Benchmarking Digital Marketing in Higher Education

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Benchmarking Digital Marketing in Higher Education

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A WHITE PAPER PUBLISHED BY MSTONER, INC

INTRODUCTION

LET'S AGREE THAT DIGITAL marketing is complicated. That's true for businesses, and it's definitely the case for colleges and universities.

For one thing, digital marketing is fast-evolving, with new channels emerging quickly and old ones diminishing in reach and results seemingly overnight. For another, while it's easy to count things online—like followers or likes—it's much more difficult to develop measurements of success that make sense in the real world. Add to this the fact that the best digital marketing involves making deep connections between your website and the various online channels through which you're doing digital marketing. There really is a lot to comprehend.

When we began thinking about digital marketing practices in higher ed, we reflected on what we knew about the digital marketing practices among our clients. Then, we began to extrapolate from there, trying to understand how higher ed as an industry was carrying out digital marketing.

We believed that just about every college and university is engaged in digital marketing to some extent: Boosting posts on Facebook during a Giving Day. Advertising on Instagram and then sending emails targeted to prospective undergraduates. Maybe even a Google Ads campaign for that new distance learning program in the School of Nursing.

And we also guessed that most institutions that are doing these things are engaged in piecemeal digital marketing within departments across the institution, rather than approaching things from an institution-wide, more strategic perspective. Taking that more centralized approach allows institutions to build a website optimized for digital marketing; leverage content across the institution and various platforms; and invest in tools to enable marketers to automate and analyze their digital marketing efforts. In other words, not only is it better marketing, but it also saves effort and money.

But who knows for sure? We looked for information—about who manages marketing strategy, who carries it out, and how everything fits together—and couldn't find anything. So we developed and rolled out a survey to gain some insights into how colleges and universities were organizing, managing, and executing digital marketing.

Before we begin, it's useful to agree on what we mean by the term digital marketing. For the purposes of this research, we defined it as "marketing programs that are planned to be executed through online tools, media, and channels." That includes everything from email marketing to Google Ads to social media advertising to influencer marketing on TikTok.

Typically, higher ed focuses on just a few channels, so we asked specific questions about the most important of these: paid advertising (digital display), paid search (such as Google Ads and pay-per-click), social media marketing, and email marketing. We also asked questions about key technologies and approaches that are fundamental to digital marketing programs designed to get results: search engine optimization (SEO), persona

development, content strategy, and tools for customer relationship management (CRM) and email management. Finally, from the responses we were able to develop a profile of some key components of a forward-looking digital marketing strategy.

In our survey, we asked people to respond on behalf of their department (i.e., Admissions, Alumni, Advancement, or a school within a university) or on behalf of the entire institution. In this white paper, we're reporting the findings from the institutional responses. Here's what we learned.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

IN OUR SURVEY, WE EXPLORED how institutions organize themselves for digital marketing, who does the actual work involved, how they fund it, and how they use various important digital channels. In analyzing responses, we saw clearly how much opportunity there is for digital marketing to grow on campuses across the United States and Canada (most of our responses were from institutions in North America).

We learned that 80 percent of the institutions we surveyed have a budget for digital marketing. At 85 percent of those, a central marketing or communications department manages the digital marketing budget. On about a third of campuses, the marketing/communications office shares these responsibilities with Admissions, and on 22 percent of campuses, individual departments manage some of their own digital marketing budgets.

What's striking is what institutions spend—or don't spend—on various aspects of digital marketing. While some institutions spend more than $100,000 a year on digital display ads (17 percent) and pay-per-click (PPC) ads (17 percent), a majority spend less than $25,000 on digital display ads (51 percent) and PPC (60 percent). And even larger

80 percent of the institutions we surveyed have a budget for digital marketing. At 85 percent of those, a central marketing or communications department manages that budget.

proportions of institutions spend less than $25,000 on email marketing (81 percent) and SEO (87 percent)—they do these things themselves—and social media ads (63 percent). (See Figure 1.)

We looked closely at the goals for social media and paid search advertising campaigns. For the majority of institutions, the most important goals for each type of campaign were related to raising awareness, generating leads, and increasing yield and conversions. In fact, 86 percent of social media advertising was directed toward

raising awareness and 82 percent to generating leads; 89 percent of paid search was for awareness raising and 83 percent to lead generation.

Not surprisingly, Facebook and Instagram were the social channels where most institutions advertised: Both are widely popular and offer superb tools for targeting ad campaigns. Among our respondents, 82 percent advertise on Facebook, and 81 percent advertise on Instagram. A majority of institutions also advertise on YouTube (52 percent), and 50 percent advertise on LinkedIn. However, a majority don't advertise on either SnapChat or TikTok and have no plans to do so.

A few other interesting insights from the survey:

▶ 82 percent of institutions have not used influencer marketing.

▶ 58 percent have invested in SEO for their website, and of those, 71 percent have a keyword list personalized for their institution.

▶ Only 45 percent of institutions have created buyer personas for major audiences or stakeholder groups.

PAYING FOR AND MANAGING DIGITAL MARKETING

IT'S NOT UNCOMMON TO find institutions that have a budget line for slapping billboards up in their region or dotting city streets with bus ads. But how often do institutions have a budget for digital marketing? How much do they typically spend, and who's responsible for managing that budget and making the magic happen?

We learned that 80 percent of the institutions do budget for digital marketing. Of those that do, 29 percent budget at least $50,000 a year for paid advertising (digital display) and 20 percent spend at least $50,000 a year on paid search (Google Ads and pay-per-click). In fact, 17 percent spend $100,000 or more on these services. And 15 percent spend at least $100,000 on social media advertising!

It appears that smaller institutions find more value in paid search than larger institutions do, since only about 13 percent of institutions with fewer than 10,000 students don't use paid search, and only 9 percent of those with enrollments of 10,000 to 14,999 skip this approach. By contrast, 26 percent of institutions with more than 15,000 students don't invest in paid search.

But some key channels are underfunded: Four-fifths (81 percent) of institutions that budget for digital marketing spend less than $25,000 annually on email marketing. And 87 percent spend less than $25,000 on SEO for their website, even though SEO is of primary importance for digital marketing success overall. (See Figure 1.)
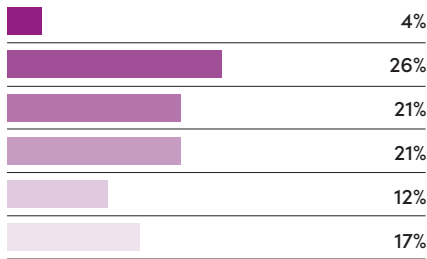
At the majority of institutions (85 percent), the central marketing or communications office plays the leadership role in managing the digital marketing budget. These

FIGURE 1
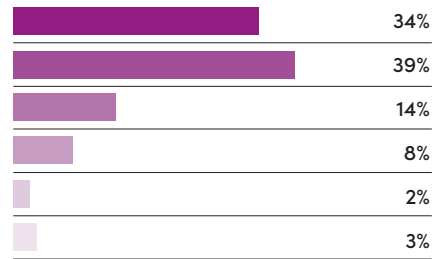Institutions' annual spending on digital marketing services

Key

- We don't spend on this
- $1–$9,999
- $10,000–$24,999
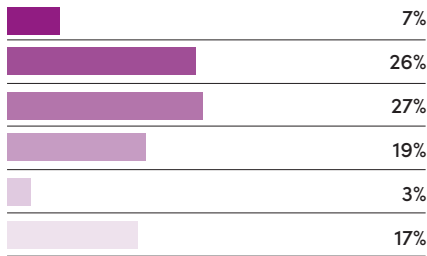- $25,000–$49,000
- $50,000–$99,999
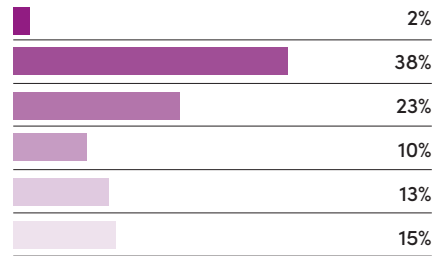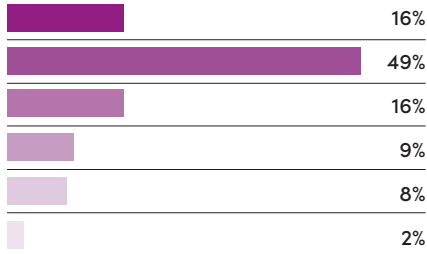- $100,000 or more

Paid advertising (digital display)

	4%
	26%
	21%
	21%
	12%
	17%

SEO

	34%
	39%
	14%
	8%
	2%
	3%

Paid search (Google Ads or PPC)

	7%
	26%
	27%
	19%
	3%
	17%

Social media advertising

	2%
	38%
	23%
	10%
	13%
	15%

Email marketing

	16%
	49%
	16%
	9%
	8%
	2%

In response to the question "What does your institution spend annually on each type of digital marketing service? If you're not sure, please provide your best estimate." Asked of those who reported that their institution does allocate a budget for digital marketing services. (n = 93–97)

responsibilities are often shared, of course: at 22 percent of institutions, the marketing/communications office shares responsibility with individual colleges and departments, and at 32 percent of institutions, Admissions leads or collaborates with the marketing/communications office. At 7 percent of institutions, Athletics has its own digital marketing budget and manages it on its own.

And not surprisingly, it was respondents at larger institutions who tended to report that individual departments or colleges handle their own digital marketing budgets. At smaller institutions, central marketing/communications or admissions/recruitment offices (or both) manage these budgets.

We were also curious about how the work gets done: Who plans, executes, and monitors the institution's digital advertising program?

One of the complications of digital marketing is that new channels are constantly emerging, and even "legacy" providers like Google and Facebook (which are, in fact, the two main digital advertising powerhouses) routinely change their practices. It's often hard to keep up with and make sense of these changes, so some institutions rely on outside partners for at least some aspects of these services. These partners usually have specialists on staff who keep up-to-date on changes in the digital marketing landscape and can make informed recommendations or execute entire programs on behalf of institutions. But, we wanted to know, in what areas does higher ed use these firms most?
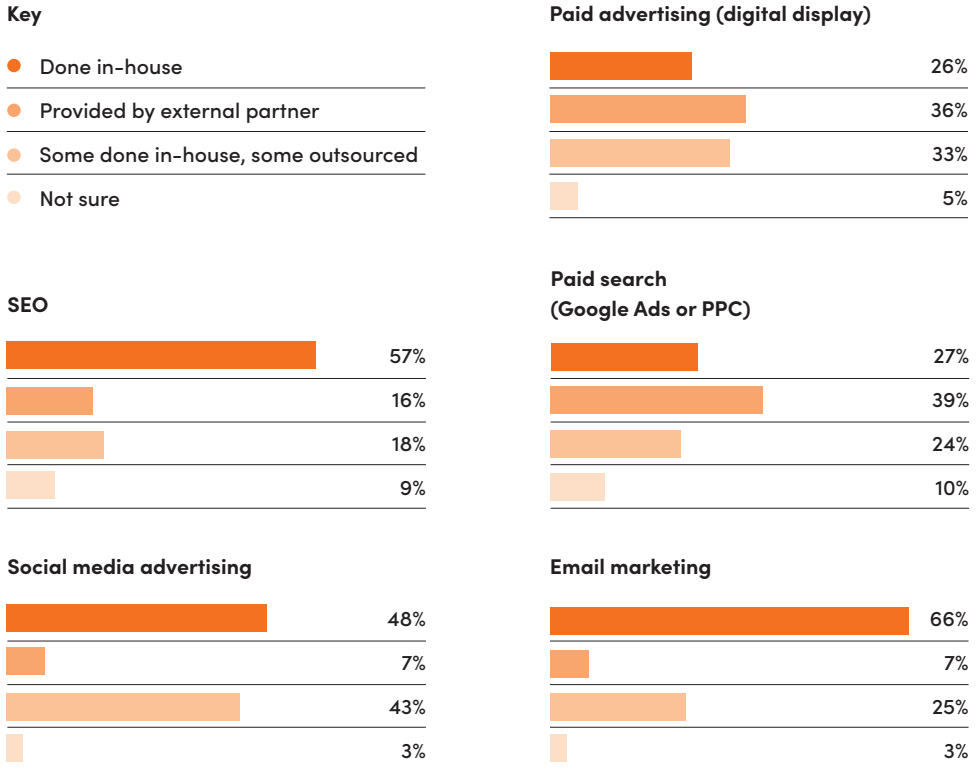
It turns out that higher ed most often outsources paid search (39 percent of institutions) and paid advertising (36 percent). It's also fairly common for institutions to share marketing work with external partners. External firms are often involved as partners for paid advertising (at 33 percent of institutions responding) and social media advertising (43 percent of institutions), but less so for email marketing (25 percent) and paid search (24 percent).

One of the reasons that institutions don't spend very much on SEO and email is that the majority of institutions do those things in-house. We'll point out that there is still a cost for these services, but that it's often not identified as such because it's labeled as "salary" in institutional budgets. About two-thirds of institutions (66 percent) plan, execute, and monitor email marketing internally, and 57 percent do their own SEO

Higher ed most often outsources paid search and paid advertising.

work—though it's not unheard of for institutions to seek help from external partners for their SEO work, either asking them to share the work (18 percent) or to take it on completely (16 percent). Nearly half (48 percent) of institutions manage their own social media advertising. By contrast, only 26 percent handle paid digital display advertising internally. (See Figure 2.)

FIGURE 2
Who does the work of digital marketing?

Key

- ● Done in-house
- ● Provided by external partner
- ● Some done in-house, some outsourced
- ● Not sure

Paid advertising (digital display)

	26%
	36%
	33%
	5%

SEO

	57%
	16%
	18%
	9%

**Paid search
(Google Ads or PPC)**

	27%
	39%
	24%
	10%

Social media advertising

	48%
	7%
	43%
	3%

Email marketing

	66%
	7%
	25%
	3%

In response to the question "Who does the actual work (executing, planning, and monitoring) involved in providing your institution's digital marketing services?" (n = 113–122)

SOCIAL MEDIA AND PAID SEARCH ADVERTISING

OUTSIDE HIGHER ED, paid search is an essential tool by which many businesses bring new customers to their websites, but it wasn't clear to us how widely it is used by colleges and universities. We also suspected that social media was the most commonly used digital marketing channel across higher ed. We wanted to find out more about how institutions use both of these key tools.

First, though, who are institutions trying to reach on these particular channels? Not surprisingly, prospective students rank as number one for both, with nearly all respondents using social media advertising and paid search to reach them. Half of institutions use social media advertising to reach admitted students, and a quarter also use paid search for this purpose. And 43 percent use social media advertising to reach alumni. (See Figure 3.)

Given the primary audiences that institutions are attempting to reach through social media and paid search, it's not surprising to learn that the primary goals for their advertising and marketing on both channels are related to raising awareness, generating leads, and increasing yield and conversions. (See Figure 4.)

Social media is one area where institutions often manage their own advertising and marketing initiatives, as we noted. One reason for this is historic: Experiments in using social media for marketing and advertising by boosting posts on Facebook and using similar techniques on other platforms worked, so they've continued to be used by departments that are well aware of that early success. For people just learning how to use social media for marketing and advertising purposes, some social channels— notably Facebook and Instagram, which share an advertising interface—offer tools that make it relatively easy to place ads across these important platforms. Additionally, advertising on these platforms shows quick returns, which, as we know, institutional leadership finds valuable.

The primary goals for social media and paid search advertising and marketing are raising awareness, generating leads, and increasing yield and conversions.
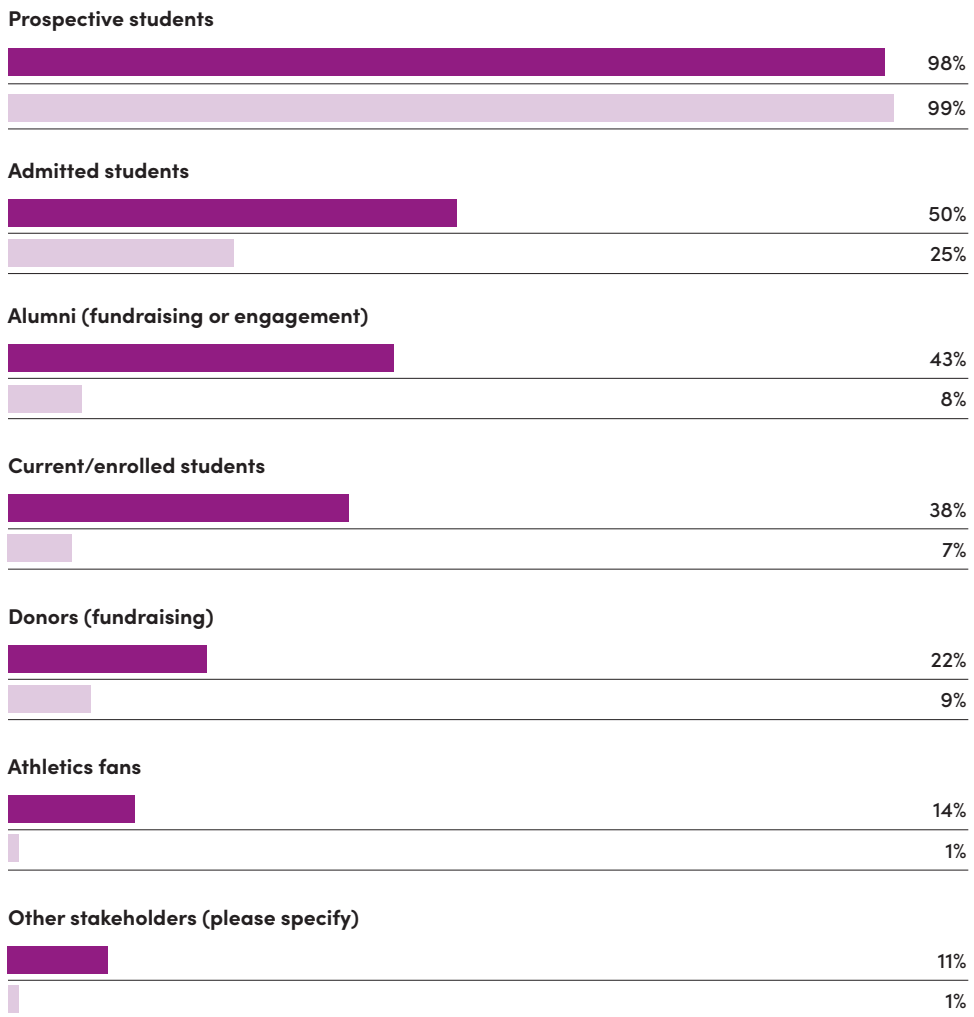
Given that record of success, one of the challenges of advertising on social media in general is that audiences are on the move. In 2015, you might have been able to reach prospective students on Facebook. But not now: They may have Facebook accounts and even use it occasionally, but they don't spend much time there. Instead, they've moved to Instagram and, more recently, to TikTok and to messaging apps where they're hard to reach through conventional digital marketing approaches. This means that people within institutions who manage these programs have to stay up-to-date on the various

FIGURE 3
Primary audiences for social media and
paid search advertising

Prospective students

98%

99%

Admitted students

50%

25%

Alumni (fundraising or engagement)

43%

8%

Current/enrolled students

38%

7%

Donors (fundraising)

22%

9%

Athletics fans

14%

1%

Other stakeholders (please specify)

11%

1%

1. In response to the question "What are the primary audiences for your institution's social media advertising campaigns? Please select all that apply." (n = 118)

2. In response to the question "What are the primary audiences for your institution's paid search advertising campaigns? Please select all that apply." Asked of those who reported their institutions use paid search. (n = 77)

FIGURE 4
Goals for social media and paid search advertising

Social media advertising[1]

Raise awareness / increase reach (e.g. increase brand recognition, or raise public awareness)	86%
Generate leads (e.g. more applicants, new donors)	82%
Increase yield (encourage admitted students to enroll)	74%
Increase conversions	62%
Raise money from alumni and stakeholders	25%
Boost enthusiasm among our athletics supporters	8%
Other	0%

Paid search[2]

Raise awareness / increase reach (e.g. increase brand recognition, or raise public awareness)	89%
Generate leads (e.g. more applicants, new donors)	83%
Increase conversions	65%
Increase yield (encourage admitted students to enroll)	38%
Raise money from alumni and stakeholders	9%
Boost enthusiasm among our athletics supporters	0%
Other	0%

1. In response to the question "What are your institution's goals for social media advertising campaigns? Please select all that apply." Asked of those who reported their institutions set goals for social media advertising. (n = 65)

2. In response to the question "What are your institution's goals for paid search advertising campaigns? Please select all that apply." Asked of those who reported their institutions set goals for paid search advertising. (n = 66)

changes being made by the platforms they've used previously—and also keep up with the emerging platforms and pay close attention to whether or not an investment in a platform gets results. This is one reason why many institutions work with external partners on social media advertising—either collaborating with them or engaging them to manage their program entirely.

Not surprisingly, a large majority of institutions advertise on Facebook (82 percent) and Instagram (81 percent), which is owned by Facebook—advertisers use the same tools to target users on both platforms. About two-thirds of respondents (68 percent) either advertise on YouTube, or plan to; this isn't surprising, given the insatiable appetite that all audiences seem to have for video. And 59 percent of institutions currently advertise on LinkedIn, or plan to do so. Yet despite the growth of TikTok among traditional college-age students, 64 percent of respondents say their institutions have never advertised there and don't plan to do so. (See Figure 5.)

We've often observed that while platforms like Facebook make it easy to track numbers like followers, likes, and shares, merely counting numbers doesn't tell you whether you're getting results. What's more important is what people actually do: Do they fill out a form giving you their contact information and opt in for ongoing contact? Do they apply? Do they donate to a campaign? In short, are they motivated enough to take actions that actually matter to the institution?

We asked how institutions measure success of social media advertising and paid search. We found that while most do use basic reports and analytics, many also are starting to count those more meaningful actions.

Counting numbers doesn't tell you whether you're getting results. What's more important is what people actually do: Are they motivated enough to take actions that actually matter to the institution?

For example, more than two-thirds consider the number of conversions as measures of success—67 percent for social media advertising and 73 percent for paid search. Nearly a quarter track alumni participation (23 percent) and fundraising income (25 percent) as success metrics for social media. Overall, this indicates increasing attention to actual results rather than numbers of likes or shares, both of which are relatively meaningless. (See Figure 6.)

One of the realities of digital marketing and advertising is that integrated campaigns can be more successful than a campaign on a single channel. For example, fundraisers have long known that while social media is an important channel to help drive awareness during a Giving Day drive, combining social media with email is the key to success in raising donations. Remember that the most valuable asset audience members

FIGURE 5
Where institutions place social media advertising

Key
- ● Previously advertised there
- ● Currently advertise there
- ● Never advertised there (but plan to)
- ● Never advertised there (don't plan to)

Facebook

	12%
	82%
	3%
	3%

Instagram

	11%
	81%
	4%
	4%

LinkedIn

	16%
	50%
	9%
	24%

YouTube

	15%
	52%
	16%
	17%

Twitter

	31%
	27%
	9%
	33%

SnapChat

	21%
	18%
	10%
	51%

TikTok

	2%
	3%
	31%
	64%
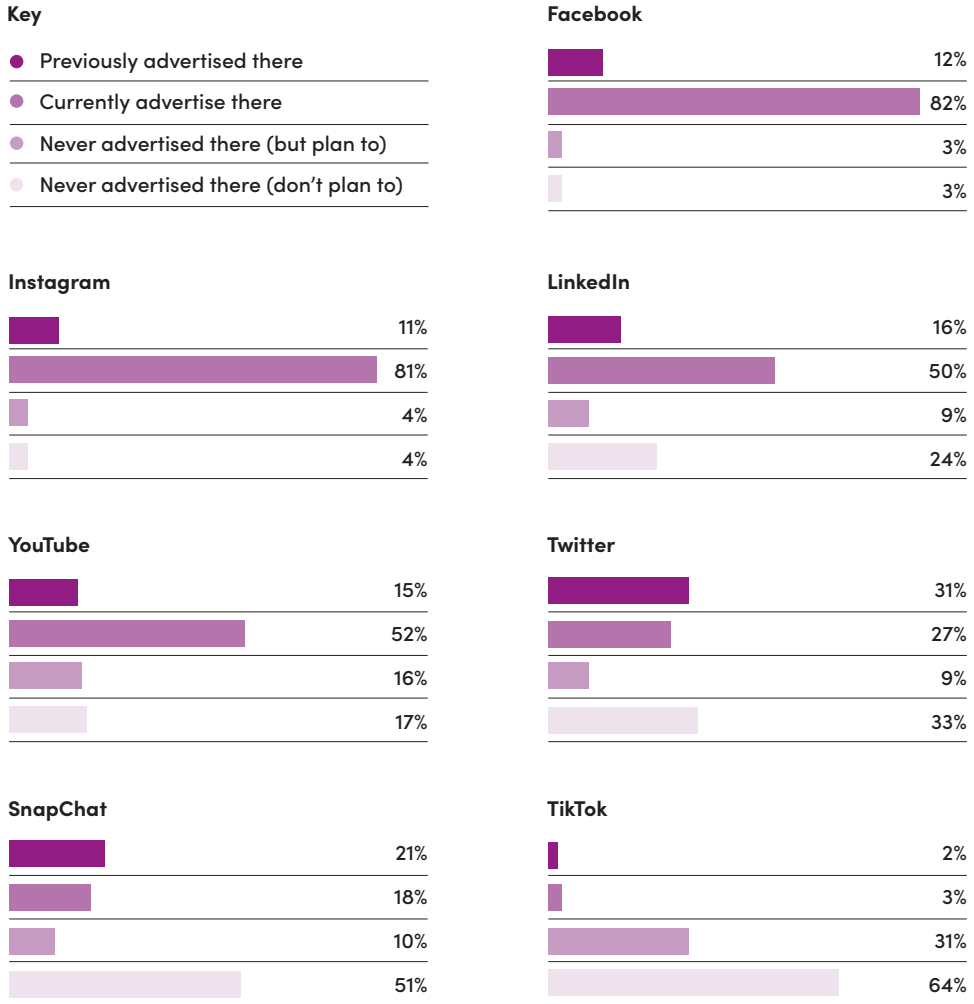
In response to the question "Please describe your institution's social media advertising on the following platforms." (n = 122)

FIGURE 6
Success measures for social media and paid search advertising

Social media advertising[1]

Reports/analytics	78%
Number of conversions	67%
Increased yield	42%
Fundraising amount	25%
Alumni participation	23%
Target class size	22%
Reduced summer melt	22%
Other	0%

Paid search[2]

Reports/analytics	82%
Number of conversions	73%
Increased yield	36%
Target class size	21%
Reduced summer melt	12%
Fundraising amount	8%
Alumni participation	7%
Other	1%

1. In response to the question "How does your institution measure the success of social media campaigns? Please select all that apply." Asked of those who reported their institutions set goals for social media advertising. (n = 64)

2. In response to the question "How does your institution measure the success of paid search advertising campaigns? Please select all that apply." Asked of those who reported their institutions set goals for paid search advertising. (n = 77)

have is their attention, so introducing them to a campaign is one thing. But success demands more than that: You have to remind them to give to it, too—and that's the role of email in so many of those Giving Day success stories you've heard.

So we were curious whether institutions integrated social media advertising with other channels, and if so, which ones. More than half (56 percent) said they integrate social media advertising with paid search. Interestingly, on another question, respondents replied differently about the same combination phrased in reverse—that is, whether they integrate paid search with social media advertising (49 percent). This could be because only a subgroup of people responded to this question. Or, we suspect, it could shed some light on retargeting practices. For example, perhaps more institutions retarget visitors who interact with their Google Ads by also serving them social media ads, but fewer institutions retarget people who click on their social media ads with their search advertising.

Almost half (49 percent) of respondents said they integrate social media with email marketing. Still, about a quarter (24 percent) don't integrate social media with any of the channels we asked about. In a separate question, 26 percent said their institutions don't integrate paid search with other channels. (See Figure 7.)

IN-HOUSE EMAIL MARKETING

ALTHOUGH 71 PERCENT OF INSTITUTIONS do use a commercial email service to help them with email distribution—rather than rely on an on-campus email system— two-thirds of institutions (66 percent) manage their own email marketing in-house; only a few (7 percent) have an external provider manage their mailing, and a quarter (25 percent) share some responsibilities for email marketing with an external partner. (See Figure 2.)

We wanted to know how institutions share responsibility across campus for various aspects of email marketing. As we suspected, while a central marketing office may develop strategy for email marketing, that role is often shared with other campus offices—usually Admissions/Enrollment, Advancement, or Alumni Relations, and less so with other departments. Execution of email marketing is often shared, too. (See Figure 8.)

We've learned in our earlier research and in our consulting that the best websites are those supported by a content strategy: This allows for the most effective use of stories and other valuable content across the site. Similarly, institutions can create more effective email campaigns with a campus-wide content strategy that enables the sharing of content among offices that use email to connect with their stakeholders.

We asked respondents whether their institutions have implemented a content strategy for various audiences that are commonly included in campus email campaigns. Not

FIGURE 7
How institutions integrate campaigns

Integrate social media advertising with ...[1]

Paid search (Google Ads, PPC)		56%
Email marketing		49%
Inbound marketing		21%
Other		3%
No, none of these		24%

Integrate paid search with ...[2]

Social media		49%
Email marketing		40%
Inbound marketing		20%
Other		5%
No, none of these		26%

1. In response to the question "Has your institution integrated social media advertising with any of the following digital marketing services? Please select all that apply." (n = 117)

2. In response to the question "With which of the following did your institution integrate your paid search advertising (if any)? Please select all that apply." Asked of those who reported their institutions use paid search. (n = 78)

FIGURE 8
Departments with responsibility for email marketing

Key

- Develops strategy
- Executes
- Not sure

Institution-level marketing and/or communications

Develops strategy	84%
Executes	71%
Not sure	8%

Unit- or department-level

Develops strategy	53%
Executes	56%
Not sure	27%

Admissions or Enrollment Management

Develops strategy	84%
Executes	82%
Not sure	3%

Advancement

Develops strategy	63%
Executes	70%
Not sure	17%

Alumni Relations

Develops strategy	70%
Executes	74%
Not sure	15%

Athletics

Develops strategy	44%
Executes	53%
Not sure	42%

Third-party vendor

Develops strategy	48%
Executes	48%
Not sure	38%

In response to the question "Which of the following best describes how email marketing is managed at your institution? Please select all that apply." (n = 58–106)

surprisingly, a large majority (83 percent) have a content strategy for prospective students and for admitted students (78 percent). Fewer include alumni (50 percent), parents (43 percent), and current or prospective donors (46 percent). Only 21 percent have a content strategy focused on reaching athletics fans.

COMMERCIAL SYSTEMS

AT ONE TIME, INSTITUTIONS relied on their campus email systems for email distribution to external audiences. Over time, though, many colleges and universities discovered that this practice was unsustainable for the kind of extensive email distribution that contemporary digital marketing campaigns require. Commercial email services offer an array of features designed to make email marketing more efficient, and 71 percent of our respondents use at least one commercial email service; 23 percent do not. Among those who do, Slate is the most widely used (by 37 percent); 26 percent use MailChimp. (See Figure 9.)

Many businesses use customer relationship management (CRM) systems as part of the process by which they administer and track interactions with customers, typically using data analysis to help them gain insights into the many interactions they have with various stakeholder groups. In general, CRM tools are just now becoming common in higher ed. Some campuses have invested in a single, campus-wide CRM system that integrates information about important audiences and stakeholders: prospective students, current students, parents, alumni, donors, and others. At other institutions, the Admissions and Advancement offices are still using their own information systems, which haven't been integrated into a larger dataset.

In our survey, 78 percent of respondents said that their institutions were using a CRM system, and 15 percent were either implementing one or planning to do so. Among these respondents, Slate was the most commonly used CRM system (used by 32 percent), with Salesforce used by 15 percent and TargetX by 12 percent. (See Figure 10.)
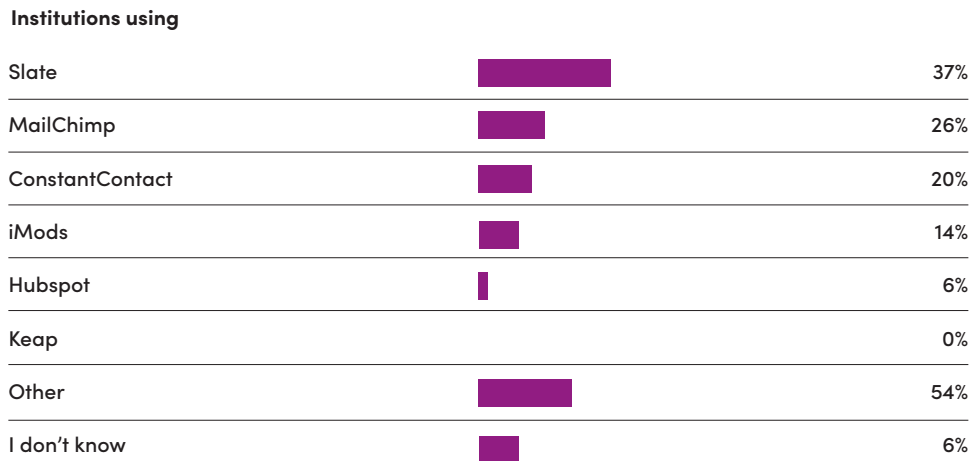
ADVANCED DIGITAL MARKETING PRACTICES

WE ASKED A NUMBER OF QUESTIONS about practices that could indicate a more advanced level of thinking and implementation of digital marketing.
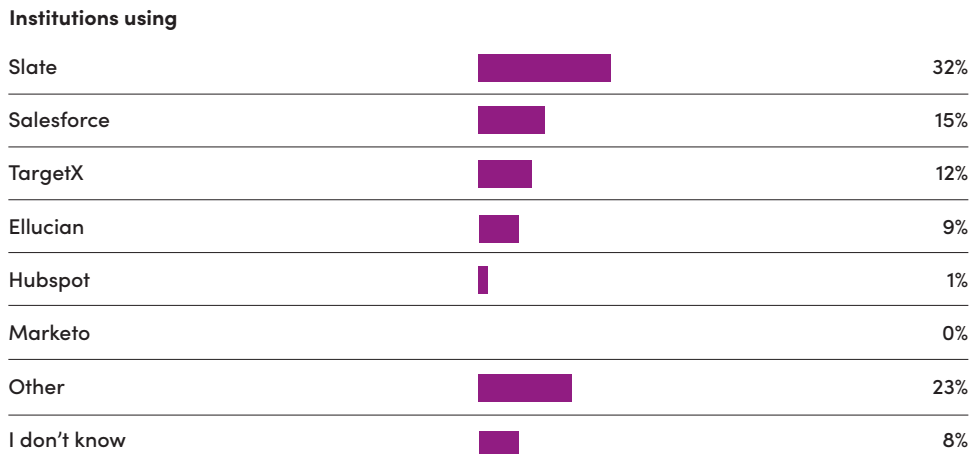
These practices fall into two general categories:

▶ In one category are proven practices whose use shows that the institution is thinking strategically enough to create a strong foundation for digital marketing efforts across campus. Developing buyer personas and institution-specific keywords, making an investment in website SEO, and social listening all are ways in which institutions can help marketers succeed with their initiatives.

FIGURE 9
Commercial email services

Institutions using

Slate	███████	37%
MailChimp	████	26%
ConstantContact	███	20%
iMods	██	14%
Hubspot	▌	6%
Keap		0%
Other	███████	54%
I don't know	██	6%

In response to the question "Which commercial email service(s) does your institution use? Please select all that apply." Asked of those who reported their institutions use a commercial service for email. (n = 81)

FIGURE 10
Commercial CRM systems

Institutions using

Slate	███████	32%
Salesforce	████	15%
TargetX	███	12%
Ellucian	██	9%
Hubspot	▌	1%
Marketo		0%
Other	██████	23%
I don't know	██	8%

In response to the question "Which customer relationship management (CRM) system is your institution using?" Asked of those who reported their institutions use or are implementing a commercial CRM system. (n = 96)

► The second category includes emerging digital marketing tactics that businesses have been exploring and that are just beginning to be considered by higher ed. Examples are influencer marketing and connected TV advertising.

BUYER PERSONAS

Buyer personas are representations of your most important stakeholders. The influential marketing software company HubSpot defines a buyer persona as a "semi-fictional representation of your ideal customer based on market research and real data about your existing customers." Personas help you understand what important stakeholders want, how they think, how they behave, and, therefore, what the best ways are to reach them. A college might develop personas for prospective students, parents, and donors using information from market research and other data from sources such as admissions officers and advancement professionals.

Businesses use personas to help them tailor messages to their customers and even to develop products for certain customer groups. In higher ed, personas can help clarify what kinds of messages certain stakeholders would best respond to—and how they would prefer to be contacted. They can also serve as the basis for developing other new marketing programs, both online and offline.

Fewer than half (45 percent) of respondents said that their institutions had already created buyer personas for major audiences or stakeholder groups; nearly that many (43 percent) said that their institutions hadn't done this work.

WEBSITE SEO

SEO—search engine optimization—is the practice of increasing the quantity and quality of traffic to your website through organic search results. Organic search results are those naturally generated from site content, without any boosting or promotion. Investing in good SEO practices enables various pages on your website to achieve good organic positioning in the lists produced by search engines like Google and Bing. In short, you deliberately write content that follows SEO guidelines so that your content ranks higher in search results.

Ensuring that content across your website is SEO-friendly helps everyone across campus who is engaged in digital marketing of any kind. But it's imperative to apply good SEO principles to the specific areas of the site that you'll be referring people to as part of your digital marketing campaigns. For example, if you're engaged in student recruitment campaigns, the initial area to focus on is academic programs.

We learned that 58 percent of respondents to our survey had invested in website SEO; 36 percent had not made this key investment. As we noted earlier, the majority of

institutions (57 percent) handle SEO internally, while another 16 percent share some of the work with an external partner; only 18 percent outsource it. (See Figure 2.)

KEYWORDS PERSONALIZED FOR YOUR INSTITUTION

It's simple to understand what keywords are: They're terms for ideas and topics that define what your content is about—and that people use to find what they are looking for. One way to think about this is that if you identify the major keywords that prospective students are searching for, you can use those keywords to help them find the programs at your institution that they would be interested in. The search terms they are using to find what they want should be the keywords you use in your content.

We'll note that keywords are important both for SEO, which brings people using search engines like Google or Bing to your website, and for your website's internal search engine, which helps people who've already found your site to find what they want on it. We'll also note that "keyword" includes more than just single words; it includes multi-word terms and phrases.

In short, keywords are an integral part of effective SEO practice and the foundation of a content strategy.

Why would a college or university invest in personalized keywords? Because its marketing managers have thought carefully about what distinguishes the institution from its competitors and are seeking to highlight those programs and characteristics through digital marketing initiatives. So rather than focusing on keywords like "nursing program," where there's a lot of competition, a university might use instead "top-ranked nursing program in the Midwest." That topic would be a cornerstone of SEO for its nursing webpages and digital marketing campaigns.

We asked those respondents whose institutions had invested in SEO whether they had developed keywords personalized to their institution: 71 percent said that they had, 16 percent had not, and 13 percent didn't know whether their institution had made this investment.

Why would a college or university invest in personalized keywords? Because its marketing managers have thought carefully about what distinguishes the institution from its competitors and are seeking to highlight those programs and characteristics.

FIGURE 11
Advanced digital marketing tactics

	Yes		No		Don't know	
Developed content strategy for emails to prospective students[1]	83%	●	13%	●	5%	●
Invested in a CRM system[2]	78%	●	20%	●	2%	·
Uses a commercial email service[3]	71%	●	23%	●	5%	●
Uses social listening[4]	65%	●	21%	●	14%	●
Invested in website SEO[5]	58%	●	36%	●	7%	●
Developed content strategy for emails to alumni[1]	50%	●	31%	●	18%	●
Created buyer personas[6]	45%	●	43%	●	12%	●
Advertises on connected TV[7]	18%	●	75%	●	7%	●
Uses influencer marketing[8]	12%	●	82%	●	6%	●

In response to these questions:

1. Does your institution have a content strategy for email communications for the following audiences? (n = 114)

2. Does your institution use a customer relationship management (CRM) system? (n = 112)

3. Does your institution use a commercial service for email? (n = 112)

4. Does your institution use social listening (extracting and/or monitoring information and conversations from social media channels) to gain insights into what stakeholders and others are saying about your institution? (n = 123)

5. Has your institution invested in SEO for your website? (n = 118)

6. Has your institution created buyer personas for major audience/stakeholder groups? (n = 123)

7. Does your institution advertise on connected TV (CTV) platforms (e.g. Roku, Google Chromecast, Apple TV, Amazon Fire, etc.)? (n = 112)

8. Has your institution used influencer marketing (that is, offering to pay a fee to others to post on behalf of your institution)? (n = 118)

SOCIAL LISTENING

Social listening is a process that's becoming increasingly important in the business world. It involves actively monitoring social media channels for mentions, feedback, and sentiment about your institution, programs, keywords, topics, or even direct competitors, and then taking action on these insights. In short, it's more than just seeing what people are saying about your college on Facebook: A good social listening program will encompass mentions across Facebook, Twitter, Reddit, and other key social channels and allow you to observe interactions and comments almost as soon as they bubble up in exchanges and conversations.

In our survey question, we described the process this way: "social listening (extracting and/or monitoring information and conversations from social media channels) to gain insights into what stakeholders and others are saying about your institution." Social listening is taking root in higher ed as institutions become aware that what they learn can influence their actions and responses. In our survey, while 21 percent of respondents said their institutions don't use social listening, 65 percent said their institutions do.

INFLUENCER MARKETING

Many businesses have adapted the longstanding practice of influencer marketing to a world in which their customers are increasingly focused on following influencers on various social channels. Today, influencer marketing involves convincing or paying a social media celebrity to use a product or to provide a product endorsement of some kind, thus providing third-party validation for the product. The key to success is identifying someone who has significant prominence in a community of users who may be interested in buying or using the product being endorsed.

12 percent of our respondents said their institutions have engaged in influencer marketing.

While higher ed hasn't adopted this practice widely yet, 12 percent of our respondents said their institutions have engaged in influencer marketing. And 82 percent reported that they haven't practiced influencer marketing as we defined it (as "offering to pay a fee to others to post on behalf of your institution"). We'll note, though, that influencer marketing has been widely practiced in higher ed for decades, though outside of the digital realm. For example, one common practice was trying to sway the opinions of influencers who rated institutions for the U.S. News college rankings. And for decades, college and university staff and their PR consultants worked to persuade reporters and other media staff to highlight their institutions by covering institutional news or writing about faculty or their research.

CONNECTED TV ADVERTISING

A connected TV (CTV) is any TV connected to the internet, either with its own built-in software (a smart TV) or through an add-on unit sometimes called an over-the-top (OTT) device, such as Roku or Apple TV. People can use CTVs to access video streaming services like YouTube or Hulu. While CTVs are fairly common now, analysts expect the number to grow as people sign off from various cable services and switch to these newer platforms where you can watch content you like in your living room and, because it can follow you wherever you go, on your tablet or phone, too. Already, during the pandemic, consumption of content on CTVs and streaming devices increased significantly, according to Comscore analysis.

Advertising on CTV has great appeal because, unlike advertising on traditional TV, CTV allows advertisers to target the people who may be most interested in their product or service, as they do with other digital marketing. And results can be tracked, so advertisers know how people are interacting with their content. Finally, for now, rates are fairly low given the high quality of CTV audiences. Many sophisticated marketers in business are paying attention to the opportunities in CTV advertising and are excited about them.

So far, very few colleges seem to be taking advantage of opportunities to advertise on CTV: Only 18 percent of respondents to our survey said that their institutions were doing this now, although 36 percent indicated that, while they weren't currently advertising on CTV, they expected to pursue it in the future. And 39 percent said that they didn't anticipate that their institutions would do it at all.

ROCKING DIGITAL MARKETING

As we've said before, colleges and universities are already doing digital marketing. Though responses to our survey told us that 80 percent of institutions specifically budget for digital marketing, we guess that almost all colleges and universities do some sort of digital marketing, whether it's advertising on social media or a small pay-per-click campaign for student recruitment.

Yet not too many institutions are committed to ensuring that digital marketing campaigns succeed. What would such a commitment look like?

For one, institutions would invest in some of the more advanced digital marketing practices described throughout this report and summarized in Figure 11. Some of these initiatives can be undertaken by an institutional marketing office largely on its own because they are already considered foundational. Others, while they might require an investment, have demonstrated returns: a central marketing office can often make a case for resources to accomplish them. Still others require both substantial investments and institutional buy-in: Here, a central marketing office can take the lead in making a case about why these expenditures are important and can pay off in the long term.

Here are some key steps for institutions that want to rock digital marketing:

1. A world-class digital marketing program requires a holistic, institution-wide focus, regardless of whether elements of that program are implemented by one office or several. What does that mean? It means that the digital marketing program is rooted in the institution's brand platform and its strategic goals. Marketers across campus must collaborate on how to best execute their campaigns in furtherance of those goals.

2. Effective institution-wide digital marketing requires a strong foundation. That means that the institution needs to invest in buyer personas for key stakeholder groups; personalized keywords for the institution and important programs; and assessing and implementing SEO across the website.

3. As you develop plans for your digital marketing campaigns and initiatives, think about how you can link those campaigns institution-wide and how a unified content strategy for both digital and analog outreach can benefit everyone. How can you develop assets that can be used in multiple campaigns by multiple offices? For example, if you're shooting video of alumni, make sure you include elements that could be used for digital campaigns in admissions, alumni relations, and fundraising.

4. Invest in systems, including an external email service and institution-wide CRM system. It's still common for key units within an institution to have separate CRM systems designed for their own needs—an advancement system or an enrollment system. These systems make it difficult for institutions to operate as a unit and to share information. It's worth doing the hard work of agreeing on a single, institution-wide CRM system and integrating the data from multiple systems into it.

5. Develop a program to assess how your digital marketing is working, based on real-world results, not just vanity metrics like follows and likes. Tie these metrics in with your institutional goals. How can digital marketing help increase enrollment? support fundraising efforts?

6. Begin to develop smart, targeted experiments with new platforms and tactics like TikTok, CTV, or influencer marketing. Start with small audiences and small budgets: Remember, your initial forays into these channels are experiments to see how they work for you. It takes a while to get acclimated and develop campaigns that feel natural in these channels and that reach the audiences you're targeting.
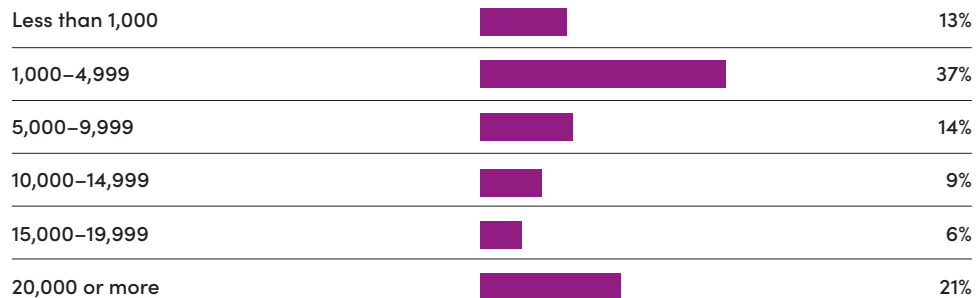
APPENDIX

WE EMAILED AN INVITATION to complete our survey to 10,000 members of mStoner's mailing list; posted the invitation on our corporate LinkedIn page, Instagram feed, and Twitter feed; and asked individuals within our agency and members of our network to distribute the link. The American Marketing Association also emailed an invitation to members of the AMA's Higher Education group.

We designed our survey so that individuals could respond on behalf of their department, unit, or college within a larger institution or on behalf of the institution itself. We had 356 responses overall. For the purposes of this white paper, we used the 136 responses from individuals who filled out the survey on behalf of their institution.

Among those institutions, 93 percent were located in North America; 66 percent were four-year colleges or universities, 12 percent were community colleges, and 12 percent were liberal arts colleges.

Additional data on survey respondents appear in Figures 12 and 13.

FIGURE 12
Student populations of institutions where respondents work

Less than 1,000		13%
1,000–4,999		37%
5,000–9,999		14%
10,000–14,999		9%
15,000–19,999		6%
20,000 or more		21%

In response to the question "How many students does your institution have? Please include ALL students, both full- and part-time, undergraduate, graduate, and online." (n = 132)

FIGURE 13
Department(s) in which respondents work

Department	Percentage
Marketing	69%
Communications	59%
Digital—Web	51%
Digital—Social Media	45%
PR	39%
Admissions or Enrollment Management	19%
Advancement Management	5%
Alumni Relations	4%
Development (including Annual Fund)	2%
Athletics	1%
Other	5%
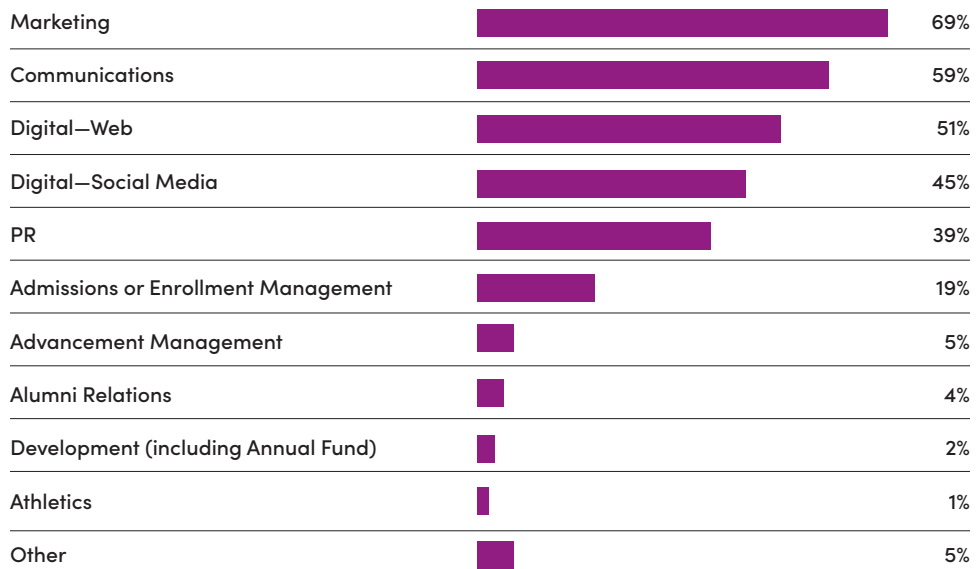
In response to the question "Which of the following describes your immediate department or division? Please select all that apply." (n = 130)

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