



Marketing and Student Recruitment in a New Age:

The 2022 Higher Education Outlook

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Abstract

Quick shifts to online operations in the spring of 2020 caused headaches but also faster digital transformation for many higher education institutions. Not only did instruction adopt new technologies, but every campus department adapted, including admissions and recruitment. New practices have turned many facets of online interaction into the normal mode for communication, accelerating innovations and improvements for higher education. By examining what changed, we can see possible future directions for colleges at all stages of their digital transformation journey.



Higher Education Digital Marketing *Comes of Age*

Though trends towards digital and social strategies in college and university marketing were underway before pandemic disruptions, the situation accelerated efforts by converting almost all marketing, recruitment, and outreach online in 2020.

By 2022, higher education will be well steeped in digital marketing to reach prospective students and their parents. Institutions that lag will need to increase their use of social and online platforms to help them achieve their admissions goals.

Here are the key trends that will continue into 2022 and beyond:

01. Social media is integral to reaching Gen Z.

Staying abreast of which social media platforms your prospective students use allows you to focus your marketing efforts for maximal impact. TikTok and Snapchat are great platforms to reach the target age groups for college marketers today, but an emergent platform may be more suitable tomorrow.

Contacting the prospect's parents is often quite different, with Facebook remaining a prime space that **77%** of people aged 30-49 report using.





82%

of online traffic will be video by 2022



53%

of videos under 90 seconds see better audience retention



10%

of videos over 30 minutes hold audience attention

02. Short video has power that continues to grow.



Cisco predicts that **82%** of online traffic will be video by 2022. But attention spans are short: videos under 90 seconds long see audience retention of **53%** while those over 30 minutes retain only **10%** of the audience, according to a report by [HubSpot](#).

Nevertheless, with much of the content viewed on mobile devices and the popularity of social media to reach students, videos—especially the shorter ones—can be formidable assets in your marketing efforts.



03. Data analytics and AI help refine the user experience at all stages of student engagement.



Using sophisticated digital tools to create an appealing journey for prospective students is easier than ever before. You don't have to be a data scientist or software engineer to implement processes that make sense and increase your engagement with prospective students from all walks of life. Without data, we often make assumptions that do not bear fruit in terms of targeted prospective students group enrollment. And adding in AI allows for more personalization to answer the specific needs of each student as they seek information on your institution.

04. Conversational and interactive content increases personalization.

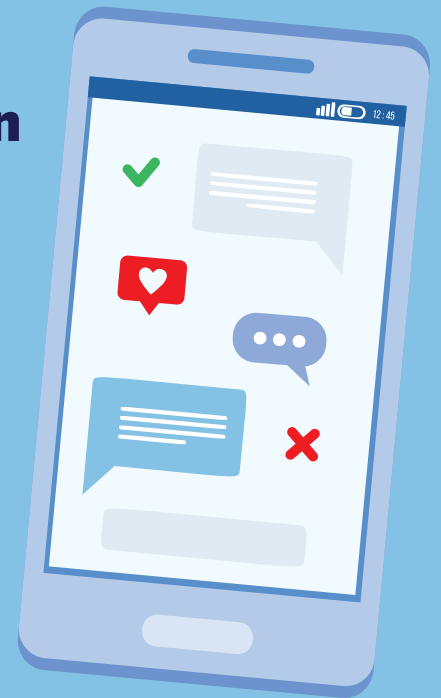


Chatbots, when well executed, can be an excellent feature to integrate into your web presence. But effective conversational marketing can reach beyond chatbots to incorporate surveys and other interactive elements that ask viewers to engage. Connecting the features of your digital presence to your actual conversations with prospects can increase your contact with students. The pathway from digital interaction to text query or video call makes the journey increasingly personal.

05. SEO and website ranking remain crucial to higher education.



High-quality content that informs and engages will help boost SEO, as will other professional SEO tricks of the trade. Content needs to be enjoyable and useful; web articles need to be written for a lay audience rather than in an academic style. Attention to improving functionality, speed, and ranking for topics relevant to prospects is integral to all marketing efforts.



06. Hybrid events and user-generated content mix it up for Gen Z.



Events can now so easily be streamed that there is no reason ever to stop streaming, which increases accessibility to prospects near and far. In addition, user-generated content from students, staff, and alumni increases the perceived authenticity of marketing, making your school appealing to Gen Z prospects who are very attuned to influencer-like marketing strategies.



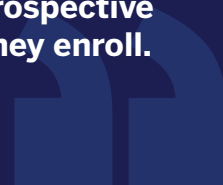
07. Omnichannel marketing integration magnifies the impact of your efforts.



While direct mail has been a mainstay of higher ed marketing, recruiters can use digital tools to target these same contacts more effectively with email. Bridging the divide between different marketing venues allows you to reach prospects in multiple ways, especially using digital advertising on social media platforms and integrating these efforts with website and personal interaction. Colleges live in a hybrid space now, so connecting in-person events like tours with digital outreach keeps prospects engaged. Tying all your various marketing and recruitment conduits together will bring the most significant gains in outreach.

The trends in higher education marketing build on each other, so integration is a critical factor in making your marketing strategy work for your institution. Schools are now bringing the digital and face-to-face experiences together to create strong relationships with their students from day one.

Marketing is just one part of that relationship, but it sets the tone. All types of marketing and recruitment interaction should strongly represent your school culture and brand, making a holistic experience for prospective students that will continue once they enroll.



Assessing Digital Admissions Features

All the digital admissions features instituted during the pandemic can continue to facilitate recruitment in the future. Some institutions had already added these services, allowing admissions staff to reach more students through varied channels. Many colleges, however, may have trailed behind on adding online features to the admissions funnel.



Plus, with the rush of the pandemic conversion to *digital everything*, many schools may not have had time to implement the best digital tools for applicants. Therefore, now is a great time to beef up recruiting to incorporate effective technologies to connect with potential students in multiple ways.



The Online Learning Consortium provides many tools to assess different aspects of your digital education initiatives. One that is most relevant to admission is a rubric to measure your progress on many fronts, and here is a simplified version to get you thinking about your department's digital functions:

Feature	Exemplary	Available	Limited
Response to student inquiries during the admissions process	Multiple, accessible ways for students to make inquiries, with directed self-service options if no live person is available	Either only one person answers inquiries, or there is only one way to connect, such as phone	Responses only occur during business hours
Virtual tours	A self-guided tour featuring all aspects of the student experience is available, with a separate tour for distance-only students	Limited information, such as maps linked to department pages; no full tour available	On-campus orientation is the only option
Online applications	Applications can be fully submitted online with the option to save and continue later. Contextual and live help is available	Online applications are available, but help is only available during business hours	Applications are available online, but no assistance is offered
Application documents online	Transcripts, recommendation letters, medical records, and other documents can be submitted online, with assistance available outside business hours	Documents can be submitted online, but help is only available during business hours	Submitting documents requires a visit to campus
Onboarding for online students	Web-based software walks students through application, admission, and enrollment with notification for the next steps	Checklist and steps are listed on the website	Admission and enrollment information is on the website but spread across multiple pages

As you contemplate where your admission program stands in terms of digital transformation, you can make a roadmap for where you would like to go. What features can you make more digitally accessible? How can you expand your help options for applicants? Do you need to reorganize your web resources to make the flow of applications smoother? What students have you been successful in reaching? Who is getting left out? How can you bring in prospects that your efforts have missed in the past? How can you combine your digital efforts with your in-person services?



Each school will have unique needs, so question and brainstorm as you consider a plan to move forward and implement more digital access to your admissions processes.

Digital Best Practices for Admissions

Admissions digitization efforts require creativity, structure, and consideration of the wide range of student needs and preferences. Reaching students “where they are” can count for a lot, with live events on social media, access to chats and Q & A sessions in multiple formats and adding a student-run social media channel that can support admissions. Use video, virtual reality, graphics, and tailor nurture

campaigns to incorporate email and SMS nudges for prospects.

The possibilities are vast, but make sure to consider the hardest to reach prospects and give them options and support to get the information they need to apply and enroll successfully.

Here are some guidelines to keep in mind while rethinking admissions processes:



Centralize: make sure there is one hub through which students can access all materials, with links as necessary straight to enrollment, financial aid, and other resources

Variety: use a mix of delivery methods and types of content, including group and one-on-one contact both online and on-campus, self-guided resources, and marketing outreach



Flexibility: accommodate disabilities with captions and audio descriptions, and be flexible with individual students needs

Humanize: make the virtual personal with a human face out front on your online presence, allowing for students to get a feeling for the human side of the institution



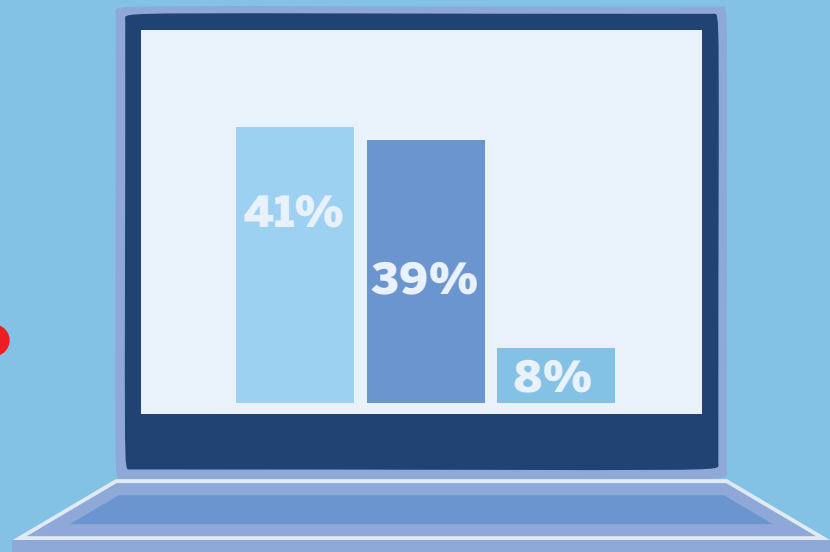
Selling the Value of Online Learning



With some elements of remote learning likely to continue, all institutions will need to adjust their marketing to incorporate touting the values of online elements of their programs. Understanding the pros and cons of the educational experience for students will give admissions staff insights to formulate marketing strategies that ring true to students who plan on in-person enrollment as well as fully online prospects.

One of the striking outcomes of the forced switch to online learning during the pandemic was that it increased faculty confidence in the quality and value of online education. Only **8%** of faculty stated that their teaching would return to what it was pre-pandemic.

The vast majority of instructors predict that the experience will inspire them to transform their teaching, with **41%** saying they would make small changes, **39%** planning to make “a number” of changes, and **8%** stating that their teaching would be “very different.” Instructors learned valuable lessons about how online platforms can enhance education, yet they still feel that in-person delivery has many benefits for students.



Online learning alone cannot surmount the difficulties for the most vulnerable students—those with inadequate academic preparation, economic hardships, and other risk factors. Purely online instruction may only work well for the most prepared, organized, capable, and successful students. Learning requires intensive human interaction to bridge the educational gaps of at-risk students. Therefore, schools must invest in intensive online education support to benefit those who most need the leg up that education can provide.

For students, the value of online learning is lower than that of in-person or hybrid instruction. A recent survey found that **80%** of students felt that their distance instruction during the pandemic was not worth the cost of tuition. While students prefer in-person learning, **46%** would like to see some elements from their digital experience incorporated into their regular instruction in the future. Students want these elements to continue, ranked from most popular (**84%**) to least (**43%** want to see it continue):



accessing learning materials in one place



viewing lecture recordings



the flexibility to attend virtually or in person



virtual office hours with teachers



working with digital course materials like homework and readings



Case in Point: Hybrid Colleges

There's a movement afoot to realize the promise of higher education in advancing racial justice, economic opportunity, and social mobility: hybrid colleges. In this model, colleges partner with nonprofits to provide missing support from online-only programs: comprehensive coaching and career connections. Along with the affordability and flexibility of distance learning, the nonprofits set up physical spaces where students can access WIFI, academic support, counseling, and career services to make completing a college degree that leads to gainful employment more accessible. Though the movement is small, it has impressive persistence rates and combines the best of online higher education with the place-based supports and belonging that students value so much. The idea is not entirely new, as some colleges with online programs have been doing versions of this for some time. These practices can reach the most at-risk students and provide the "extras" needed to make graduation more likely. More colleges could consider adding satellite mini-campuses closer to where students live and work, bringing the convenience of proximity along with higher levels of academic and counseling support.

Digital Colleges: The New Reality

We have all learned a lot during the pandemic, but there is more to learn. Students find some aspects of digital learning valuable and enjoyable: online lecture videos, access to notes and homework, centralized course resources, and personal feedback from instructors are all popular elements.



Social media is becoming more central to interactions between all higher education community members. With careful consideration, faculty and staff can incorporate social media features into more aspects of the college experience. Bringing school culture and supporting a sense of belonging is more challenging in an all-digital course environment, so online programs need to work very hard to provide the fertile ground for learning. Plus, supports and human contact for at-risk students is always essential, so planning for all ways of giving students the counseling, mentoring, and assistance they need should be a priority.

The way forward will have digital elements at all levels of university interaction. Our pandemic experience can help us make the best of technological tools to support and deliver education. And while more programs are moving to online formats, the value of in-person learning and community is still highly valued. Thus, for purely online programs to rise to the quality of on-campus offerings requires effort, and for the foreseeable future, inclusion in online learning is a challenge. Education should be convenient and flexible like distance learning, yet supportive and interactive, which is easier to deliver face-to-face.



There is no single solution for the challenges ahead, but we can continue to study the best practices in digital higher education marketing to continually improve the efficacy of education for all the different groups we serve. These efforts start with increasing digital interaction for prospective students that continue through graduation and alumni relations. Integrating all avenues for communication makes colleges, like the rest of our human interactions, a hybrid yet social and productive experience.

About AMG Higher Education Marketing:



We believe effective marketing begins with effective storytelling. Our first goal as a marketing partner is to understand your story and what makes you special. Once we understand who you are, we can build a strategic marketing plan to tell your story in the best way on the best platforms to reach your ideal audience. Compelling stories paired with a strategic plan drive great results, and we have a track record of doing just that. Servicing traditional four-year universities, community colleges, and technical and career schools, we help institutions level up marketing strategies for student recruitment as well as alumni outreach. Like what you see? Want to know more? **Let's talk.**





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