

**HIGHER EDUCATION INSIGHTS IN ACTION:**

## **COVID-19 Marketing and Communications Best Practices**

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As the COVID-19 crisis continues, potentially into the next academic school year, higher education must adopt new strategies for providing peace of mind and conveying value. To secure, and even boost, enrollment, college administrators will need to keep key stakeholders—prospective students and their parents—well-informed of campus safety precautions and the steps being taken to ensure the quality of the education that their schools provide.

We are helping colleges and universities address these challenges with battle-tested marketing and communications strategies, grounded in research. In spring 2020, we commissioned a national survey among parents of college-bound high school seniors to evaluate the impact of COVID-19 on college decision-making. Parents were feeling anxious and ill-informed; nearly 40 percent preferred their children attend schools closer to home.

In fall 2020, we followed up on that data with two national surveys, evaluating current attitudes of high school seniors likely to attend college and their parents. Our findings show that 7 in 10 parents feel a college education is required for a successful career, while just 5 in 10 students agree. This generational shift heightens the need for schools to reinforce their value through strong and direct messaging, as families weigh ongoing health, safety and tuition concerns. Considering the pandemic, almost half of parents (49%)—close to a 25% jump from the spring—and a third of high school seniors (33%) now prefer a college or university closer to home. Still, nearly two-thirds of parents say the pandemic has made them more cautious about the financial impact of tuition, and more than half of high school seniors (52%) are now considering attending a different college or university due to a change in financial circumstances.

From both surveys, it is clear that what parents and students want now more than ever—*need now more than ever*—is frequent communication so they can make informed decisions.

The following page contains best practices that all higher education institutions—from large public systems to small private liberal arts colleges—can use to support marketing and communications strategies during the 2021 college admissions season.

**1**

## Increase Interconnectivity

Every institution has its unique group of core constituents: students, faculty, staff, community members, trustees, donors, alumni, etc. Oftentimes these relationships overlap, and it is important to increase this interconnectivity. Keep your finger on the pulse of internal conversations as they will create opportunities for meaningful, two-way dialogue. Rather than just sharing messaging, take time to be an active listener. This will elicit better information on how your constituents are feeling and what they want your institution to do. While responses may not always be positive, an honest conversation, rooted in empathy, will position you well in the long-term by establishing trust.

**2**

## Reinforce the Value Proposition of Higher Education in the United States

While parents overwhelmingly believe that higher education is required for a successful career, students are more skeptical. This is an alarming trend, and one that has been amplified by the pandemic. Combat this by sharing real-life examples of opportunities you offer. Show students what is possible on- and off-campus, and make it easier for them to visualize their dreams. And measure outcomes now to demonstrate value later. Prospective students and their parents want to know how your students and teachers are performing during the pandemic. Concrete data reinforces the potential and promise that your institutions still provide, not just to students but to the nation and beyond.

**3**

## Bring Clarity, Reduce Anxiety

When sharing information, it is best to establish a candid, confident and empathetic tone. Students and parents want guidance, so be sincere and cut straight to the chase. The college admissions process can be stressful in a normal year, but the uncertainty of the pandemic adds an additional level of anxiety. You can help mitigate concerns by utilizing multiple platforms (e.g. social media, website) to increase the likelihood of your message being received and absorbed. The cadence of these communications should anticipate the needs of today's audience. Parents and prospective students want frequent updates. So, if you have updates, say so. If you don't, say so. It is what they expect now.

**Contact us for more on our national survey and other higher education insights related to strategic communications.**

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