



HIGHER EDUCATION MARKETING: CHALLENGES, SOLUTIONS & STRATEGIES



CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	3
PROBLEMS FACING HIGHER EDUCATION	4
ENROLLMENT CLIFF	5
COST OF EDUCATION	5
DIGITAL MARKETING FATIGUE	6
STRESS FROM POLITICAL PRESSURE	7
MESSY DATA	8
SOLUTIONS	9
ENROLLMENT CLIFF	10
REACH ADULT LEARNERS	10
EXPAND YOUR BORDERS	11
BUILD YOUR AUDIENCE EARLIER	12
COST OF EDUCATION	13
BE TRANSPARENT	13
SCHOLARSHIP FORWARD ADVERTISING CAMPAIGN	14
CONFIDENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION	15
MISSION-BASED BRANDING	15
ENGAGING PERSONALLY	16
DIGITAL MARKETING FATIGUE	17
MANAGE AD FREQUENCY	17
NATIVE ADVERTISING	19
STRESS FROM POLITICAL PRESSURE	19
BE PREPARED	19
HELP OTHERS	21
MESSY DATA	22
DATA GOVERNANCE	22
REGULAR REVIEWS	23
CONCLUSION	25

INTRODUCTION

Attracting new students has never been tougher for higher education institutions. There is more competition than ever, with a rise in alternative credentials and online education. At the same time, fewer new students are entering undergraduate programs because of the enrollment cliff. Throw in a tumultuous political climate with new pressures, concerns about tuition costs, and the challenges all marketers face, like ad fatigue and messy data, and it is clear that higher education marketers have a mountain to climb.

Fortunately, mountains are scalable. We're here to be your guide to help you prepare and tackle obstacles one step at a time. This whitepaper breaks down higher education marketers' top challenges and provides possible solutions. Along the way, you will hear from experts and explore the data behind these hurdles.

First, let's dive into some of the big problems facing the higher education industry right now and break them down.



THE CHALLENGES



B**efore** you can solve a problem, you need to understand the problem. We will briefly define and provide some background on the challenges faced by higher education. Then, we will explore solutions to each of them throughout the whitepaper. This is not an exhaustive list, and you may face obstacles that are not covered here. If you are looking for support for something else, [reach out and let us know!](#)

THE ENROLLMENT CLIFF

The number of high school graduates is expected to [peak in 2025 at about 3.8 million](#). Following that, there is an expected gradual decline in the number of students graduating, with [12% fewer graduates by 2037](#). This is primarily due to lower birth rates from the 2008 financial crisis.

Large and selective schools tend to be insulated from the impact. Smaller schools are more likely to suffer side [effects related to the drop](#).



While called a cliff, the drop in students will not happen immediately. This is more of an enrollment hill we are going down. The good news is that it means there is still time to prepare and react.

COST OF EDUCATION

[The number one concern of students seeking a school is cost](#). It is the number two concern of parents of students, only barely beaten out by concerns for safety. Tuition costs aren't going down any time soon either. By 2035, tuition at a national public 4-year in-state school is [predicted to increase nearly \\$10,000](#). A private school in 2036 is [expected to cost over \\$300,000](#).

Affordability is going to remain important to school seekers for the foreseeable future. While it is a difficult challenge, it is one worth taking head-on.

The number **ONE** concern of students is **COST**



DIGITAL MARKETING FATIGUE

Digital marketing fatigue is at an all-time high, making it more difficult than ever to get your message heard. Excessive messaging caused [70% of consumers to unsubscribe](#) from brands over a period of 3 months.

Even through fatigue, the digital landscape is where [most students begin their search](#) for a school, taking to social media, search engines and websites to find the information they need to decide their future.

There are ways to break through the noise. [Interactive ads are 2.9x more likely to engage Gen Z](#) than static banner ads. Personalized messaging can help your marketing resonate, too — [81% of consumers](#) open emails aligned with their interests, and [71% of students](#) prefer relevant, personalized content about majors and programs.



70% of consumers unsubscribed from brand emails in 3 months

2.9x more engagement from interactive ads (vs static)

81% of consumers open personalized emails

71% of students prefer targeted content on programs & majors

STRESS FROM POLITICAL PRESSURE

Today is a very different landscape for higher education as far as politics go. Rather than recap everything going on with changes impacting education, this is a moment in time where we need to make sure we are taking care of ourselves and those we work closely with. The only thing that is certain is that [there is a lot of uncertainty, which can cause additional stress.](#)

Here's the good news, you can do something about that stress. And you can help others in the process.

Crisis Management Essentials



Cross-Functional
Team



Scenario-Based
Plan



Response
Plan



Social
Listening



Practice
Drills



MESSY DATA

All marketers face data problems. Whether it is outdated information, systems not speaking to each other or simply not having the right data, any of these issues can cause your marketing dollars to be spent inefficiently.

It is worth the effort to resolve as many data issues as possible. Parents and students both predominantly use digital channels to learn about schools. And over [70% of students don't respond to physical mail](#). Ensuring your advertising is segmented and targeted to the right audience relies on good data and systems that work together.



Best Practices for **Resolving** Data Problems:

- Establish a cross-functional data governance team (marketing, admissions, IT, compliance)
- Define clear data collection policies and standards
- Provide training for everyone handling student data
- Schedule regular data reviews and audits
- Invest in tools for segmentation and analysis (CRM, CMS, GA)

THE SOLUTIONS



A **lone,** problems are stressful. Together with a solution, they transform into an opportunity for growth and excitement. We just listed a bunch of problems; sorry if we added to your stress levels. Let's add some solutions to those challenges and show how we can make lemonade out of lemons.

ENROLLMENT CLIFF

The enrollment cliff is a problem many businesses face — your customer base is shrinking. For higher education, it is a bit different, though. Instead of customers moving to a competitor or leaving a geographic area, in this case, they simply don't exist.

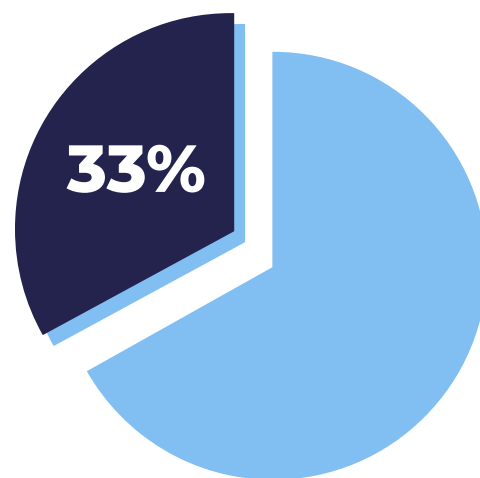
The silver lining here is that everyone is facing this problem, and all of your growth strategies will help solve this problem. Here are a few strategies that can help.

REACH ADULT LEARNERS

While one group of students is shrinking, another group is on the rise. Adult learners, those 25 and older, make up just under one-third of the undergraduate population. From 2023 to 2024, [adult learner enrollment at 4-year institutions increased by 6.5%](#).

These students search for schools differently. They value flexibility in fitting school into their lives around work and family needs. They also prefer to have a [more active role in educating themselves](#) and are excited by self-directed learning options. They are also more selective, with over [40% applying to two or fewer schools](#).

**AMOUNT OF UNDERGRADS
THAT ARE ADULT LEARNERS
(25 AND OLDER)**



By tailoring your marketing to answer the needs of adult learners, you gain access to a huge audience. One route you can take is building a microsite dedicated to answering their questions and presenting a roadmap they can follow to meet their educational goals. Blog content can help build affinity and confidence with adult learners who are more cautious about making a big commitment. Show them how earning a degree can help them advance their existing career. If possible, take it a step further and partner with local businesses to help offset the costs of education.

EXPAND YOUR BORDERS

For students, college is about more than an education. The entire experience is included in the cost of tuition. During their college years, students get to try on a new life and learn about themselves. That could be a major selling point.

**84% more students
from the North attend
schools in the South**

Some schools have figured that out. Incredibly, [84% more students from the North attend schools in the South](#) compared to the other way around. Climate, culture and football convince huge numbers of students to migrate for their college years.

What makes your school location special? Perhaps you have easy access to ski slopes or are nestled in a dreamy small town. Football stadiums aren't the only thing students are looking for.

Use geotargeted advertising to promote what makes you unique to areas that lack what you have. Share more than your campus on social media and show what life can be like if they choose to attend your school. Things that you think are ordinary may be extraordinary to others. If you don't share it, though, no one will know. What makes your school location special? Perhaps you have easy access to ski slopes or are nestled in a dreamy small town. Football stadiums aren't the only thing students are looking for.



BUILD YOUR AUDIENCE EARLIER

Rather than battling it out with competitors for recent graduates, you could start laying the ground-work earlier on. Since 2019, the 17 and younger undergraduate student population has [grown nearly 27%](#). They even outnumber the 25–29-year-old demographic!

The undergraduate student population
has grown 27%

Early outreach is key to engaging a very young demographic. Summer camp programs are one way to get high school students active on your campus, but not every school can take that on. Hosting events tailored to a teenage audience, like movie screenings, is a lower lift and still gets students active on your campus.

Consider creating a social media account focused on helping students learn about what to expect when they are ready to apply for college. Providing access to local advisors through those channels creates a huge amount of value for them and their parents, who are also likely navigating unfamiliar waters.



COST OF EDUCATION

Earning a degree is expensive. While tuition costs eased slightly during the pandemic, [they are once again on the rise](#). It is also at the [top of students' minds and parents' minds](#). There is no avoiding this concern, and efforts to avoid the topic may appear like deception. Instead, we are going to explore a few ways to address tuition costs to make it more transparent, understandable and affordable.

BE TRANSPARENT

One big, single cost can cause sticker shock. A recent survey found that [83% of high school graduates](#) avoided applying to a school because of it! In the same study, it found that only 42% of those students were confident that they could afford the college they were enrolling in. You can build their confidence and remove a big barrier to entry by educating potential students.

85% of high school students
avoided applying due to cost

The first step is being transparent. Tuition calculators, webinars, blogs and more can all be utilized to provide valuable information that connects the dots. Showing where tuition dollars are spent helps reassure students that they aren't being ripped off. This can pay off by increasing applications by upwards of 20% over time.

Transparency may not be enough, though. High school students are [not well educated in personal financial literacy](#), and for many, attending college will be the first major purchase of their lives. By being their educator, you can help them make an informed choice, build their confidence, and prove that by attending your school, they will learn valuable lessons that will help them in life.

Your content marketing strategy will play a huge role here. Creating evergreen content that only needs to be updated occasionally is a smart investment. Consider building an email cadence that drips this information to interested students over time to keep them engaged. And reformat the information to work well on social media, where [students are more likely to engage](#).

SCHOLARSHIP FORWARD ADVERTISING CAMPAIGNS

Every student knows about scholarships, but many students never apply for any, despite scholarships being a great way to make college more affordable. One of the main reasons students don't apply for them is that they don't know about them.

45%
**of students struggle
to find scholarships**

In fact, [45% of students](#) say they have a hard time finding scholarships for which they are eligible. And [75% of students](#) rely on the materials their school supplies!

As marketers, awareness is one problem we are great at solving. Consider advertising campaigns focused on scholarships. Scholarships often come pre-packaged with targeting information based on who would be eligible to receive them. As a bonus, this messaging will stand out among other recruiting ads, making them more likely to be noticed.

Similar to providing financial literacy materials, you can help students be more confident in applying for scholarships by explaining how they work and how students can prepare to apply for them. This could also be used as part of the overall recruitment process to continue to build affinity with potential applicants.



CONFIDENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Over the last decade, confidence in higher education has plummeted, [especially among Republicans](#). This industry-wide problem is unlikely to be solved by individual schools, but it also isn't your job to solve it for the entire industry. You only need students to feel confident in your school and the education it provides. And that is what we will focus on.

Some strategies we covered previously will also help here, like financial transparency and connecting with future students earlier. The overall goal is to build trust between students, your school, and your brand.

**For students,
value is about
more than dollars
and outcomes.
They want to be
part of something
they can feel
proud of.**

MISSION-BASED BRANDING

We have seen focused brand messaging improve ad engagement by [upwards of 65% for our clients](#). Students are also more likely to show interest in colleges that reflect their values and support their social causes like DEI, mental health support and safety. In fact, [52% of students](#) say their decision to enroll in a school would be impacted if the school stopped supporting those programs.

It isn't all about enrollment either, retention is impacted too. About half ([48%](#)) of enrolled students would consider transferring to another school if DEI initiatives were halted on their campus. For students, value is about more than dollars and outcomes. They want to be part of something they can feel proud of.

Start with a brand audit. Does your school have a clear message it wants to send? This is your foundation. If you aren't sure what your school's values are, then students won't know what they are either. Next, check what messaging you are sharing in your marketing materials.

Are your values front and center, or are they a footnote? If you aren't confidently sharing your values, then it is unlikely that your audience will believe you support them. We've seen this [play out in headlines recently](#) with very different approaches and responses.

Once you have a solid foundation, promote your values. Build them into your advertising campaigns and reflect them in your content. Use segmentation wisely to adjust the values you emphasize for students versus parents. For example, you may want to focus on DEI initiatives with students and [campus safety with parents](#).

Brand messaging campaigns can sometimes be a tough sell, but the data supports them. In tests, [brand messaging outperforms performance messaging 80% of the time](#). Additionally, a [long-term strategy can build loyalty and boost performance](#) in a way that you can build on year after year.

ENGAGING PERSONALLY

Consistent messaging and strategic advertising campaigns can do a lot of heavy lifting, but when it comes time to make a decision, personal connections can make a big impact. In our most recent survey, we found that 42% of students want to be invited to a campus tour (in-person or virtual), and [37% are looking for personal communication from current students](#).

It makes sense that people are more likely to trust other people over an institution. Edelman's Trust Barometer found that people consider other people more trustworthy than businesses, with [teachers in particular being a powerful unifying force](#). Schools are in the unique position of being an institution full of people seen as trustworthy!



Digital marketing has transformed how brands connect with audiences—offering unprecedented scale, targeting, and speed. With a few clicks, campaigns can reach millions, cross platforms, and adapt in real time. But this power comes with responsibility. The ease of digital reach has led many brands to prioritize volume over value, frequency over finesse.

And that's where cracks begin to show.

DIGITAL MARKETING FATIGUE

Digital marketing fatigue is hitting consumers. We are [more online than ever](#), and as a result, [we see thousands of ads online every day](#). While repetitive ad exposure builds recognition and positive affinity, overdoing it has the opposite result, causing frustration and negative emotions related to the brand being promoted.

MANAGE AD FREQUENCY



Beyond damaging your brand image, not closely managing your ad frequency can result in [decreased CTR and wasted ad spend](#). The first step to mitigate this is to put a cap on how many impressions are served to someone.

Research shows that [2 to 3 impressions per week is an ideal range](#), but this is a starting point. It is important to test and see what works best for your campaigns.

If your advertising is segmented by different stages in the student journey, [you will also want to test frequency by stage](#). The awareness stage may take more impressions to make an impact than the consideration stage, or the reverse may be true.

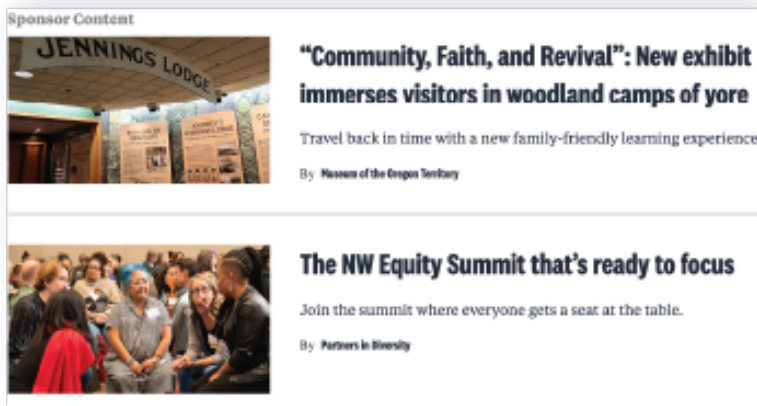
Even if you have finely tuned your ad frequency, you may end up seeing performance dip over time. This could be due to the same creative being used for too long. Research shows that [changing the creative after your audience has seen it 6 to 10 times](#) is a good place to start. If you are serving ads 2 to 3 times a week, that ends up being new creative every 4 to 6 weeks. This helps increase engagement and delays fatigue from setting in.

Finally, after someone takes the intended action from your ad, don't keep serving them the same ad. It will cost you money and frustrate them. Working with a trusted partner who specializes in this process can significantly reduce the workload on your team.

A creative swap every month is key

NATIVE ADVERTISING

Not all advertising channels are created equal. So far, when discussing ad fatigue, the focus has been on more straightforward advertising options like banner ads. The sort of advertising where you pay for impressions or clicks. Native advertising, the inclusion of your content into different content streams where it fits the feel and format very closely, works differently.



When viewing native ads, [users pay attention significantly longer and are less likely to perceive them as ads](#). This results in native ads being less likely to contribute to advertising fatigue.

Native ads receive

53%

more views than banner ads

If that hasn't convinced you of the power of native advertising, how about this? Native ads receive 53% more views than banner ads and are less likely to be ignored. To recap, native advertising contributes less to ad fatigue, captures attention for longer and is less likely to be ignored.

STRESS FROM POLITICAL PRESSURE

The mounting political uncertainty universities are facing is a big challenge to overcome and it is not one the marketing department will likely be tasked with solving. Nevertheless, your budget may be impacted, recruitment may become more difficult and your job may be more stressful.

There are things you can do that will help prepare you for the unexpected and improve your experience at work.

BE PREPARED

We're taking a page out of the Scouts BSA Handbook. Be prepared.

This means more than double-checking you have all the tools you need. The goal of the famous motto is to consider negative outcomes and consider the best way to mitigate the damage from them if they occur.

In this scenario, marketers are likely going to be central to crafting and distributing messages. You may also be involved in dialogues between the school and concerned parties. And you likely won't be the only group navigating these choppy waters.



This is why it is important to have a crisis management playbook. When the future appears to be full of surprises, having a process to fall back on can help mitigate panic and shock. If you already have a playbook, review it and ensure it is adequate to meet these challenges. If not, here are a few steps to help you get started:

1 Define the purpose and team members:

You will need to work across departments to gather the correct set of skills and to make sure that everyone is aware and in agreement with the approach. Your team should include a leader, a communication lead (this is likely the role marketing will play), legal counsel and operations. IT, HR or external counsel may also be beneficial.

2 Explore potential scenarios:

Scenarios may be as simple as responding to different questions on social media to handling a large protest on campus. A good place to start is what has already happened on other campuses. Your communication plan needs to cover how you react to these scenarios. Know how you will handle internal and external communication, create messaging templates and who will be your spokespeople. If you were a Scout, this would be deciding what you are packing in your bag for an excursion into the wilderness.

3 Create a process to follow in a crisis:

Figure out what you do in the first few minutes, the first hours and the first day when you need to respond to a crisis. What are the steps to follow and who do you speak to first? When do you make a public statement or not? These will be unique to every institution, but equally important for all. High-stress situations can impair decision-making capabilities. Having a process to follow can alleviate that and [improve team performance in an emergency](#).

4 Intelligence gathering:

You don't need to be James Bond, but paying attention to what is going on can provide you with valuable knowledge and tip you off to what may happen in the near future. Social media listening is a great option here. However, you may also want to establish lines of communication with staff across your school to share what others are hearing and feeling.

5 Practice:

The first time you test out your crisis management playbook shouldn't be when a crisis happens. Role-play through the process with likely scenarios. This step will give you insights into where improvements can be made. It will also build confidence in the process and provide assurances that you are prepared.

HELP OTHERS

Feeling helpless and stressed at work is never a situation we want to find ourselves in. Despite our best efforts, external forces may force us into that position unexpectedly. Higher levels of stress at work can [hurt our mental health](#) and [reduce our productivity](#), which can create a nasty feedback loop.

It is especially hard to get out of that cycle when the cause is out of your control. To regain control, find someone you can help. Helping someone else can have a remarkable impact on you. It has been shown to [reduce your stress levels at work, mitigate emotional exhaustion and improve job satisfaction](#). At the same time, you will be providing similar relief for a colleague.

Helping someone else can have a remarkable impact on you.



MESSY DATA

Marketers everywhere are victims of messy or incomplete data. It results in [lost customers](#), wastes money by [limiting ad targeting capabilities](#) and generally makes planning tougher. In higher education, [half of all institutions can't access reliable data](#). And [61% of schools](#) lack an adequate reporting system.

The level of success marketing achieves hinges on data now. Despite that, having reliable data remains a significant problem. Let's explore a couple of ways to improve that situation.

DATA GOVERNANCE

Maybe you have never established data governance policies or perhaps they were created years ago and are no longer working as well as they once did. No matter how you ended up in a data nightmare, the first step to getting out of it is through good data governance.



CROSS-FUNCTIONAL DATA GOVERNANCE TEAM:

Step one, you need the right group of people to manage data. Marketing, admissions, IT and compliance departments all have an important role to play. Without input from any one of them, your governance approach will be lacking and eventually lead you back to wrangling unruly data.



DEFINE POLICIES AND STANDARDS:

Governance is all about rules. Now that you have the right people working together, your first order of business will be to create rules. Marketing and admissions needs to know how they can collect data and specifically what can and can't be collected. Compliance needs to make sure that what is being collected is being done in alignment with local, national and international data privacy regulations. IT needs to be able to support the systems that collect and store data.



TRAINING:

After all this work setting up rules and processes, the last thing you need is spreadsheets of data being uploaded with incorrect fields and old information. Anyone who touches data needs training to maintain a clean data environment.

REGULAR REVIEWS

Unless you have a data science team, it likely falls on marketing to understand and analyze all your data. These reviews accomplish a handful of things. First, they help you maintain your data governance by regularly checking that the data looks clean and makes sense.

It also helps you refine your advertising targeting and segmentation, which is crucial to running cost-effective ads. You will also gain insights into how your audience is changing.

Those insights should feed all your other marketing strategies and may prove valuable to other departments.

This shouldn't be done only in spreadsheets. You need some tools to help you understand and analyze data. Learning to make the most out of Google Analytics or features built into your CRM and CMS can be a worthwhile training investment. Depending on your school, you may need something more robust. It may also be a task where you are facing a gap in skills, which means you should consider finding an outside partner that can provide you with analytical insights.





Given the current challenges in higher education, it is crucial to precisely target your ideal students and the key influencers in their lives, while simultaneously ensuring a strong ROI and minimizing marketing waste. How can this be achieved? By leveraging robust audience data in your marketing strategies and consistently monitoring performance to verify that your chosen targeting is effective in meeting your objectives.

What does this look like in practice? Imagine targeting three distinct audiences in a display campaign: one for individuals interested in higher education, one focused on high school counselors, and one aimed at parents of teenagers. Through regular performance monitoring, you might observe that the high school counselor audience is not performing as expected. This could indicate the need for a creative adjustment or even a shift to a completely different audience to achieve your goals. By closely tracking performance, you can identify the need to pivot, thereby reducing investment waste on underperforming segments and continuously optimizing towards your desired outcomes.

- **BRITNEY DOUGLAS**
DIGITAL STRATEGY MANAGER
ADVANCE EDUCATION

CONCLUSION

Higher education marketing is facing some of the toughest challenges it has ever seen. From the enrollment cliff and rising costs to political pressures, digital marketing fatigue, and messy data, marketers have their work cut out for them. But as we've explored, every challenge presents an opportunity. With the right strategies in place, schools of all types can not only survive but thrive in this changing landscape.

The road ahead will not be without obstacles, but with preparation, creative thinking, and a focus on authentic connection, institutions can inspire confidence, spark interest, and continue educating the next generation.

We hope this whitepaper has provided you with actionable insights and fresh perspectives to tackle today's challenges. If you need a partner to help you navigate the twists and turns ahead, Advance Education is ready to help. Together, we can chart a path forward!

LET'S CHAT!

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