volt

After the Funnel

The enrollment funnel no longer reflects how students search for schools. There's a better way to measure your marketing efforts and track your incoming class.

Issue #001 · 2026



Also in this issue:

- An innovation framework to make change stick
- What's worth getting excited about in 2027
- How to get your boss to approve additional resources
- Navigating the maze of higher ed titles

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Volt is published by Electric Kite, a creative marketing agency.

Some Things Are Worth More Than a Click.

Volt began seven years ago with a handful of blog posts and an idea: higher ed marketers needed more — more creative inspiration, more data to make decisions, more frameworks to make sense of that data, more community from like-minded peers, and more opportunities to advance in their careers.

People seemed to agree, and as our audience grew, we added a newsletter, podcasts, social accounts, a jobs board, and more. But we've always stayed digital-only, because marketing moves too fast to wait on a print schedule. This issue breaks that streak. It's the first thing we've ever put on paper.

Here's why we picked now: Higher ed marketing is in the middle of a shift that is changing the job. Paid media CPMs are skyrocketing. Your .edu website isn't the go-to resource for information about your school anymore. Public sentiment about higher ed is tenuous at best. And marketing budgets aren't exactly keeping pace.

But amidst all this change, there is opportunity. Because when the rules change, the advantage shifts to the people willing to rethink how everything works and change course. For marketers, that means positioning our institutions not just as places to go, but as the way students become who they want to be. In a world of increasing digital noise, sometimes it helps to become a bit more tangible. So here we are... in your hands.

This issue provides plenty of inspiration and direction for people looking for these opportunities. Our cover story presents a new framework to replace the traditional enrollment funnel, which, it turns out, doesn't predict much of anything anymore. Reporter Chris Kudialis spent months with enrollment leaders figuring out what comes next, and what emerged is the Enrollment Signal Model: reach, engagement, and decision signals that track what students are actually doing, instead of which stage a database says they're stuck in. What does this mean for you? Predictive and actionable analytics when you still have time to act upon them.

Meanwhile, the calls for higher ed to innovate have never been louder. But just yelling "innovate faster!" isn't helpful. Mallory Willsea offers something more useful: a specific definition of innovation and a framework for making it stick on your campus.

That's not all: Lana Fontenot offers the keys to unlock more resources for your department. Jaime Hunt walks through the confounding world of job titles. DéRecco Lynch explains what higher ed can learn from big tech. We even have a dang marketing MadLibs for you.

That's why this belongs in your hands as paper and not another browser tab. These aren't ideas you skim once and move on from.

If you picked this up at the AMA Symposium this November, welcome. If it found you some other way, welcome anyway. Read the entire issue. Steal the frameworks. Then tell us what breaks when you try to use them, because that's the conversation we built Volt to have.



Louis Miller
General Manager & Editor, Volt



Higher Ed Marketing, By the Numbers.

The Prospect Pool

3.9M

That's the record number of U.S. high school graduates for 2025, the peak before a slow, steady decline through 2041.

74%

Share of today's college students who have at least one "nontraditional" trait: over 24, working full-time, raising kids, a veteran, or first-gen. The "typical" 18-to-22 residential student is now the minority.

32.3%

Share of all college enrollment now made up of adult learners age 25 and older — projected to hit 35% by 2030.

Student Search Habits

6.8

Average number of colleges a Common App applicant applies to — nowhere near the 20-or-30-school binges we hear about anecdotally.

1.7%

Share of undergrads who name TikTok as their primary source for college discovery, versus roughly 41.5% for Instagram — even though students say they "live" on TikTok.

50–100

Number of marketing emails the average prospective student receives from colleges during their search, most of which get deleted unread.

Higher Ed Marketing Career Trends

11.9%

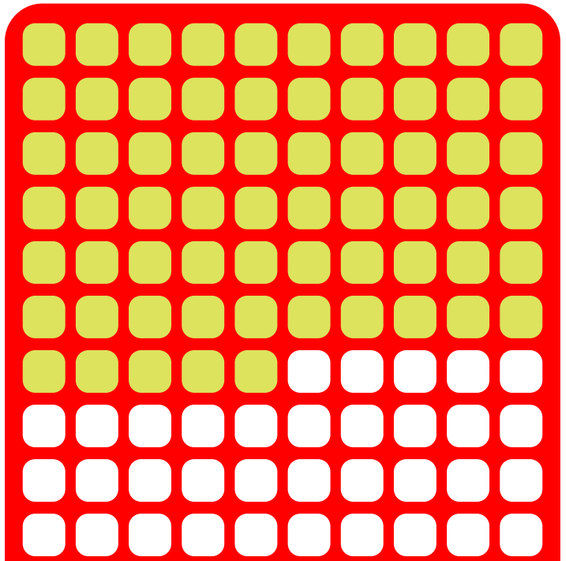
Average share of institutional revenue spent on marketing (although the median is a leaner 5.3%).

$75,000

Median salary for a higher ed marketing professional in 2026, up from $72,000 in 2025 — even as more than half still say their pay isn't competitive with other industries.

69%

Share of higher ed marketing budgets that stayed flat or shrank heading into this academic year, even as the job keeps expanding.



65%

Share of higher ed institutions using AI-enhanced creative and design tools in their marketing — ahead of AI-powered CRM and analytics tools (31% each).

90%

Share of admissions chatbot users who rated the experience "helpful," per a 2024 survey.

Bulldogs, Bulldogs Everywhere

14

Number of Division I schools whose mascot is a Bulldog, making it the single most common mascot name in college sports.

View the source data and more stats at voltedu.com/numbers



What Volt Is Excited About for 2027

Eric Kelderman

Co-host, Campus Docket Podcast; Senior Writer, The Chronicle of Higher Education

The fast-evolving world of college athletics is going to be interesting and important for college leaders to pay attention to. Vast amounts of money are flowing into the highest-tier programs, raising big questions about the motivations of donors, how it can be spent, and who will really benefit. At the same time, conferences and universities are pushing Congress to pass legislation to provide some greater oversight of the system by granting the NCAA an antitrust exemption.

Louis Miller

Volt General Manager & Editor

I'm excited for colleges and universities to evolve how they approach their brand identities, taking real steps toward differentiation and creative risk-taking. This has been my wish list for several years, but this feels like the year, for real!

Changes in technology and what students expect are pushing this issue to the front, but it's also needed. When an institution's marketing leans into what it does best, it attracts better-fit students and faculty, and it becomes clear which creative levers to flex while still being on brand.

That's the move I'm looking forward to: where brand identity goes beyond marketing materials and embodies a school's strategic plan.

Kevin Renton

Volt Publisher; Principal, Electric Kite

What I'm most excited about is seeing how AI agents will reshape the admissions experience. We're building CampusPixel around a simple idea: prospective students shouldn't have to hunt through hundreds of webpages to find the information they need or wait for someone to answer a question. AI agents can create a more conversational experience, helping students explore programs, understand requirements, compare options, and figure out what to do next. For admissions teams, the opportunity is equally exciting. AI can handle thousands of routine interactions while allowing people to focus their time on the conversations where human connection really matters. We're still at an early stage, but this could fundamentally change how students discover, evaluate, and ultimately choose a college.

Scott Schneider

Co-host, Campus Docket Podcast;
Owner and Founder, Schneider Education & Employment Law

In 2027, I hope university public relations becomes a little more thoughtful — and a little more becoming of institutions of higher education.

Too often, universities now communicate like risk-averse corporations in the middle of a product recall: a quick statement, a familiar set of values, and as little actual information as possible. That instinct is understandable. But it is rarely persuasive, and it is especially ill-suited to institutions whose central purpose is the pursuit of knowledge, argument, and judgment.

Universities should be able to say what happened, explain which principles are in tension, acknowledge uncertainty, and tell people why they reached a difficult decision. They should not have to pretend every controversy is simple, every disagreement is a crisis, or every unhappy constituency can be satisfied by a statement drafted to say nothing.

Better communication will not eliminate conflict. But institutions that speak with candor, intellectual seriousness, and a little courage will be better equipped to earn trust when the next difficult issue arises.

Kevin Tyler

Host, Higher Voltage Podcast; Founder & CEO, Bay & Bicknell

Innovation or just another discount? Like everything else, a college degree is getting more expensive, too. Right now, 15 institutions have a sticker price exceeding $100,000, and another nine are close to crossing that threshold. With affordability on the minds of families across the country, one trend that intrigues me is the growth of the three-year degree (and how it's marketed). Now available in about 25 states and at roughly 60 institutions, the offer aims to reduce credit requirements for certain degrees from 120 hours to 90 hours. While the move will surely save students and their families time and money, critics argue the compressed degree might raise questions among employers and graduate schools. From a marketing perspective, however, I'm curious how institutions will craft messaging for these programs that defines their value against traditional four-year programs and who they target with those messages.

Maryna Yankovska

Editorial Producer, Volt

I am curious to see how AI and new technologies continue to evolve. I recently attended an event for freshmen students at my alma mater, Minerva University, and the overwhelming majority of the 2030 class wanted to connect their careers to AI or computer science in one way or another. Maybe this trend is so prevalent because I'm located in the heart of the Silicon Valley, but LLMs are reshaping the economy as a whole. Are our institutions equipped to ride the wave of AI? And where does it leave human creativity? I'm excited to see how human creative work can coexist with emerging technology without losing its value — and potentially even gaining more spark.



Is your marketing

half-assed?

- Counting impressions. Not enrollments. **Half-assed.**
- Optimizing to clicks. Not classes filled. **Half-assed.**
- Streaming you can't ***really*** measure. **Definitely half-assed.**

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FEATURE

Higher Ed Doesn't Have an Innovation Problem. It Has a Framework Problem.

Written by Mallory Willsea

You're in a committee meeting. (You've never been in one of those? Lucky you.) Someone has done great work — mapped a better enrollment communications flow, built a smarter website governance model.

Then someone says: "We tried something like that before." Or: "That would never work here." Or: "We just don't have the capacity." And just like that, the idea is no longer being judged on whether it's smart, timely, or necessary. It's being judged on whether it feels familiar or safe. So it stalls. Again.

The pitch was fine. The room simply had no shared way to evaluate it — no common language for what kind of innovation it was, no structure for separating a one-off tactic from a real strategic shift. I've heard versions of this story for 20 years, and every time, the room was built to compare the idea to the last time something similar was attempted.

Start with the Word Itself

Before an institution fixes its approach to innovation, it has to agree on the word. Larry Keeley, who spent three decades studying this at Doblin, defines innovation as the creation of a viable new offering. "Viable" means the thing sustains itself — financially, operationally, politically — past the pilot phase. "New" means new to your

" Single-type innovation is visible, which is why it gets funded. Combined innovation is durable, which is why it wins."

market and your students. Borrowed ideas count. Hold your campus against that definition and the gap shows fast. Before a recent keynote on this topic, I polled my network of higher ed marketers: when your institution invests in innovation, where does the money go? Nearly half said technology. A tool. Procurement standing in for strategy.

A shared definition gives the meeting a floor to stand on. When everyone in the room means the same thing by the word, an idea gets measured against a standard instead of a memory.

Three Ways Campuses Get it Wrong

Campuses tend to make the same three mistakes. They treat innovation as temporary — a rebrand, a task force that meets twice — so whatever it produces stops compounding the moment the project closes. They treat it as performance — the innovation lab with a glass wall and no budget authority, built to signal movement rather than create it. And they let real innovation stay invisible: a redesigned advising model or a partnership reshaping how transfer students arrive goes unnamed as innovation, so it goes unfunded as innovation. Your campus is almost certainly doing more innovating than it gives itself credit for. The language to see it is missing.

The Ten Types of Innovation

A definition sets the floor. A framework builds the room. In 2013, Keeley and his team at Doblin published research on more than 2,000 successful innovations across industries. Their finding: innovation shows up in ten distinct types, and the strongest organizations combine several at once.

The types fall into three domains:

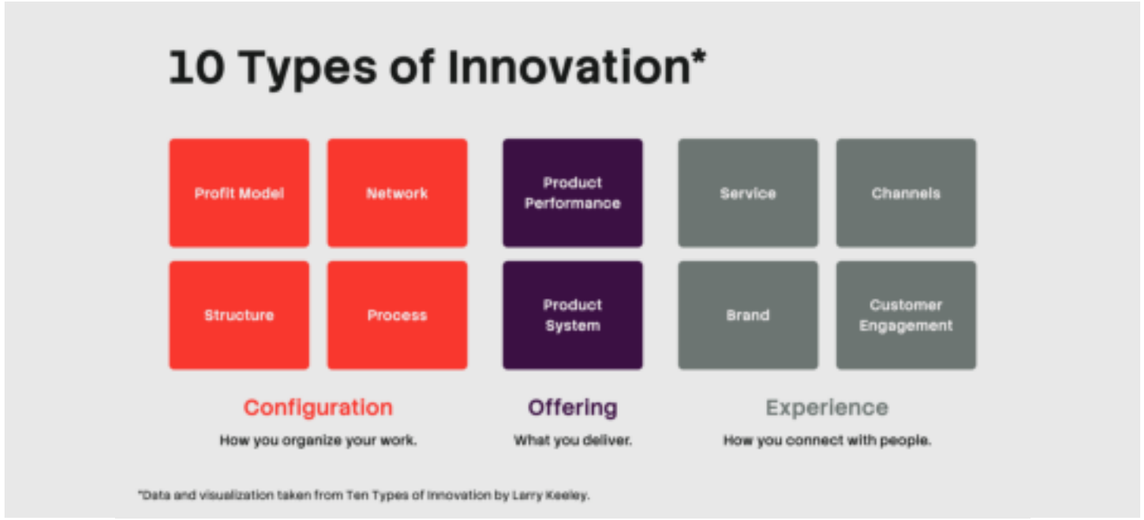
1. **Configuration covers how you organize:**
   - Profit model
   - Network
   - Structure
   - Processes
2. **Offering covers what you deliver:**
   - Product performance
   - Systems around it
3. **Experience covers how people encounter you:**
   - Service
   - Channels
   - Brand
   - Customer engagement

Read those against your own campus and one thing jumps out. Almost everything higher ed celebrates as innovation lives in a single type: Offering. The new major. The new online program.

Those investments are real. They're also the most expensive and most copyable moves on the board. When your differentiation strategy is a program your competitor launches in eighteen months, your head start expires.

Even the Most Resourced Institution Defaults to the Familiar

In April, Yale released its Report of the Committee on Trust in Higher Education — a year of faculty research culminating in 20 recommendations for rebuilding public confidence. President Maurie McInnis put it plainly: trust must always be earned. Yet look at where the recommendations concentrate: affordability, admissions, grading, resource allocation. The visible, announceable levers.



A board has a rubric for a building: cost, capacity, donor naming rights. A board has no rubric for a channel strategy or an engagement system. So the building wins, every budget cycle, at every institution — including the most resourced one in America, in the middle of a trust crisis. Higher ed isn't missing ideas. It's missing the framework to judge them.

What Combining Innovation Types looks like

Arizona State has been ranked the most innovative university in America for 11 straight years. Ask people why and you'll hear "great online program" or "strong brand." True, but missing the point — ASU built a system.

Online delivery became the primary model, at global scale = Channel innovation.

Starbucks, Uber, and edX fund enrollment = Network.

"New American University" operates as a charter, not a tagline = Brand.

Multiple revenue engines across tuition, cohorts, and research = Profit Model.

Access redefined merit at the institutional level = Structure.

" Innovation isn't a department."

Five types, working together. Your campus could copy the online program this year. The system is a different story.

Georgia State's student success transformation is the same pattern:

Predictive analytics flag struggling students = Process.

Proactive advising and micro-grants intervene at the moment of need = Service.

Texting and chatbots keep students responsive = Customer Engagement.

Measurable equity outcomes became the institutional story = Brand.

The micro-grant removes the $300 barrier standing between a student and a degree — but only because the analytics flagged the need and the advising capacity existed to act on it. Remove any piece and the system weakens. That interdependence is what makes it impossible to copy with a single budget line.

Single-type innovation is visible, which is why it gets funded. Combined innovation is durable, which is why it wins.

Five of the Ten Types Run Through One Office

Look at the domains again, and something jumps out. Half the framework runs through marketing and communications: Service, Channel, Brand, Customer

Marketing Leader Q&As

Where has AI actually changed how your team works, versus where it's just noise right now?

[Answer]:

AI's greatest impact for us has been to expand capacity. On the staff side, that looks like data analyzing student lifecycle data, identifying patterns, and strengthening strategy. For the student-facing side, it has helped us reduce inbound phone calls, identify fraudulent applications, manage nudging campaigns with minimal human intervention, and provide multi-channel support to a large student population.



Brian Gann
Wake Technical Community College

Engagement, Network. The innovation budget, in most institutions, lives somewhere else.

Trust is soft until applications stall. Channel strategy is "just marketing" until the pipeline shrinks. Then everyone looks at marcomm — usually the first function to feel something break, sitting where trust, demand, and institutional credibility become visible before the rest of the institution catches up.

Start with Brand. It's carrying belief now, not just recognition. If your institution claims to be student-centered, workforce-ready, or accessible, marcomm is the function tasked with turning that claim into something people actually believe — a harder job than it sounds, since words are cheap and easy for a competitor to borrow.

Channel tells a related story from a different angle. Enrollment problems that get diagnosed as awareness problems are often friction problems in disguise: a program that's hard to find, a next step that's buried, a handoff between interest and action that breaks momentum. Direct admissions programs and ASU's majority-online model are Channel innovations, and they're already reshaping who enrolls where.

Then there's Customer Engagement — the touchpoints and signals that keep someone connected long after they've stopped being a prospective student. Weak alumni engagement rarely announces itself. It just shows up quietly, in giving that plateaus, referrals that never come, and advocacy nobody thought to ask for.

The other two levers, marcomm doesn't hold alone — it holds them together with the rest of the institution. Service is the clearest example. Advising, emergency aid, and counseling all sit outside marcomm's org chart, but a support system nobody finds is a broken system from the student's point of view, and marcomm is usually the one that sees that friction first. When Georgia State pairs proactive advising with micro-grants, it's the communication layer that decides whether a struggling student actually acts on the outreach.

Network works the same way. A signed employer agreement or a new transfer pathway is just a press release until someone translates it into something understandable and easy to act on — and that translation work, converting internal complexity into external meaning, is marcomm's job too.

The Real Risk Is Misdiagnosis

If leaders think marcomm exists to promote decisions made elsewhere, they'll measure outputs when they should measure behavior, celebrate activity without compounding value, and assign marcomm responsibility for outcomes while withholding the authority to shape them upstream. That's how institutions end up asking marketing teams to solve structural problems with campaigns.

How to Bring Smarter Innovation to your Campus

None of this requires a new budget line. Run the audit: map your last five innovation announcements against the ten types, and you'll likely find nearly everything in Product Performance — with real work in the other nine types never named or resourced as innovation. Pick one lever where your institution is weakest and your team is strongest, attach a real KPI, and report it the way advancement reports dollars. Then bring the framework to the cabinet. When the conversation shifts from "we need a campaign" to "we're underinvested in two of the three trust-building innovation types," the seat at the table changes shape.

Innovation Isn't a Department

Go back to the committee meeting. Same idea, same objections. Now give the room a framework. The enrollment communications flow gets named as Channel and Service innovation, weighed against what those types cost and return. "We tried something like that before" loses its veto power, because the room finally has something better than memory to compare against.

Your marcomm team holds five of the ten levers your institution has for earning back public trust, including the three strongest ones. Innovation isn't a department. It's a discipline. And the team best positioned to practice it has been sitting in the room the whole time, waiting for someone to hand it the vocabulary.

Consider it handed.

Marketing Leader Q&As

If your marketing budget doubled tomorrow, what is the first new initiative you would take on?

[Answer]:

If my marketing budget doubled tomorrow, I would invest in signal engineering to ensure every piece of content we create is meaningful and measurable. I would want to create content that provides the clearest evidence of who we are. Additionally, I would invest heavily in brand marketing to fuel our performance marketing.



Jeff Holeman
University of Florida's Warrington College of Business

SPONSORED BY ELECTRIC KITE

Powering an Upward Mobility Machine

How four years of compounding digital work helped Forsyth Technical Community College reach more of the students it was built to serve.

Overview

Forsyth Tech is thriving. Enrollment is growing, its reputation is flourishing and in June the Aspen Institute named it one of the 10 finalists for the 2027 Aspen Prize for Community College Excellence. As the college's agency partner for the last four years, Electric Kite is proud to have had a role in that success.

29%
Enrollment growth over 4 years

61%
Increase in lead volume

41%
Conversion rate from lead to application

The Starting Point

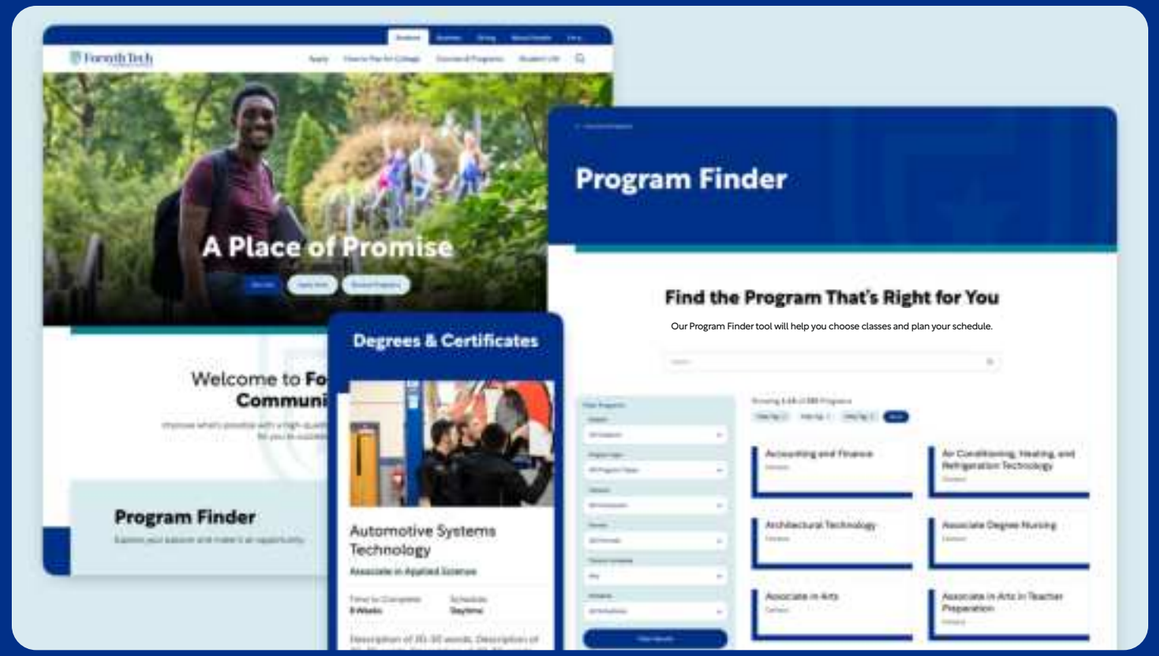
Many Forsyth Tech students are the first in their families to attend college. In 2022, the website wasn't answering their questions. It was bloated, hard to navigate, and built on dated technology, so many prospects gave up and called instead.

The website won a CASE District III "Best of District Winner" award for Best Marketing Website.

2022: Website Redesign

We started with research: 368 surveys, student and parent interviews, and prototype testing. We organized the new site around what those students and families needed to know. We also integrated it with the college's Element451 CRM so every inquiry triggered personalized email and text follow-ups.

- RFI submissions rose 61%
- Student phone calls dropped 25%
- Enrollment grew 5.3% (fall 2022 to fall 2023) and 6% (spring 2023 to spring 2024)



2024: Paid Media as a Full Funnel

When we took over Forsyth Tech's digital advertising in 2024, we rebuilt a one-size-fits-all ad strategy to be tailored around the college's specific audiences. We fixed measurement by resetting conversion goals and adding enhanced tracking, so the budget went to what actually produced applicants. Then we matched campaigns to specific programs and decision points, and refreshed creative on the enrollment calendar.

160%
Increase in impressions, significantly boosting brand visibility

90%
More conversions from ads

27%
Lower cost per conversion

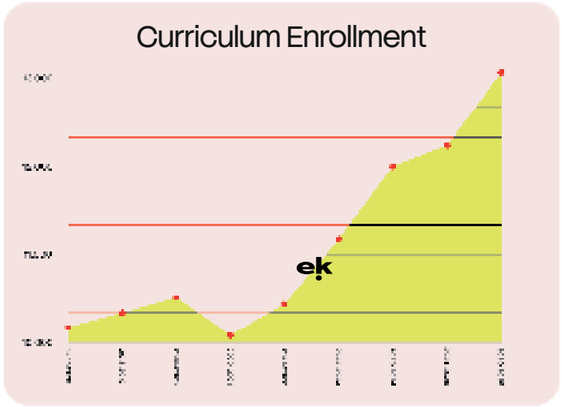
41%
Of leads went on to apply



We continue to manage Forsyth Tech's digital advertising and to see similarly strong results.

“Electric Kite didn’t just build us a website–they created a dynamic digital ecosystem that resonates with our students’ journeys and needs.”

— **Devin Purgason,**
AVP for Student Experience,
Marketing and Outreach,
Forsyth Tech



2025–26: Content Support and AEO Discovery

In the summer of 2026, Forsyth Tech needed to get the word out about the Pell-supported Next NC Scholarship that could make college free for eligible North Carolina households. Within weeks we concepted, scripted, produced, and launched :15- and :30-second spots, then ran them through our targeted CTV service.

As prospective students continue to turn to ChatGPT and other LLMs in their college searches, traffic to higher ed websites is down across the board. But by building structured FAQs, adding schema markup and updating copy on key pages of the Forsyth Tech website, we have boosted program-page discoverability and strengthened locational signals. As a result, visibility in LLM platforms has surged and the most important metric — traffic from LLMs — doubled from May through August of 2026.

Forsyth Tech shows no signs of slowing down, and we’re proud to support the college’s success and its vital mission.

About Electric Kite

A Philadelphia-based creative marketing agency helping colleges grow enrollment through research-led web strategy, design, paid media, and search.

Contact: hello@electrickite.com
electrickite.com

Marketing Leader Q&As

What’s the best piece of advice you’d give someone stepping into a CMO or marketing director role at a university right now?

[Answer]:

There’s so much more to the work than just the marketing itself. If you’re thinking about this kind of path, it’s really important to understand budgets, building campus relationships, and being comfortable that you can’t have everyone agree. Start working on these skills now, so that you’re better prepared for that role when the opportunity presents itself.



Carrie Phillips, Ed.D.
University of Arkansas at Little Rock

FEATURE

The Higher Education Enrollment Funnel Is Dead.

Written by Chris Kudialis



A high-school junior researching nursing programs may never fill out an inquiry form. Instead, she finds a university's program through Perplexity, watches current students' dorm tours on YouTube, compares tuition on Niche, reads Reddit threads about campus social life, and asks a family friend in health care about job placement. By the time she visits campus, she already has a strong opinion about the school. The school's CRM never saw her coming.

Sound familiar? It's most of Gen Z's college search. And it's also why the enrollment funnel — the traditional path higher ed marketers use to track how prospective students progress through awareness, interest, inquiry, application, admission, and enrollment phases — is quietly failing the marketing and admissions teams who rely on it most.

For decades, enrollment marketers have mostly built their dashboards and budgets around these six stages, baked into day-to-day strategy and reporting templates at admissions offices nationwide.

For marketing and enrollment leads looking at just those numbers, everything might still appear fine. Inquiries clear annual targets. Application and admission tallies are on par with or higher than year before. Each item gets checked off as the pool of prospects filters down to the students expected on campus in August.

Then, the class misses its target goal.

"The traditional enrollment funnel, conceptualized as this consistent, linear journey doesn't capture the totality of the student journey," said Becca Smith, senior vice president of client strategy and services at higher ed marketing firm Electric Kite. "To market effectively, we need to introduce some flexibility and complexity."

The surprise normally comes late in the enrollment cycle, despite enrollment teams believing they had enough volume. The massive number of inquiries includes students who never seriously considered the college, and applications jumped because it's easier than ever to apply — not as a result of growing interest[1].

Deposited students eventually stop opening messages, then fail to complete their housing and financial aid forms. The enrollment dashboard recorded all of those students at a stage in the process. But it never showed they changed their minds.

The traditional enrollment funnel has been a university marketing blueprint for eons, tracking the administrative steps between a name and an enrolled student. But in 2026, it no longer explains the behaviors that produce university classes — and it doesn't warn leaders in time to change outcomes.

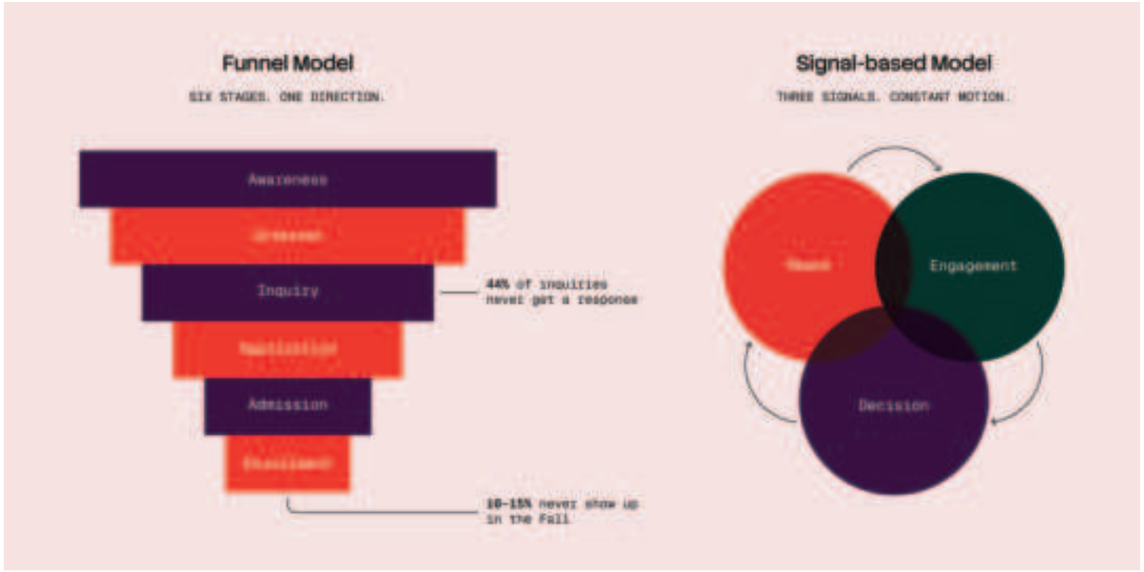
For all practical purposes, the enrollment funnel is dead.

"[The funnel] is a helpful structure and a way to conceptualize how students make decisions about where they're going to go to school," Smith said. "But it's not scientific, and reality doesn't usually happen that way."

Rather than a linear process, marketers are now responding to prospects using multiple channels and marketing assets simultaneously and sporadically throughout their journey. So instead of grouping users into unrealistic stages, they're implementing a framework that treats every interaction as intelligence that can tell a more unified story and prompt more tangible action. For instance, the signal model looks at whether the right students know about a school, how they interact with it and the factors that influence whether they decide to enroll. It then connects those early signs to familiar numbers such as applications, the percentage of admitted students who enroll, and total enrollment.

The Funnel Used to Work, When Students Were More Visible to Schools

Higher education borrowed the funnel from corporate sales and marketing. College marketing and enrollment teams calculate the percentage of students moving from one stage to the next, then compare those rates with



previous years.

After that, if a school realizes it still needs more students to complete a class, they might assign admissions counselors to weaker territories to help finish the job. The model worked better during previous decades, when colleges could more easily follow prospective students' search. Institutions bought names, mailed pamphlets, paid for Google ads, collected replies and generally encouraged students to move forward.

A click, call, or inquiry required intent — a signal the student was at least moderately serious. Enrollment software tracked it all, keeping teams and trustees on the same page.

"We once relied on informational search as a key tactic in an effective paid media strategy," Smith said.

The funnel served two purposes at once: it structured how teams processed students, and offered a theory of how they chose. The first still works, mostly. The second has broken down.

A 2026 Volt survey of university marketers found just 12.5 percent were "very confident" their school's enrollment metrics predicted enrollment outcomes. Only 5 percent believed the funnel reflected how students actually behave, while 52.5 percent called student behavior "much more unpredictable" than the funnel suggests, or said it "doesn't reflect student behavior at all."

From Funnels to Pinballs

Jeff Holeman, chief marketing officer at the University of Florida's Warrington College of Business, has spent the past two decades in university marketing, including three years at Florida. He's leading the college's marketing transformation away from the traditional enrollment funnel after concluding, similar to Smith, that the linear model is outdated.

Early in Holeman's career, the funnel offered real benefits as a "reporting model," he said. But it's becoming increasingly irrelevant.

"What we're doing is adapting as our world has changed around us," Holeman said. "That starts with the understanding that the enrollment funnel is not the decision model. The funnel is an excellent reporting framework, but it's never been an accurate model of how people decide where to go to college."

Marketing strategist Rand Fishkin, founder of the audience research firm SparkToro, dubs it the pinball customer journey. Fishkin argues that consumers, including prospective university students discerning where to enroll, no longer move through a small handful of predictable channels before making a purchase. Instead, they bounce around.

Prospective students can also move backward, which the funnel doesn't consider. A financial aid offer can send an admitted student comparison-shopping. A disappointing campus visit can cool interest that has been rising.

But the backward movement isn't a final direction, either. Case in point: an enrollee having second thoughts about a school might find renewed interest after a productive phone call with a faculty member. Per Fishkin, students don't completely lock into each stage of the enrollment funnel. Their interests simply change as they receive new information.

"We can't bury our heads in the sand and pretend like the funnel is the best way to describe real customer journeys anymore," he said.

Higher education has seen its own version of this shift: instead of typing "best nursing programs" into Google, more students are asking ChatGPT to compare three specific nursing programs by cost and prestige.

A recent study by EducationDynamics found that 51 percent of students now use AI chatbots somewhere in their college research[2], and that more prospective students are researching financial aid — a late-funnel step in the old model — before ever applying. Per Holeman, that means universities relying on the traditional funnel in 2026 are handicapping themselves with major blind spots.

Schools can still follow parts of a student's journey on their own platforms and in their own CRMs. But they miss almost everything happening off-platform, where more students than ever are actually making their decisions.

"Students now learn about an institution from a magnitude of outside sources," he said. "And a student may have spent weeks or months deciding what's even worth considering long before they submit any kind of inquiry, an important part of the process that the funnel doesn't account for."

Deciphering What's Real on the Dashboard

The gap between what the funnel dashboard shows and what actually drives enrollment has perhaps never been wider. And it starts at some of the earliest stages.

The University Professional and Continuing Education Association's 2025 biennial Secret Shopper Analysis, which tests how schools respond to prospective student inquiries, found a whopping 44 percent of inquiries went completely unanswered in 2025, worse than in 2023 and 2021[3]. Institutions that did respond took an average of 14 hours and 23 minutes; even the median was more than three hours.

Ruffalo Noel Levitz found that nearly half of prospective students expect a response within 24 hours, and that their interest drops the longer they wait[4]. The funnel records the inquiry but treats all them as equal — without accounting for the obvious fact that a three-hour response produces better odds of an application than a 14-hour one.

How Marketing Leaders View the Funnel

A Volt survey of higher ed marketing and enrollment leaders found:

12.5%
are "very confident" the metrics they report to leadership actually predict enrollment outcomes

97.5%
track application volume — but only 17.5% track response time, and just 20% track engagement or behavioral signals

75%
say if they could rebuild their reporting framework, they'd prioritize actual student decision-making behavior over stage progression

1. https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2025-11-25/college-admission-process-easier-less-stressful-as-applicant-pool-declines
2. https://insights.educationdynamics.com/rs/183-YME-928/images/EDDY-Modern-Learner-Report-2026.pdf

Allison Turcio, dean of enrollment and marketing at Siena University, said it's "common sense" that the odds change — most departments are well aware. Yet the funnel treats all inquiries as the same.

"If I have hundreds of inquiries, I shouldn't just count them all as inquiries," Turcio said. "Their sources, where they came from and when they first interacted with us matter."

The gap widens further along the journey: 10 to 15 percent of students who complete every stage in the funnel never show up in the fall[5]. Summer melt happens almost entirely after a funnel dashboard would already mark them enrolled.

Turcio, who has spent 20 years in Siena's marketing and communications department after graduating from the school in 2006, now hosts her own biweekly podcast on enrollment marketing. She contends a funnel stage doesn't capture why a student melted. Perhaps a financial aid package that looked fine in March became too little in August. Or a competing offer from another school may have surfaced in June.

As the cost of higher education keeps climbing, price and financial aid availability remain leading factors in students' final decisions. For the low-income and first-generation students who make up a sizable share of summer melt, the cause is often a family situation or a need to start working. Not necessarily a problem with the institution itself.

"Too many schools are stuck in a one-sided view of what's happening," Turcio said. "They don't see what's going on behind the scenes."

The funnel dashboard misses warning signs that a signal-based model could catch earlier. Holeman and Turcio both point to a student's behavior after visiting campus as an important tell.

A signal model, for example, might follow which webpages a deposited student returns to. If they stop visiting pages about financial aid or the specific program they want to study, that's often a better predictor of a no-show than anything sitting in an application file.

Meanwhile, a stage-based system can't measure that. It only has "deposited," a status that looks identical whether a student is planning to move in or already leaning toward another school.

"Those gaps expose a major problem with the stage-first dashboard," Holeman said. "It can show a school admitted a student, but on its own it can't show whether the student understood the cost of attending or how well they enjoyed their visit, or even whether they're entertaining offers from competing schools."

"I think if you're only looking at the traditional funnel and using the same conversion points and your throughput, you're not going to come out with an accurate prediction," Turcio added. "You're going to be shocked. We might track someone when they apply. We might track someone who inquired. But there are so many other things happening that are hard to surface and hard to see."

Signals, Not Stages

Marketers and survey respondents agree: enrollment marketing needs a model of what students are actually doing, not which stage a database puts them at. The signal model isn't a wholesale replacement for every institutional metric. Instead, it reorganizes metrics around three signal categories: Reach, Engagement, and Decision, which together represent how a recruiting cycle actually plays out.

> " If I have hundreds of inquiries, I shouldn't just count them all as inquiries," Turcio said. "Their sources, where they came from and when they first interacted with us matter."

3. https://upcea.edu/secret-shopper-2025/
4. https://www.ruffalonl.com/blog/enrollment/beyond-the-click-why-students-really-reach-out-to-colleges/
5. https://sdp.cepr.harvard.edu/sites/g/files/omnuum4446/files/sdp/files/sdp-summer-melt-handbook_0.pdf

Reach signals show whether schools are getting the right students to encounter their institution, and the impression that contact creates. Engagement signals detail the quality, timing, and pattern of their interactions. Decision signals follow the inputs most likely to drive students' final decisions.

The categories can overlap or bleed into each other. A campus visit starts as engagement and can become a decision signal once the college connects completed visits with yield. Ditto for a financial aid offer when a student moves from opening it to accepting it.

"The enrollment signal model gives marketing and admissions teams some indicator of where a student is in the journey based on the student's behaviors and engagement, rather than relying on the calendar of the recruitment cycle," said Smith, the Electric Kite executive.

This approach also requires segmentation, Smith noted: a 30 percent yield rate may look healthy, but could mask a collapse among first-generation admits in a specialized program like engineering behind strong performance among local legacy students in liberal arts.

Smith, Turcio, and Holeman suggest segmenting by program, geography, student type, income proxy, or inquiry source — whatever's large enough to matter.

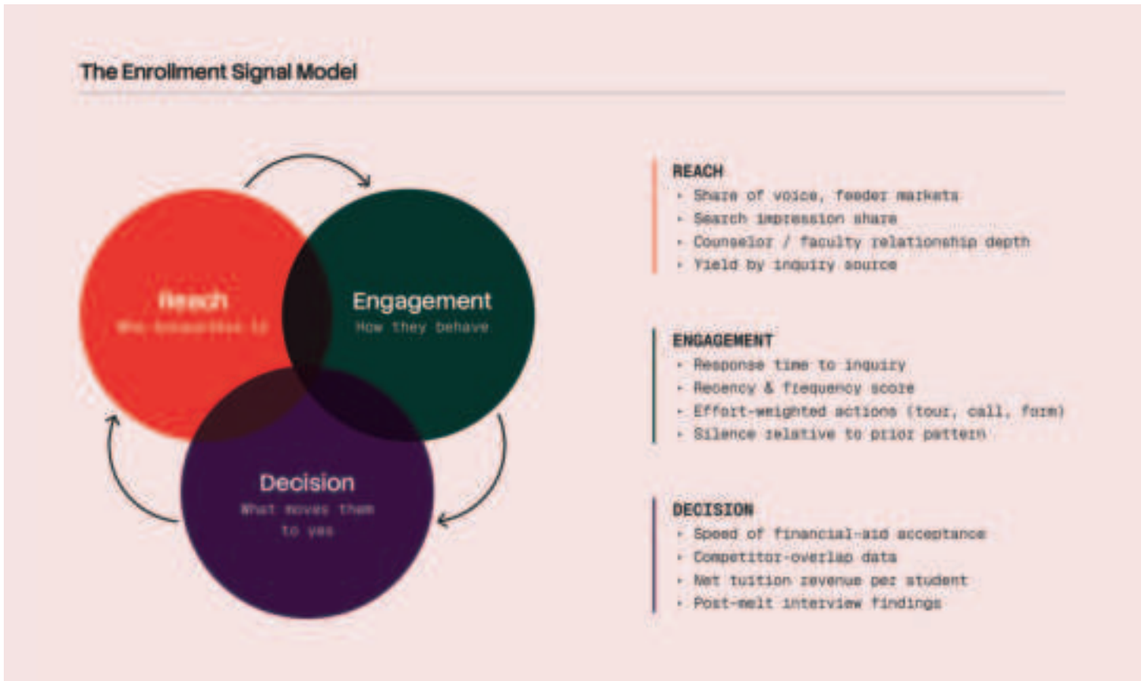
Reach: Legitimate Consideration Instead of Simple Awareness

Reach signals measure something the old funnel's raw inquiry count never captured: how many of the right prospective students encountered the institution in a context built for genuine consideration, and how they felt about it.

"The reach layer asks a better question," Smith explained. "Did the institution become visible to students it can serve, in places that foster serious consideration?"

Share of voice in key feeder markets offers one plausible answer. A university defines its most important feeder markets, compares its presence against competitors across paid search, organic search, local media, school events, counselor contact, and social channels. The goal isn't a score — it's showing up where the most-likely prospective students gather information and build their lists.

Search impression share for high-intent queries matters more as students lean on AI-generated summaries — a



school either gets named or it doesn't, Holeman said, so marketers should do everything possible to show up for the criteria they want to be known for.

The depth of relationships students and their families feel toward counselors, professors, staff, coaches, and other influencers matters just as much — a counselor's recommendation often carries more weight with a family than any paid media an institution can run. The Ruffalo Noel Levitz report found that first-generation families were especially influenced by contact with counselors, fairs, admissions staff, and faculty.

"And there are many ways to track that," Holeman said. "Above all, just making sure you're putting the right people out there for students to easily discover and access is incredibly helpful."

Yield by inquiry source shows which channels actually convert, not just which generate volume. Holeman recommended tracking every source application, admit, deposit, enrollment, and net tuition results — a more accurate story than the funnel's top-line numbers. A channel producing 1,000 inquiries at a 2 percent yield costs more than one producing 200 inquiries at 20 percent, even though funnel dashboards call the former the bigger win. Quality-weighted reach begins with the students who actually enroll.

Engagement: Understanding Current Levels of Interest

Engagement signals happen after contact, tracking not whether a student advanced to another stage, but what interactions they've made lately with the school, how often, and with how much effort.

"Engagement signals capture how prospective students are actually behaving once they know an institution exists, which reach signals alone can't illustrate," Smith explained. "Data on actual behavior matters more here than where they are in the funnel, because two students in the same funnel stage can be in very different places."

Actions carry different weights — a reply outweighs an opened email; showing up for a campus tour outweighs registering for one; filling out a financial aid application outweighs clicking to read about it. Smith believes institutions should rank interactions by quality and depth, then test their rankings with final enrollment tallies during several cycles.

A simple rolling score is a good place to start, Turcio said: score how recently a student completed a meaningful action, track interaction frequency over a week to 60 days, and add points for effort — a campus tour, a call with faculty, or responding to a financial aid offer. Teams can subtract points for negative actions, like a missed appointment, an unfinished form, or repeated requests for information already given.

"Scores tracking engagement recency and frequency can help us answer many of our questions about what students are thinking," she said. "A student who engaged twice over the summer is different from one who engaged twice in March, even if they'd both technically be in the same funnel stage."

Response time to inquiry might be the single most predictive and most neglected metric in the industry, Turcio said — and a student's silence is usually the most telling change signal. A student who engaged every week and then goes quiet for a couple of months deserves attention before they melt, though teams should measure that silence against the student's own earlier pattern, not a universal cutoff.

Turcio also flagged a risk: teams should prioritize consented, first-party behavior and regularly audit scores for bias. Students with jobs, limited home internet, or long commutes may engage differently than students who don't — without being any less interested.

Decision: Measuring the Forces Closest to Commitment

Decision signals are the hardest category to measure directly, Holeman said — which is exactly why most institutions fall short or don't even try. The inputs that most directly drive final decisions often happen outside institutional visibility: students compare colleges in private, where universities can't see or influence them.

But proxy measures exist, and they're more available than most enrollment offices think.

When and how fast a student accepts a financial aid package is among the most important factors, Holeman said — a student who accepts within a week is behaving very differently from one who sits on it for a month, even if both eventually say yes.

Competitor overlap data — the other schools admits are weighing, and at what yield rates — gives that price context. Schools can gather it while negotiating financial aid, through admitted-student surveys, and by matching students to their eventual destinations.

Then net tuition revenue per enrolled student, when segmented rather than just combined into a final number, tells schools whether they're earning the enrollment numbers they want at a cost they can sustain.

"A headcount figure alone will never reveal that," Holeman said. "A headcount without price can lead institutions into buying a class it can't sustain."

One underused decision signal is the post-melt interview: reaching out to students — by phone where a team has bandwidth, by short survey where it doesn't — to ask why they chose another school. The answers students give provide marketers with their most valuable data.

Give Leaders a Dashboard They Can Act On

None of the three signal categories work well on their own — this approach works only when all three come together, and when they conflict with one another.

A spike in reach with no jump in engagement usually means the wrong audience is getting a campaign's attention — something the funnel would never catch.

But the signal model will have little impact if enrollment teams use it privately while leaders keep receiving only a funnel. The reporting structure has to change too. A two-layer report, tracking both health and performance, is required.

The health layer brings three to five leading indicators that tell leaders in real time whether the recruitment cycle is on track: response time, engagement score trend, financial aid acceptance rate, and yield rate broken out by segment. These indicators move before a final outcome and should reach leaders regularly.

"It's a way for (leaders) to better understand where a student is on that timing," Electric Kite's Smith explained.

The second is a performance layer, the lagging metrics leaders already track: application volume, yield rate, and enrolled headcount, reported with context instead of as the full story. It's reframed as an outcome of signals, not a primary indicator.

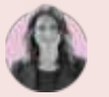
Building both layers doesn't require new infrastructure, Smith said. Response time and financial aid engagement already live in a CRM. Marketers just need to move that data onto the same data sheet leadership already receives every month. Yield by segment is a filter on data institutions already have, not a new dataset. The post-melt interview is perhaps the only genuinely new process, and it requires only a phone call or email.

To satisfy the politics of change, marketers can frame this as an added resource, not a substitute — it doesn't ask a president or board to stop caring about yield rate. The pitch is simple: The funnel told you the story after your class arrived. The signal model tells you while you can still do something about it.



Chris Kudialis is a veteran reporter and editor with experience covering some of the world's most significant events for several of the country's largest news outlets.

Quoted in this article:



Allison Turcio
Dean of enrollment and marketing at Siena University. She also hosts The Application Podcast about the future of enrollment, marketing, AI, and the student experience.



Becca Smith
Senior vice president of client strategy & services at Electric Kite, a full-service creative agency.



Jeff Holeman
Chief marketing officer at the University of Florida's Warrington College of Business. He has previously led marketing at the University of California, Berkeley, Arizona State University, Keene State College, and the University of Rochester.



Rand Fishkin
CEO and cofounder of SparkToro and the co-author of the book "Zero Click Marketing." Prior, he was CEO and cofounder of Moz and Inbound.org.

AmbioEdu

SPONSORED ARTICLE

Students Can't Choose Schools They Never See.

We asked over 2,000 high school students how they actually find colleges. Nearly half of them said they only applied to schools they had seen advertised.

95%

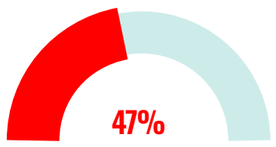
Streaming services are extremely popular among high school students, **95% of students reported that they watch streaming TV.**

Ask an enrollment team how students discover their institution and you'll get a familiar list. Rankings. Counselors. Campus visits. A recommendation from a cousin who went there and liked it. A search engine, eventually.

Then you ask students, and the answer is a little different.

AmbioEdu partnered with Clarity EM and higher ed researcher Will Patch to survey more than 2,000 high school students across the country about how they stream, scroll, watch, and decide. Some of what came back confirms what you already suspected. Some of it should change your media plan.

Start here:



47% of surveyed seniors said they only applied to colleges they had seen advertised.

That one number completely reframes the funnel. Students are narrowing their consideration sets long before they do anything you can track. By the time a student is comparing net price or scheduling a visit, the shortlist already exists. The competition ended before most institutions knew it started.

It also puts a stake through the idea that awareness sits politely at the top of the funnel. If half of seniors won't apply to a school they've never seen advertised, awareness isn't the warm-up act. It's the ticket to compete on everything you're actually proud of: your programs, your outcomes, your aid, your campus.

Discovery Happens Before the Search

Ninety-five percent of surveyed students said they watch streaming TV. On its own, that isn't shocking. Streaming is simply television now, spread across Netflix, Hulu, Disney+, Prime Video, HBO, and a variety of other networks. What matters is the timing. Students spend hours a day with video years before they type a college name into a search bar, Claude, or ChatGPT. And when they finally do search, they're usually looking up a school they already know exists.

That's the uncomfortable truth about branded search. It captures demand beautifully. It rarely creates it. Something has to introduce your institution first: a conversation, a feed, an ad, a game on a Saturday afternoon. Discovery comes first. Research comes later. If your budget is weighted toward the back half of that sequence, you're paying to harvest a crop somebody else planted.

68%

68% of students say that seeing TV ads for a brand makes them more credible.

Recognition is What Makes Credibility Stick

Two findings belong together.
Sixty-eight percent of students said seeing a college advertised on TV makes that institution feel more credible. But 49% said advertising only increases credibility when they had already heard of the school.

Read them in sequence and you get something more useful than either one alone. Trust isn't a stage students arrive at after awareness. It's built by repetition. Recognition and credibility feed each other, which means one flight, in one channel, for one season, will not do it.

Consider the view from a 17-year-old. This is the largest financial decision of their life so far, made on incomplete information and instinct. They're hunting for signals that a school is real, established, and worth the risk. Showing up consistently in places they already trust is one of those signals.

None of this replaces a strong institution.
But students don't apply to schools they merely know about. They apply to schools they trust enough to consider.

Then There's Pinterest

One finding gets the loudest reaction in every room. Pinterest ranked as the fifth most-used social platform among surveyed students. You read that right, fifth! Still, Pinterest almost never comes up in higher ed channel planning. The conversation stays on Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube. Meanwhile, students are on Pinterest doing the exact thing your funnel depends on: planning, exploring careers, picturing a life that hasn't happened yet.

That isn't a call to reallocate your budget to Pinterest overnight. It means your assumptions have a shelf life. Everyone chases the same four channels, which is precisely why those channels keep getting more expensive. If a platform that surprised most enrollment marketers, what else is being missed?



So, What Should You Do With This?

Three things worth carrying into your next planning cycle. Treat institution visibility as a primary driver of conversion. Prospective students are unable to consider a school they do not know exists.

Rather than viewing brand awareness and performance marketing as competing tactics, treat them as interconnected steps in a single strategy.

Challenge one premise per strategy cycle by allocating real resources to an overlooked channel long enough to yield meaningful insights.

Rather than revealing a hidden platform or a quick shortcut, the survey highlighted a fundamental reality that is costly to overlook. Students have to see you before they can choose you.

49%

49% of respondents only lend that credibility if they have heard of the brand before.

Get the full report!

The 2026 High School Media Consumption Survey covers streaming behavior, platform rankings, advertising influence, and the factors shaping how this class picks a college. Visit ambioedu.com, or scan the QR code to download it.

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4	Harvard University harvard.edu	96
5	Carnegie Mellon University cmu.edu	96



FEATURE ARTICLE

Demystifying Marcom Titles in Higher Ed

Written by Jaime Hunt

> Higher education marcom titles can be messy. Very messy.

At one institution, a director may lead an entire marketing operation. At another, a director may oversee a single function within a much larger division. Some institutions use AVP titles liberally. Others skip them entirely. And “CMO” can mean anything from the institution’s chief strategic marketing officer to the person overseeing advertising and creative services.

So, a title itself only tells you so much

Creating clarity in titles and their associated job responsibilities can be enormously helpful. This guide is designed to help you as you think about the roles within your division. I hope it can also serve as a resource to help make a case for changing a title when it makes sense.

Manager or Assistant Director

Level of Responsibility: Deliver the work well

Success Measure: Quality, timeliness, and effectiveness of execution; reliable ownership of projects and channels.

At this level, the primary responsibility is usually execution. A manager or assistant director should understand the institution's strategy and translate it into strong work within a defined area. They may manage projects, vendors or a small team, but they are still relatively close to the work itself.

Typical expectations might include:

- Managing campaigns, projects, or channels
- Producing or overseeing high-quality deliverables
- Coordinating timelines and workflows
- Tracking performance and reporting results
- Supervising staff or vendors
- Identifying problems and proposing solutions
- Building expertise within a particular function

Director

Level of Responsibility: Lead a function

Success Measure: Performance of the function; team effectiveness; achievement of functional goals; smart use of resources.

The director level is where the job should begin to shift substantially. A director title shouldn't be given just because someone has years of experience doing the work. A director should be leading a function. That means establishing priorities, developing staff, improving processes and making decisions about how resources are used. Directors should understand how their area contributes to larger institutional goals and think beyond whether their own projects are getting completed.

A director of digital strategy, for example, should not just "manage" the website. They should be thinking about how the institution's digital ecosystem supports recruitment, retention, revenue generation, reputation, and audience experience.

Typical expectations might include:

- Setting strategy for a functional area
- Translating broader goals into plans and priorities
- Managing and developing a team
- Allocating budget and resources
- Establishing standards and processes
- Measuring effectiveness
- Partnering with peers across the marketing and communications organization
- Advising senior leaders within their area of expertise

Senior Director

Level of Responsibility: Connecting the functions

Success Measure: Cross-functional alignment; success of major initiatives; ability to anticipate and resolve problems; strength of leaders they oversee.

The difference between a director and a senior director is often one of the least clearly defined distinctions in higher education. Ideally, a senior director has a broader lens. They may still own a particular discipline, but they should increasingly be able to see across teams, channels, and priorities. They should recognize when a problem that appears to be about social media is actually a brand problem, when a website challenge is really a governance problem or when an enrollment campaign issue requires coordination across various units both within and outside of the division. They should also require less direction from senior leadership.

Typical expectations might include:

- Leading a complex or institutionally significant portfolio
- Connecting work across multiple functions
- Resolving competing priorities
- Coaching directors and managers
- Leading major cross-functional initiatives
- Anticipating organizational needs
- Making recommendations based on institutional rather than departmental interests
- Representing marketing and communications in broader conversations

Senior directors should begin moving away from being primarily functional experts and toward becoming organizational leaders.

Executive Director

Level of Responsibility: Lead across functions or a major institutional priority

Success Measure: Cross-functional performance; successful delivery of major initiatives; alignment of people and resources; progress against broader strategic goals.

The executive director level typically represents a shift from leading a single function to leading across multiple functions, teams, or a significant institutional priority. An executive director should be able to see how different areas of the marketing and communications operation work together and create alignment among them. They are often responsible for translating broad strategy into coordinated action across teams while anticipating where priorities, resources, or processes may come into conflict.

For example, an executive director overseeing enrollment marketing might not directly manage every channel or campaign. Instead, they should be ensuring that content, creative, digital, web, and paid media are working together toward shared enrollment goals and that the work is aligned with institutional strategy.

Typical expectations might include:

- Leading multiple functions, teams, or a significant strategic portfolio
- Translating institutional priorities into coordinated strategies and initiatives
- Creating alignment across teams and functional areas
- Leading major cross-functional projects
- Managing and developing directors or senior-level staff
- Allocating resources across competing priorities
- Identifying and resolving organizational or operational barriers
- Establishing shared goals, measures, and accountability
- Advising senior leadership on broader strategic opportunities and challenges
- Representing marketing and communications in institution-wide initiatives

Assistant/Associate Vice President

Level of Responsibility: Lead the system

Success Measure: Performance of multiple teams; organizational effectiveness; resource optimization; progress against division-wide strategic priorities.

At the AVP level, the scope should widen again. An AVP is typically responsible for a collection of functions, teams or strategies. (And this is one role where an individual may move from an assistant VP title to an associate VP title based on experience.) They should be able to create alignment across areas that may have different priorities, workflows and cultures. This role often requires balancing strategy and operations. AVPs are close enough to the work to understand where systems are breaking down, but senior enough that they should not personally be solving every problem.

Typical expectations might include:

- Leading multiple functions or teams
- Developing integrated strategies
- Managing significant budgets and resources
- Establishing organizational priorities
- Building leadership capacity among directors
- Improving systems, structures, and workflows
- Navigating relationships with campus partners
- Translating executive priorities into actionable strategy
- Advising the VP or CMO on institutional opportunities and risks



Marketing Leader Q&As

What's one thing your team stopped doing this year that everyone else is still doing?

[Answer]:

I'm always looking for outdated undertakings that no longer support our goals and strategy. In 2015 we stopped posting in Tumblr (no one missed it, by the way). In 2022 we stopped sending monthly analytics reports to the president of the institution. Rafael Reif ended his tenure that year and it was a good opportunity to stop doing this task that took up a lot of time for what I believed to be minimum impact. We still send reports to the president when necessary and provide value, but the monthly reports halted, and again, no one missed them. This year, I'm thinking we might stop posting in Threads. The platform doesn't feel like it's adding value to our presence, at least not currently, and my time is too valuable.



Jenny Li Fowler
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

VP or CMO

Level of Responsibility: Lead the institution through marketing

Success Measure: Institutional outcomes; strength and distinctiveness of the brand; contribution to enrollment/reputation/revenue goals; executive influence; health and effectiveness of the overall marketing organization.

At the VP or CMO level, the job shifts from primarily managing marketing to helping lead the institution. The CMO should understand brand, enrollment marketing, communications, digital strategy, reputation, and audience behavior. But subject-matter expertise alone is not enough. A strong CMO should be able to sit at the executive table and contribute to conversations about enrollment, academic strategy, finance, student experience, philanthropy, reputation and organizational change. Their lens should expand well beyond, "How should we market this?"

Typical expectations might include:

- Setting the institution's overarching marketing and communications direction
- Advising the president and other executive leaders
- Connecting brand strategy to institutional strategy
- Making enterprise-level resource decisions
- Advocating for audience needs and market realities
- Building alignment across decentralized units
- Managing institutional reputation and risk
- Developing senior leaders
- Establishing accountability and performance expectations
- Deciding what the organization will not prioritize
- Helping institutional leaders understand the external environment

A Word About What Comes After the Title

Where titles really start to go sideways is when institutions try to cram the job description into the title. For example, "AVP for Marketing Strategy and Brand Management" or "Executive Director of Strategic Marketing Initiatives." (I have been guilty of this in the past.) These titles often create more ambiguity, not less.

The more qualifiers you add, the less clear the actual authority of the role becomes. Take "AVP for Marketing Strategy and Brand Management." Does this person own marketing or only marketing strategy? Are there other marketing leaders with overlapping authority? A simpler title like "AVP of Marketing" establishes both the level and the function. The position description can explain that the person owns strategy, brand, campaigns, etc.

Overly specific titles also create problems when responsibilities evolve. (I know a marketer who had four different variations of a title over four years. As duties were added to his job description, the title grew longer.) These lengthy titles also make external benchmarking harder and can unintentionally narrow authority. Going back to the "AVP for Marketing Strategy and Brand Management" example, that role can sound like an advisor to marketing rather than the person accountable for it.

That said, not all modifiers are bad. "Senior Director of Enrollment Marketing" or "AVP of Brand and Marketing" can be perfectly clear when those words define a genuine portfolio. The question is whether the language clarifies the scope or is being used to describe the entire job.

Titles Should Create Clarity, Not Confusion

At the end of the day, the goal isn't to create a perfectly standardized hierarchy across all of higher education. That is probably impossible. The goal is to make sure a title accurately reflects the scope of the role, the level of responsibility and the expectations for leadership.

If you are designing an organization, ask whether someone's title tells people roughly what they own and at what level they are expected to operate. If you are considering a promotion, don't focus only on whether someone has earned a bigger title. Ask whether the role itself has actually expanded.

And keep in mind that the best title is the one that makes things clear, not the one that sounds the most impressive.



Marketing Leader Q&As

What's one assumption about "what Gen Z wants" that you think is flat-out wrong?

[Answer]:

I honestly think we do our prospective students a disservice when we say they don't have an attention span. Gen Z will scroll TikTok endlessly if the content is what they are looking for. I think it's less of an attention span issue and more of a content quality issue. If your content is good, they'll watch it.



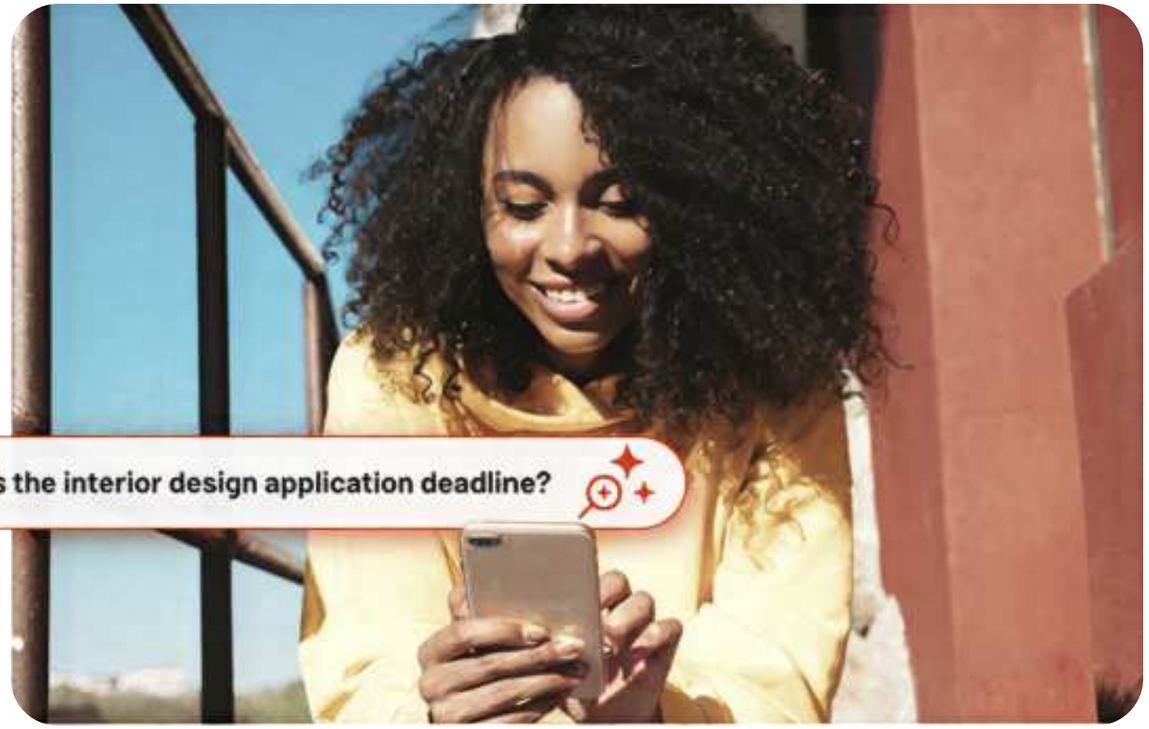
Shane Baglini
William & Mary

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Generative AI Is Raising the (Search) Bar

Written by Jeff Dillon

SEARCHSTAX



At The Ohio State University's College of Food, Agricultural, and Environmental Sciences (CFAES), a prospective student researching a soil science degree has faced a maze:

nearly 300 separate college websites, each with its own navigation and its own idea of where "admissions requirements" belong. Kris Read plans to bring those sites under one search experience, so a student asks one question and gets one answer instead of guessing which of 300 sites has it.

Fragmentation is common for university websites, built one department at a time.

For a decade, a mediocre college site search was a nuisance. In 2026 it's a liability. Students now expect answers, not 10 blue links to sort through themselves.

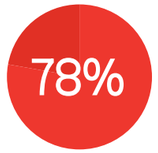
Generative AI didn't invent the problem of fragmented content, but it did make it far less acceptable. When an AI system summarizes web pages, badly organized content will get misinterpreted, skipped, or replaced by a competitor's cleaner page.

According to EducationDynamics, 78% of education-related Google searches now surface an AI Overview before a student clicks anything, and "stealth applicants," who apply without a formal inquiry, have grown from roughly 1% of applications in 2020 to 9.7% in 2025. Yet trust hasn't fully transferred: a UPCEA-cited survey found 77% of prospective students still call university websites "extremely" or "very" trustworthy, versus 66% for search engines generally.

Generative answers are turning into the front door to the university website, not a replacement for it.

Texas Christian University shows what fixing that door looks like. TCU's site had grown to more than 50,000 pages across hundreds of publishers. Corey Reed, TCU's director of web management, called the result a "crazy quilt," with academic programs, the single most-searched term on the site, buried under years of accumulated content.

The question TCU faced is the one every institution should be asking: when a prospective student arrives with a specific question, can they find an accurate answer and a next step? At the industry benchmark of a 35% search click-through rate, nearly two out of three searches end without the student clicking on anything. TCU fixed the search layer first. Now more than 55% of searches lead a student to a next step, and fewer than 5% return no results.



78% of education-related Google searches now surface an AI Overview

AI can't give a good answer if the pages it pulls from are wrong, and financial aid amounts and deadlines are where mistakes cost students the most. That's why keeping a human in the loop matters: someone still has to decide which pages the AI can trust and which topics are too important to leave to its best guess.

For marketing leaders, the lesson from TCU is to audit your content before you touch an AI feature. Start by checking your no-results rate, which should be under 5%, and search your top 20 queries yourself to see whether the first result is the page a prospective student needs or an outdated news release or PDF. If the wrong page ranks for your #1 search term, AI summaries will be wrong too.

For prospective students, the first real conversation with a university happens in an AI answer before they ever see the homepage. A student who types a question into your site's search box has already shown intent. They want to know what a program costs, when the application is due, or whether a major fits what they want to do.

This is why site search is the low-hanging fruit. Students tell you, in their own words, exactly what they want to find. A no-results search reveals a content gap, and a search that ends without a click can signal that the answer is hard to find. But that data matters only if teams can act on it.

SearchStax helps colleges and universities do both. Its site search brings content from across the institution into one experience and shows marketing and web teams what visitors are searching for and where they hit dead ends. It pulls answers only from sources the institution approves and shows the marketing and web teams what students are searching for, so they can see where content falls short and fix it.

The students are already asking. Every day, they type the questions that decide whether they apply, and every day your search box either answers them or sends them somewhere else. The universities that treat those questions as their most valuable recruitment data will be the ones those students end up choosing.

Jeff Dillon is the founder of EdTech Connect and a digital strategist who has worked with SearchStax on higher ed search initiatives.



Sources:

1. https://www.searchstax.com/case-studies/tcu-transforms-website-search to-provide-unified-search-experience/
1. https://districtadministration.com/article/ai-search-is-changing-how-students-choose-colleges/
2. https://upcea.edu/ai-search-higher-education-student-search-trends/

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HOW-TO GUIDE

Getting a “YES” from Your Boss for More Resources: A How-To Guide

Written by Lana Fontenot

We need another staff member.
We need more advertising dollars.
We need a new website.
We need updated collateral. We need another software platform.

Sound familiar?



The marketing landscape evolves quickly, and leadership expects results. It’s no wonder needs pile up quickly — during budget season and all throughout the year.

The challenge isn’t recognizing the need; it’s convincing someone else to invest in it.

I’ve been there.

Earlier in my career, I served on — and later led — marketing teams, passionately explaining why our department needed more people, more dollars and more tools.

Today, as a vice president, I’m evaluating those same requests before deciding which ones move forward to our CFO and college president.

Every budget season, I review requests that all have merit, but only a handful can move forward.

Here’s what I’ve learned: Getting a “yes” rarely depends on how important your request feels to you. It depends on how well you help leadership solve a larger institutional problem.

So, where to start?

Here are the four steps I’d recommend every marketing professional take to improve their chances of hearing “yes.”



Step 1: Before You Ask for More, Evaluate What You Already Have.

I know what you’re thinking. This article is about securing more resources, not cutting costs. But hear me out.

The first thing I ask my leaders in my division to do before making a new request is to evaluate their current state of operations.

People. Capacity. Software. Budget. Projects. Efficiencies.

In my experience, this type of reflective exercise often uncovers creative solutions that move the needle toward higher priorities. Higher education operates with finite resources. Being a good steward of these resources isn’t just good leadership; it’s an expectation.

For example:

Can an existing position be restructured to better align with evolving institutional priorities?

Are there products and software that no longer serve the department, or a similar one with a better price tag?

Are there projects that your department is still carrying that can be sunset in favor of higher priorities?

By doing a similar analysis, my Director of Marketing recently transitioned to another news monitoring service and saved more than $10,000 in her upcoming budget. She was able to then use those savings to augment her digital advertising budget for targeted mini enrollment campaigns. The request for additional advertising dollars didn’t disappear; it simply became smaller because existing resources had been optimized first.

Through reflection, she also restructured a vacant position into an assistant director role for added leadership support, and the restructuring equated to a near net-neutral budget change.

As an executive, these are the kinds of discussions that immediately capture my attention. Leaders who demonstrate they’ve exhausted existing resources before requesting new ones establish credibility. Their future requests carry more weight because they’ve already proven that they are responsibly stewarding the resources they’ve been entrusted with.

Step 2: Align Your Request with Institutional Priorities.

I always tell my team, “If we cannot tie it back to our college’s strategic plan, why are we doing it?”

What institutional problem are you trying to solve?

In the case of a new website, it’s not about an aesthetically pleasing landing page or a slick photo carousel. Think like an executive. Rather, state your case with a clear line of understanding of the bigger picture:

Weak pitch:

“We need a new website because ours is outdated.”

Strong pitch:

"Our current website creates ADA compliance risk, negatively impacts enrollment conversion, increases maintenance costs and limits our ability to support strategic enrollment initiatives."

See the difference? The conversation is no longer about spending money on a website. It's about reducing institutional risk, improving enrollment outcomes and advancing strategic priorities. That's how executives evaluate investments.

> "Executives don't buy need. They buy evidence."

Step 3: Show Me the Data.

A good idea may start the conversation, but data is what moves a request toward the finish line.

By this point, my marketing director has already demonstrated that she's been a responsible steward of existing resources and aligned her request with institutional priorities. Now I want to see the evidence. Can she prove the investment is likely to produce meaningful results?

- Can you connect advertising click-through and conversion rates to enrollment?
- Can you demonstrate that your media strategy outperformed industry benchmarks?
- Can you show that investments in SEO and keyword search increased inquiries or even produced a waitlist for a program?

Think like an executive. Every investment competes with dozens of other worthy requests. What is the return on yours?

The stronger your data, the less your ask feels like a gamble and the more it feels like a sound investment.

Step 4: Make Saying "Yes" Easy.

Your goal isn't simply to make a request. It's to make it easy for your boss to champion your request.

My marketing director has completed all three steps, and I'm certain that she's bringing it home with the fourth step: Make it hard for me and my boss to say no.

What I mean is—be impressively prepared. Provide your boss with a toolkit that they can confidently walk into the president's office with tomorrow. The easier you make it for them to advocate on your behalf, the more likely your request is to gain traction.

- Have a timeline prepared.
- Gather vendor quotes.
- Bring data on peer institutions and other benchmarks.
- Articulate implications on staffing.
- Draft a metric-driven implementation plan.
- Anticipate objections.
- Identify consequences for delaying the decision.

This last step will separate your ask from many others. This is where good requests become compelling business cases. You are proving that you are ready, the plans are laid, and you only need a "yes" to begin the work.

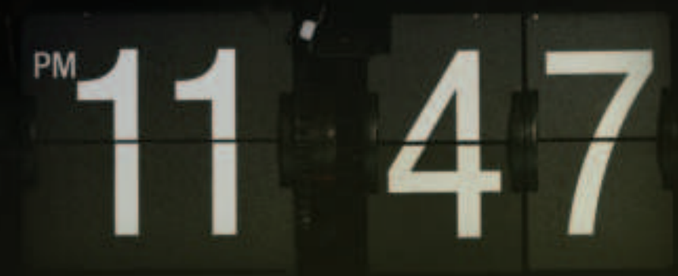
Think like an executive. Every request is evaluated through three lenses: risk, return and strategic alignment.

The next time you're preparing to ask for another position to hire, a larger advertising budget, or a new technology investment, remember these four steps. Demonstrate you've been a responsible steward of existing resources. Align your request with institutional priorities. Support it with data. Then make it incredibly easy for your leadership to advocate for it.

Executives don't fund good ideas. They fund well-prepared, strategically aligned institutional investments. The more you learn to think like an executive, the more likely your executive will think "yes."

Lana Fontenot serves as Vice Chancellor for Institutional Advancement and External Relations at South Louisiana Community College.

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LIST

The Marketing Conferences List 2027

The higher ed marketing conferences and events to inspire you in 2027.

January

Carnegie Conference	01.27-01.28 Orlando, FL. In-person Starting at $895

February

InsightsEDU	02.23-02.25 Phoenix, AZ. In-person Starting at $845

March

American Council on Education Experience (ACEx2027)	03.02-03.07 Washington, DC. In-person TBD
AGB National Conference on Trusteeship	03.13-03.15 Washington, DC. In-person Starting at $1,830
SXSW EDU	03.13-03.16 Austin, TX. In-person Starting at $545
CUPRAP	03.22-03.24 Lancaster, PA. In-person TBD
CASE DRIVE	03.31-04.02 Austin, TX. In-person Starting at $1,335

April

AACRAO Annual Meeting	04.04-04.07 Long Beach, CA. In-person TBD

April

ASU+GSV Summit	04.04-04.07 San Diego, CA. In-person Starting at $1,900
University of Illinois Web Con	04.08-04.09 Online Starting at $150
AMA Virtual Conference: Higher Ed	04.14 Online Free
UPCEA Annual Conference	04.13-04.15 Anaheim, CA. In-person Starting at $1,045
Higher Learning Commission (HLC) Annual Conference	04.17-04.19 Phoenix, AZ. In-person Starting at $775
NAGAP Graduate Enrollment Management Summit	04.21-04.24 New Orleans, LA. In-person TBD

June

Slate Summit	06.02-06.04 Nashville, TN. In-person TBD
Engage Summit (Element451)	06.21-06.23 Orlando, FL. In-person TBD
Career Education Colleges and Universities (CECU) Convention	06.21-06.23 Denver, CO. In-person TBD
CASE Annual Conference for Marketing and Branding Professionals	06.28-06.30 Chicago, IL. In-person Starting at $1,335

July

eduWeb Summit	07.20-07.22 Charleston, SC. In-person Starting at $1,175

September

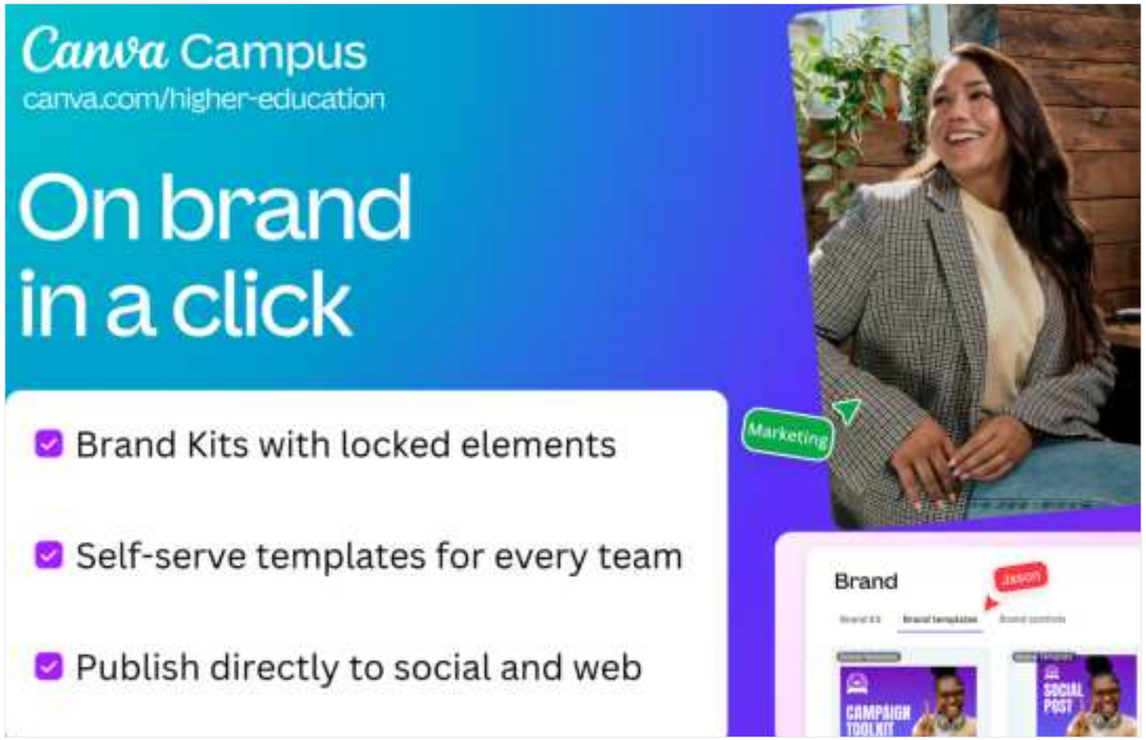
NACAC Conference	09.23-09.25 Kansas City, MO. In-person TBD

October

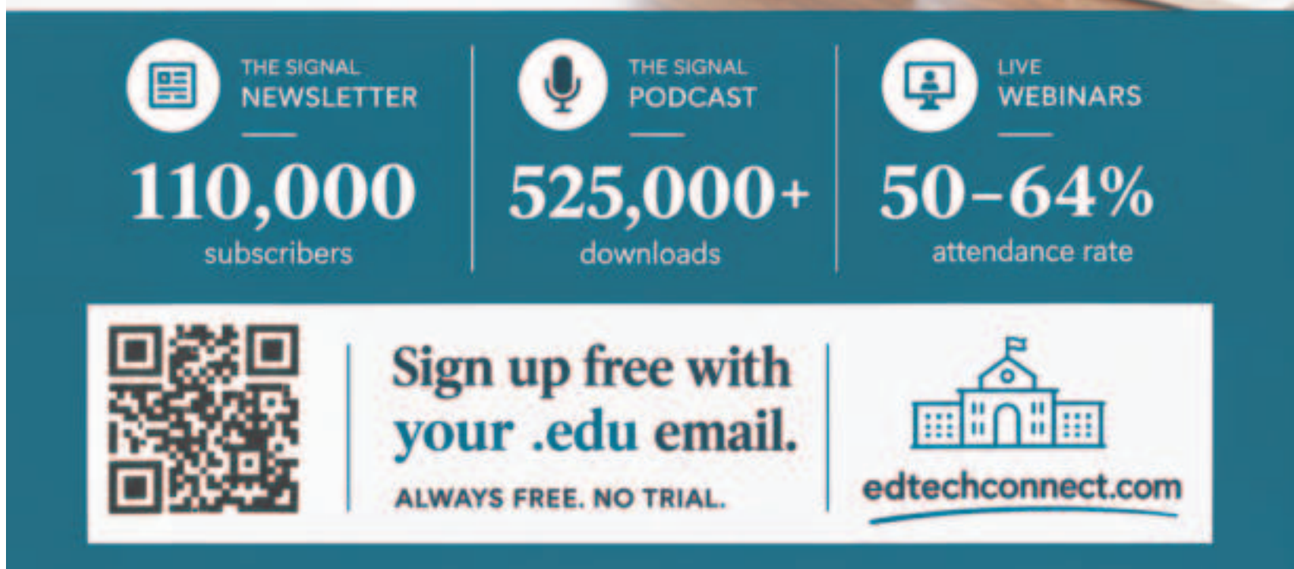
EDUCAUSE Annual Conference	10.18-10.21 Orlando, FL. & Online Hybrid TBD

November

Digital Collegium (formerly HighEdWeb)	11.07-11.10 Bellevue, WA. & Online Hybrid TBD
AMA Symposium for the Marketing of Higher Education	TBD TBD In-person TBD







FOR FUN

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Ever feel like all institutions' marketing materials have started sounding the same? Here's your chance to mix things up!

Before reading the story, fill in the word bank below — the more random the better. Then take the words from and fill them in to your potential next marketing outreach on the following page.

Word Bank

1. Adjective
2. Adjective
3. Noun
4. Your Last Name
5. Noun
6. Emotion
7. Hobby
8. Noun
9. Noun
10. Number
11. Verb past tense
12. Plural noun
13. Verb ending in -ing
14. Adjective
15. Plural noun
16. Noun
17. Noun
18. Verb
19. Plural Noun
20. Large number
21. Plural noun

Your Future Starts Here

Nestled among the rolling `1. ADJECTIVE` hills of our `2. ADJECTIVE` campus, `3. YOUR LAST NAME` University isn't just a school — we're a `4. NOUN`. From the moment you step onto our state-of-the-art `5. THING`, you'll feel it: that unmistakable sense of `6. EMOTION`. Our world-class faculty, including a Nobel laureate in `7. HOBBY`, are personally invested in helping you find your `8. NOUN` and unlock your inner `9. NOUN`.

With a student-to-faculty ratio of `10. NUMBER`:1, you'll never just be a number — you'll be known by name, especially when you `11. VERB, PAST-TENSE` in the dining hall. Our vibrant, diverse community of `12. PLURAL NOUN` comes together every fall for the beloved tradition of `13. -ING VERB` on the quad, a moment so `14. ADJECTIVE` it's basically why people apply.

Outside the classroom, you'll forge lifelong friendships over late-night `15. PLURAL NOUN` and discover leadership skills you never knew you had as president of the `16. NOUN` Club. And when you finally walk across that stage, diploma in one hand and a slightly regrettable `17. NOUN` tattoo in the other, you won't just be graduating — you'll be ready to `18. VERB` the world.

So come see for yourself why 4 out of 5 `19. PLURAL NOUN` recommend `3. YOUR LAST NAME` University. Your best four years — and your parents' `20. LARGE NUMBER` tuition dollars — start here.

`3. YOUR LAST NAME` University: Where `21. PLURAL NOUN` Become Leaders.



Q&A QUICKFIRE

DéRecco Lynch on: What Higher Ed Should Steal From Big Tech.

Answers have been edited for brevity and clarity. View this entire interview at voltedu.com/derecco

DéRecco Lynch has worked at Salesforce, partnered with Apple and Disney, and across HBCUs, Ivy League campuses and large public systems — a unique blend of both corporate and higher ed that has allowed him to cherry pick the best of each. Now Assistant Vice Provost for Enrollment Management at the University of Cincinnati, Lynch helped land the university's largest incoming class in history — not by chasing enrollment targets, but by rebuilding the team's culture. He also publishes "The Excellence Factory," a newsletter on the unwritten rules that shape careers. We talked to him about the AI tool that got him a petition, the meetings he cut by 60%, and why relationships still matter.

What can higher ed learn from corporate America, and vice versa?

[Lynch]
Big tech is obsessed with the customer experience. They don't build around the org chart, they design the company around what value they're trying to deliver. Higher ed is moving that direction, but the student experience has always been treated as a byproduct, something thought about afterward.

Corporate could learn to lean more into relationships. In higher ed, we build relationships with departments before we even introduce the work. In corporate, a lot of teams have a transactional relationship instead of a real one. That creates barriers that real relationships would move past faster.

Is there something you tried to import from Salesforce that didn't work?

[Lynch]
I built our own admissions AI agent from scratch — started at noon, finished at three, and sent it to the team at 3:15. In big tech, when you build something and share it, the team runs with it. Here, I got a petition against AI use. I had to slow it down, bring people into it. We created an AI council to govern it and introduce it to the division properly, but it did not land well with the team at first.

If a CMO told you they wanted to run their team "like a tech company," what would you tell them to change first?

[Lynch]
Get clarity on your revenue priorities and your big bets, period. Don't have any other conversation until that's settled. Then look at your budget, your people, and how they work together before you buy any tech, run any ads, or ask for any money. I think that's where CMOs go wrong — everybody jumps to the campaign or the new technology. If you slow down and understand what you're actually trying to achieve, you probably already have what you need.

What does the culture transformation at Cincinnati actually look like day to day?

[Lynch]
When I got here, Central Admissions had about a 20% sense-of-belonging score. We've moved that to 90%. I came in saying I don't care what the enrollment targets are — I care about having the number one place to work on campus. We cut our meetings by 60%. We built a playbook that spells out what makes you a culture blocker versus a high performer. Culture isn't a poster or a tagline — it has to be built into your operations.

> **"Higher ed doesn't need bigger budgets to compete with corporate playbooks — it needs the discipline to know which parts of those playbooks to steal, and the humility to admit which ones already work better on campus."**

What's a piece of institutional politics the corporate world didn't prepare you for?

[Lynch]
In corporate, people do their job whether they know you or not. In higher ed, if I don't like you, I can slow something down and never be held accountable for it. You have to build relationships before there's an ask — you have to influence people you don't manage and aren't held accountable for. That's very different from the transactional way things move in corporate.

How should a marketing director trying to get noticed by leadership approach moving up?

[Lynch]
Put the same energy into your own narrative that you put into telling the institution's story. And use the language each audience actually cares about. If I tell a provost we got 30,000 impressions, he doesn't care. If I say we moved academic quality by 6% because a student could use the portal better, that number matters to him. Same project, same outcome, different audience.

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