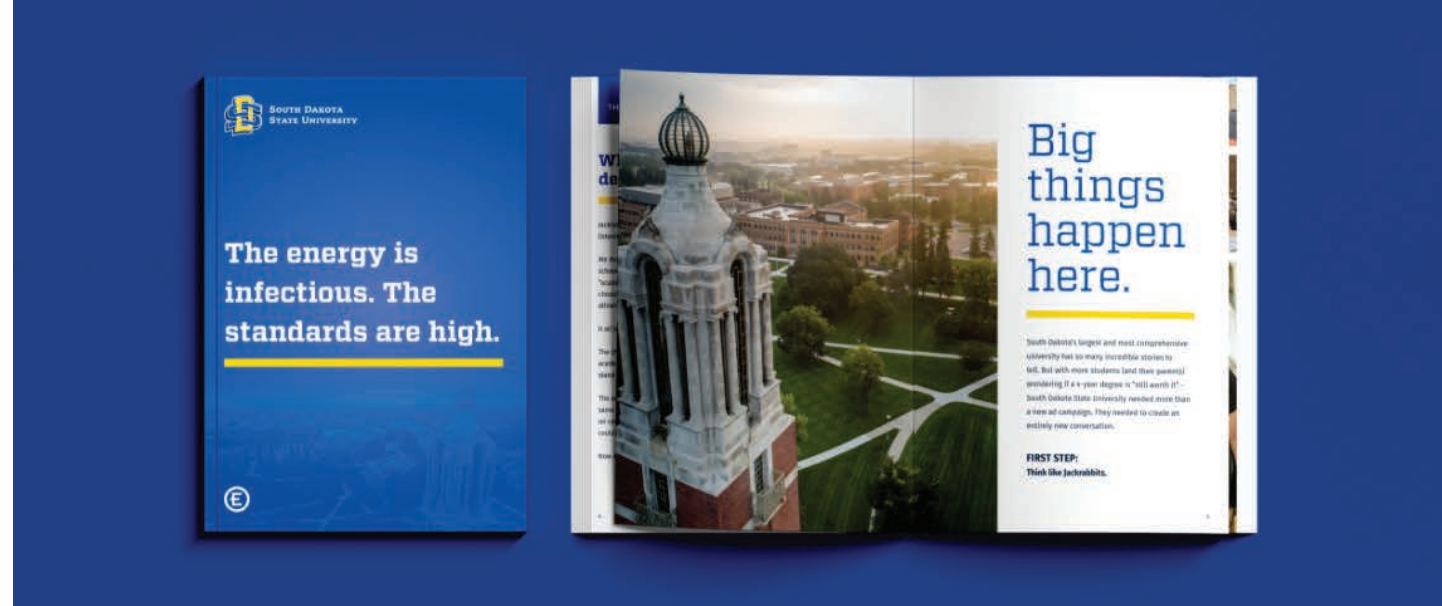
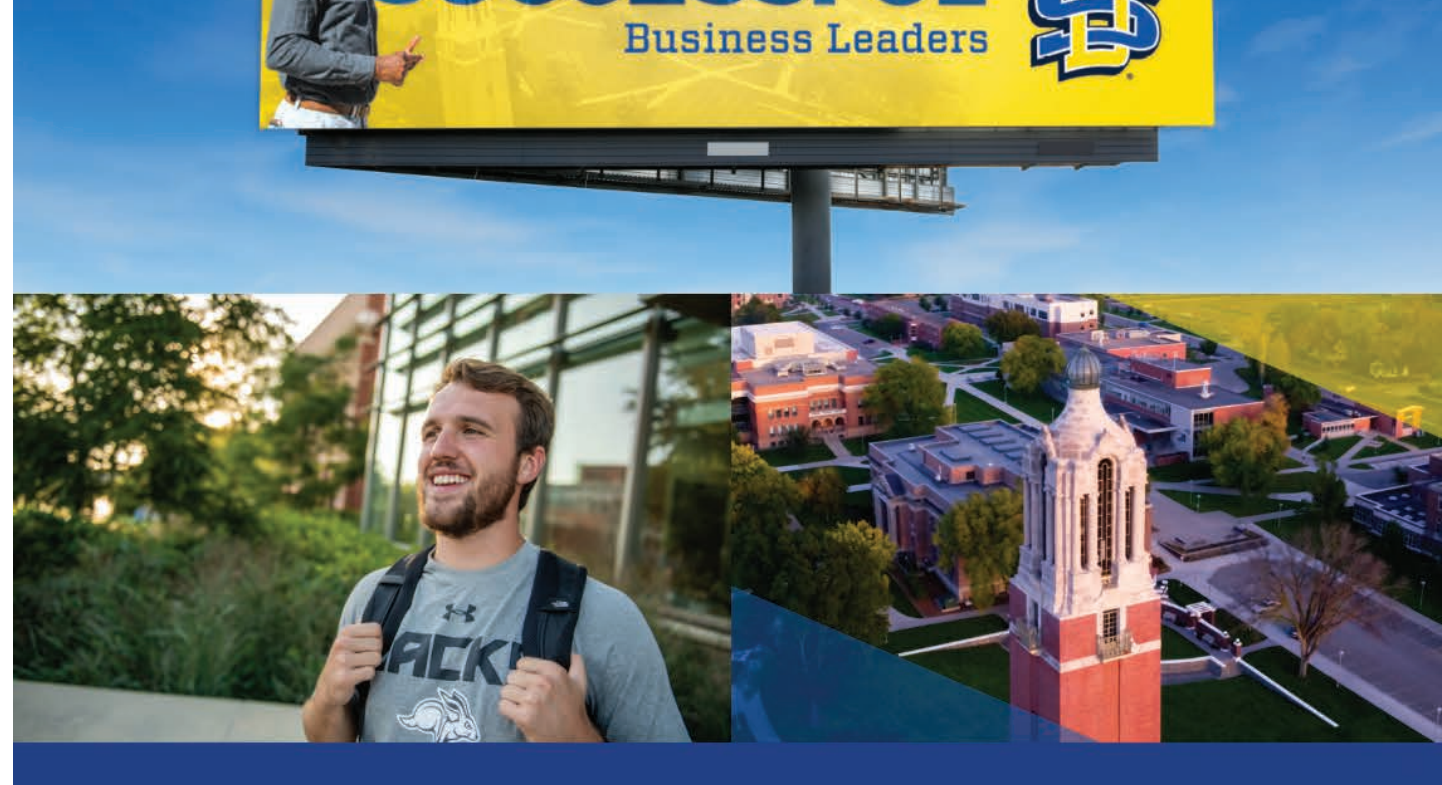
“South Dakota's largest and most comprehensive university  
- has so many incredible stories to tell.”

#### + THE STORY +

South Dakota's largest and most comprehensive university has so many incredible stories to tell. But with rising student loan debt nationwide - and more students wondering if a 4-year degree is worth the investment - SDSU needed more than a new ad campaign to drive enrollment. They needed to create an entirely new conversation.



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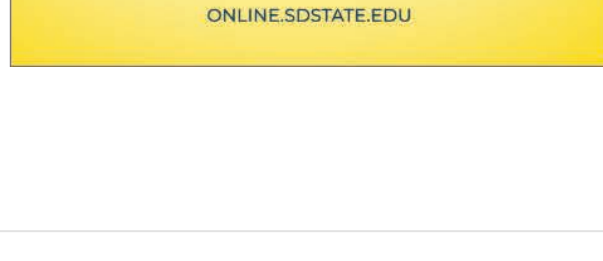
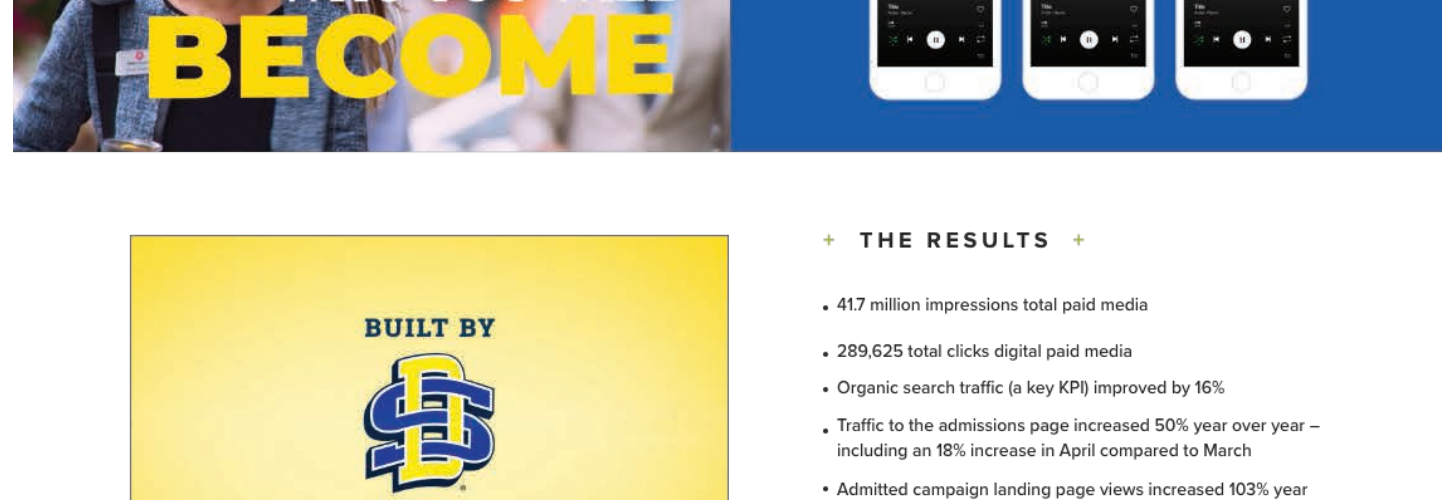
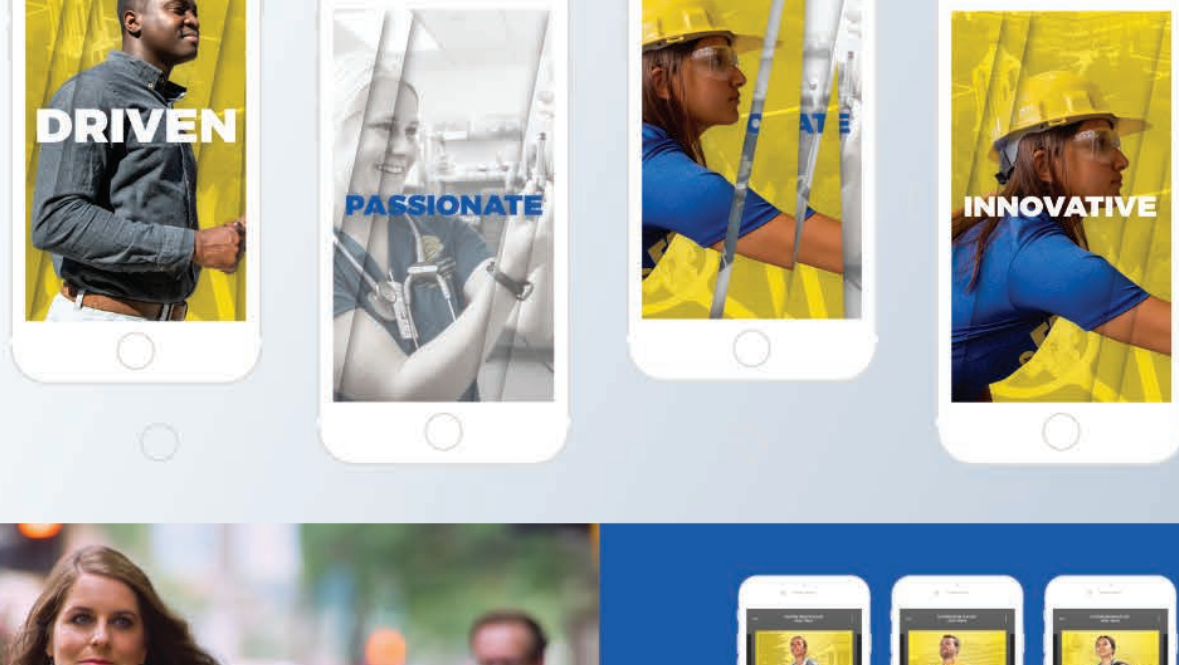


#### + THE DETAILS +

- Outcomes-based messaging focused by focus groups with high school juniors and seniors
- Full day of one-hour campus discovery sessions with faculty, staff and students midway through campaign
- Campus stakeholder messaging tools (tone and style guide, message map development and more)
- Three broadcast TV spots backed by a comprehensive multimedia campaign - including digital, social, outdoor, OTT video and streaming radio
- Foundational brand design continues to set the tone for more targeted awareness/application campaigns



“Over 5 million impressions total  
paid digital media.”



#### + THE RESULTS +

- 417 million impressions total paid media
- 289,625 total clicks digital paid media
- Organic search traffic (a key KPI) improved by 16%
- Traffic to the admissions page increased 50% year over year - including an 18% increase in April compared to March
- Admitted campaign landing page views increased 103% year over year
- “Apply now” clicks on the admitted campaign increased 157% year over year
- “Apply now” clicks across the website increased 4% in April 2020 as compared to April 2019

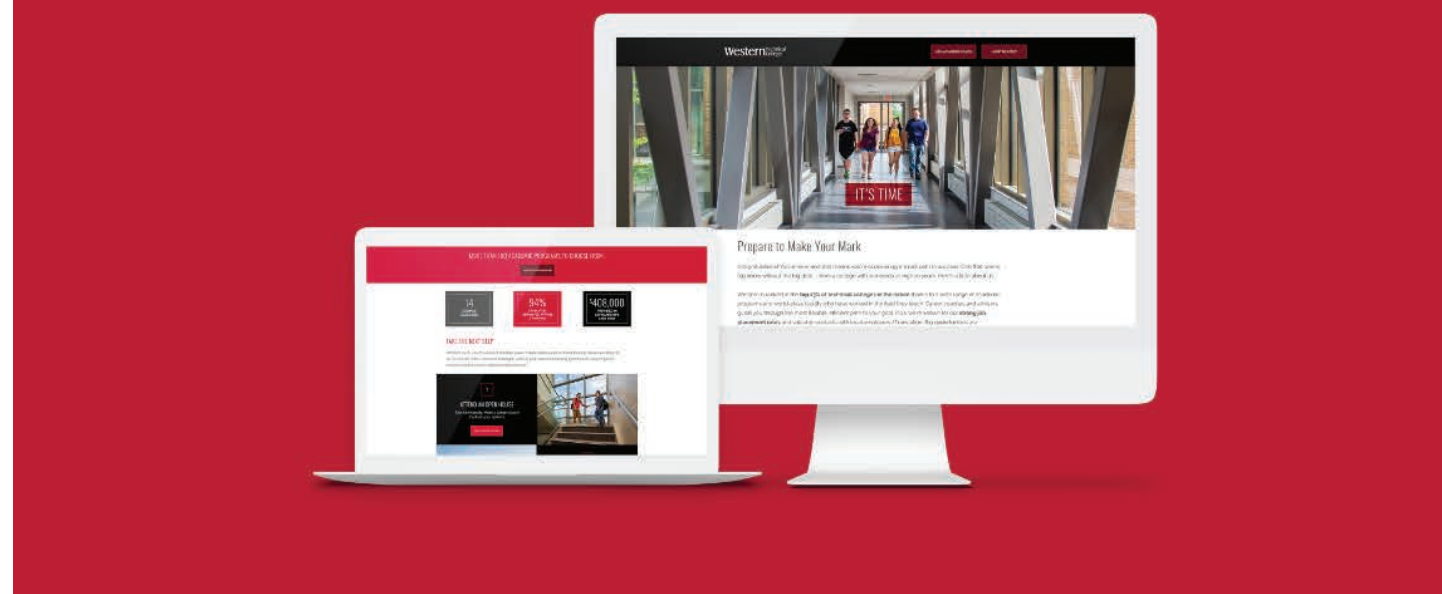
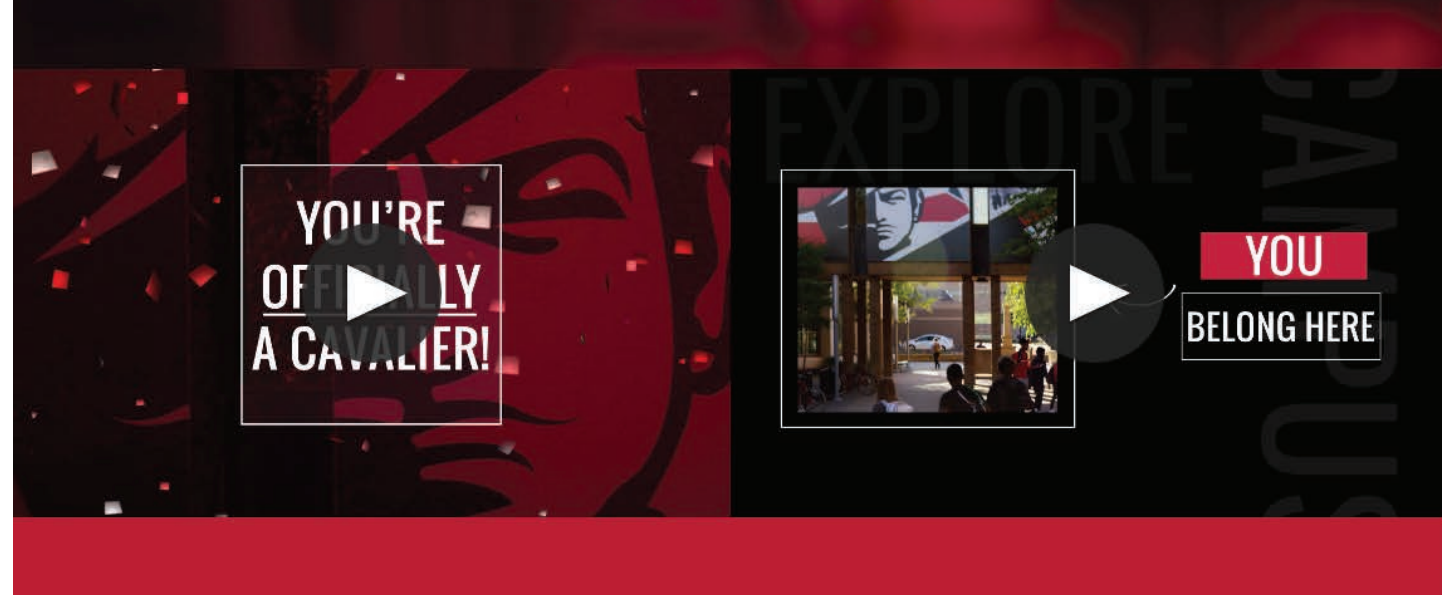
## + Western Technical College

### “It’s Time” for less waiting and more doing.

“Students are questioning college costs - Western Tech gets  
passionate about the why!”

#### + THE STORY +

It's no secret that students of all ages are questioning the high cost of a four-year college degree. To stand out and attract more students, Western Technical College needed to go beyond general descriptions of what programs they offered. They needed to get passionate about WHY students should choose Western in the first place.

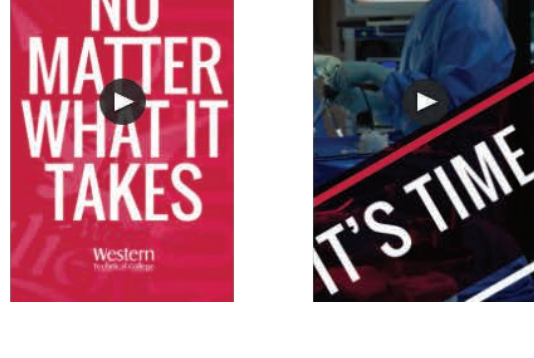
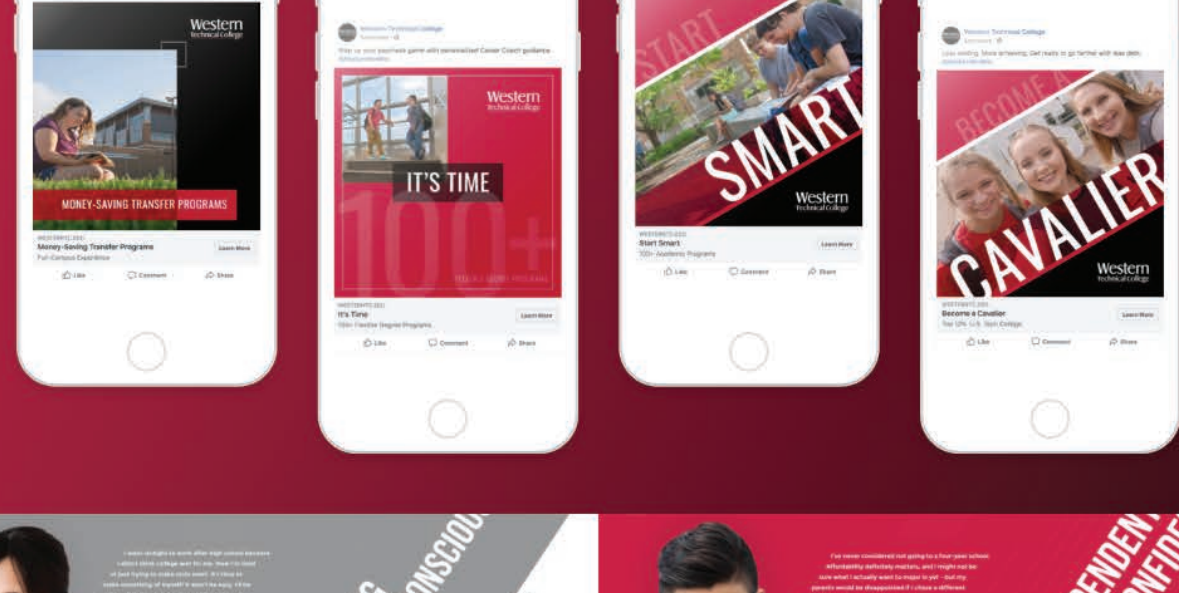


#### + THE DETAILS +

- On-campus discovery sessions, in-depth student personas and segmented messaging
- Laser-focused digital targeting, remarketing and email workflows specially tailored to accommodate Western's limited marketing geography (required by the statewide technical college consortium)
- Segmented campaigns for traditional and non-traditional students
- Both awareness and admitted-to-enrolled yield optimization campaigns



“Facebook campaign alone - 2.5 million impressions  
and over 9,300 clicks on the ads.”



#### + THE RESULTS +

- The Google Search campaign for Admitted to Enrolled finished the quarter with a total of 105,000 impressions and over 2,700 total clicks. While the Google Display campaign produced over 12,000 impressions and 30 clicks.
- Continually optimized digital ad sets with multiple creative “looks” reduced ad fatigue while also deliver a consistent message to the target audiences
- In its first quarter this campaign ran, the Facebook campaign alone generated over 2.5 million impressions and over 9,300 clicks on the ads.



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