ADVANCE OHIO

MARKETING TO STUDENTS

How strategic targeting and great content can help make you the college of choice in a world of unlimited options

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INTRODUCTION

Higher education has gone from being a mark of distinction for a relatively small and privileged segment of society to an expected rite of passage for millions. In just one decade, **from 2002 to 2012, U.S. college full-time enrollment jumped 28% to a record 20.6 million**, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.[1]

Yet while these are in many ways boom times for higher education, pressures have increased on individual colleges and universities to stand out in order to attract the best students. That means being fully aware of the latest trends and adapting content marketing and other approaches to meet students where they are.

5 TRENDS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

66% of students who took a gap year said they studied more seriously afterward.[2]

Looking for Value With tuition rising, students "want to know what they're getting out of this purchase," says Brendan Mernin, founding tutor with Noodle Pros.

Nanodegrees While there's still room for four-year history majors, many students seek highly targeted "microcredentials" that prepare them for specific jobs in tech or business.

The Rise of Community Colleges Once seen as a last resort, they've transformed into a hot choice, thanks to rising quality and reasonable tuition, says cleveland.com education reporter Karen Farkas.

Gap Years No longer just for people trying to find themselves, gap years have gone mainstream. Of students who took a gap year, 66% said they studied more seriously after taking it.[2]

Blended Learning Colleges are combining the best of face-to-face and online learning. In-person courses use web-based supplements, while online courses arrange for periodic face time with professors.

MARKETING TO STUDENTS

Like college itself, attracting students is part art and part science. It's about knowing where to find them, appealing to their romantic ideas of college and offering specific, practical information about what they'll learn and how it will help them prosper.
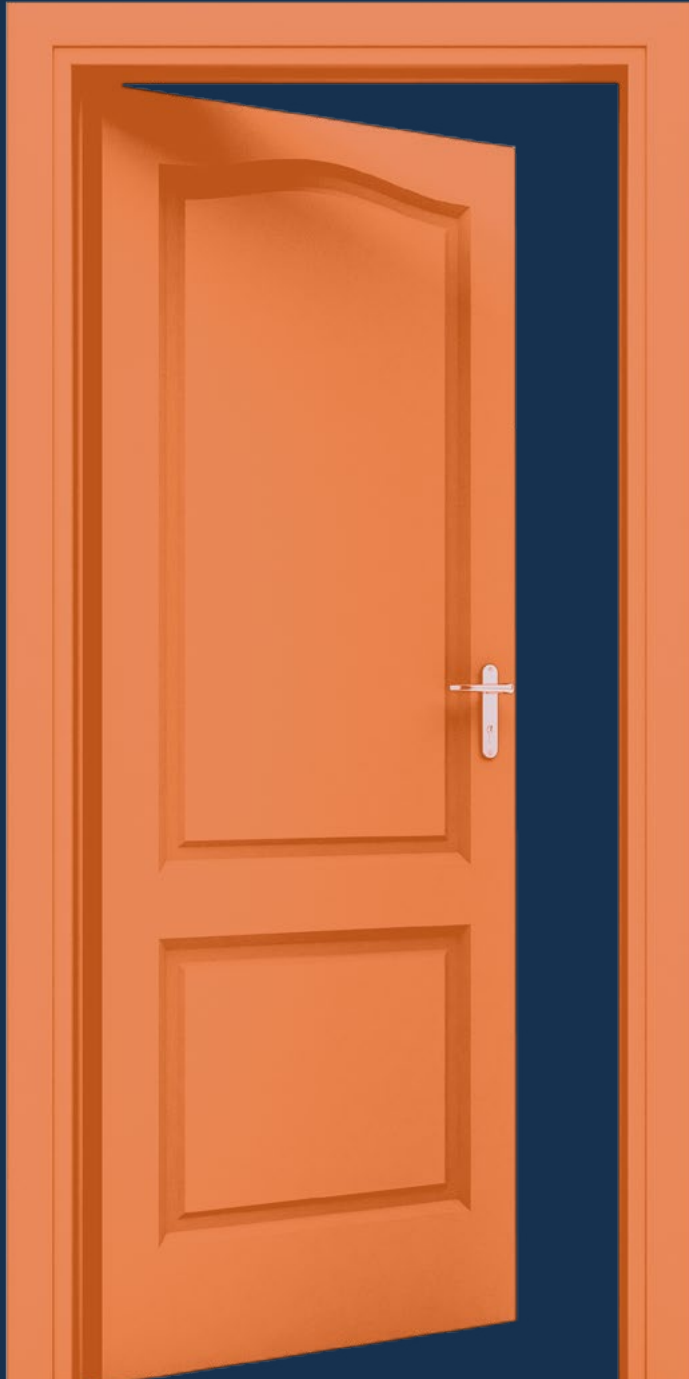
- REACH STUDENTS WHERE THEY ARE
- KNOW WHAT DRIVES THEM
- MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR LOCATION
- FOLLOW UP

PART ONE
REACH STUDENTS WHERE THEY ARE

To capture the eyes and ears of prospective students, you need to reach them in the virtual places where they spend most of their waking hours.

"College websites offer a huge amount of information but you often have to know how to dig to find it. Many prospects never make it past the banner headlines and pictures of happy students. That's where colleges can do a better job."

—Brendan Mernin, founding tutor with Noodle Pros

Nearly **80%** of students say that a campus website affects their perception of an institution.[3]

CAST A WIDE CONTENT NET

Connected almost 24/7 to their devices, prospective students are a ready audience. Build a strong suite of content that you can distribute across multiple channels.

- Create **videos** that let people see, hear and feel what it's like to be a student there.

- Tap faculty and students for **educational blogs** that generate excitement about a specific department or field of study.

- Write **articles** that highlight leading professors or student accomplishments.

- Use **checklists** with helpful tips on what to expect from the college experience and how to prepare.

- Distribute and repurpose content on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other **social media sites**.

- Use Google Analytics, bit.ly and other **measurement tools** to learn what is and isn't connecting.

3 WAYS TO GIVE YOUR CONTENT MORE POWER

Design for Mobile Ideally, optimize content for both large and small screens. If time or budget constraints force you to choose, "Think about mobile first," suggests Michael Lofstead, a digital and web strategist for Ruffalo Noel Levitz, a higher education consultancy. Content designed for larger screens may be impossible to read when called up on a smartphone.

Drill Down on Keywords When you advertise for keywords on Google or other search engines, keep in mind that a nurse seeking an advanced degree will use vastly different search terms from a prospective undergraduate. Target different content to the likely searches for each type of student, and encourage reasonable next steps when the content appears.

70% of students have looked at a college website on a mobile device.[4]

Eliminate Friction Clever messages or designs that require two or three steps to figure out create mental friction that drives online readers away, Lofstead warns. "Use simple, clean language and clear calls to action that are almost commands."

EDUCATION BEAT: GETTING AN "A" IN MARKETING

When reporter Kelly Heyboer of NJ Advance Media started covering higher education during the late 1990s, nearby colleges mainly used mailings and college fairs to get the word out. Times (and tactics) have changed:

RUTGERS UNIVERSITY celebrated its 250th birthday by encouraging student selfies in front of an outdoor sign. One corporation pledged $1 for each posted photo.[5]

THOMAS EDISON STATE COLLEGE, offering online programs aimed at working adults, invites students to test drive a course for 30 days at no charge.[6]

CALDWELL UNIVERSITY has launched 360 Video Tours. Heyboer says, "'fish-eye videos let you move around a dorm or dining hall with controls on a screen."[7]

CENTENARY COLLEGE launched #theVibe, a center for training students and local businesses on effective use of social media. Naturally, "They've promoted it across social media and on a website," Heyboer says.[8]

PART TWO

KNOW WHAT DRIVES THEM

The definition of a college student has changed. While many seek four years on campus and the value of a liberal arts degree, others are becoming much more targeted. Either way, today's students are pragmatic and results-oriented. Content that acknowledges and addresses specific concerns trumps generalities.

STUDENT PROFILE:
GENERATION Z

THE BASICS **Born between 1998 and today, 69 million strong—they fill nearly a quarter of the U.S. population.**[9]

FULLY DIGITAL The first generation with no knowledge of life before the Internet, they average **3+ hours per day staring into a screen.**[10]

PRACTICAL **79% want internships** and professional experience in college; 85% want skills such as financial planning.[11]

FRUSTRATED BY OBSTACLES 82% say finding the best college for them is an obstacle; 63% cite the application process.[12]

ENTREPRENEURIAL 63% say entrepreneurship should be part of the college curriculum; **72% say students should be allowed to design their own majors.**[13]

THE ELEPHANT IN THE ROOM:
RISING COSTS

While tuition fears are the focus of bill-paying parents, students feel the pressure, too.

- **67% are concerned about affording college**; 64% about whether they'll get a job.[14]

- More than 72% feel stressed about personal finances.[15]

- **Just 22.1% always follow a weekly or monthly budget**, and only 7.5% have attended personal finance classes or workshops in college.[16]

BUT THERE'S GOOD NEWS:
Students overwhelmingly see college as necessary to their future. Over 77% believe they'll one day be able to support themselves financially.[17]

More than **72%** of students feel stressed about personal finances.[15]

EDUCATION BEAT: LIVING THE COLLEGE SEARCH

Education reporter Betsy Hammond of the Oregonian Media Group has seen colleges in her region get better at marketing qualities that make them special. For example, **Whitman College**, a small, liberal arts school in Walla Walla, Washington, stresses the breadth of its programs, close working relationships with professors, and a year-long "Encounters" program offering freshman a deep dive into the ongoing value of a liberal arts education. **Western Oregon University**, which stresses accessibility, recently announced affordability grants to help students meet rising costs.

Yet as the parent of a 16-year-old son, Hammond is learning how challenging the search process can be. Rankings often "read as though they were written by someone sitting in an office crunching numbers," she says. "People feel overwhelmed." Hammond and other searchers struggle to understand:

INTANGIBLES What makes a college different? What's it really like? What's the academic and campus *feel*?

TRUE COST The price tag comes wrapped in so many layers of fees, grants and loans, says Hammond, that few families know what to expect.

HIDDEN TREASURES So many colleges have specific strengths. Hammond notes, "I worry that there may be gems we're overlooking."

OPENING UP ON SAFETY

With sexual assaults and other safety issues in the news, families want to know how colleges plan to protect students, says Brendan Mernin, founding tutor with Noodle Pros. "Some colleges worry that by being forward-thinking, they'll call attention to the fact that problems occur. But people know it can happen anywhere. **What they want to know is, who's got plans in place?**"

PART THREE

MAKE THE MOST OF YOUR LOCATION

College isn't all academics and campus life. Whether you're located in the heart of a major city, next to the best skiing in the East or in a sun-drenched stretch of the Pacific Coast, your location can be a key draw, provided that you market it in a concerted way.

CROSS-MARKETING: 5 WAYS TO ALIGN WITH LOCAL PARTNERS

- Link to **area attractions** and visitor bureaus from your website.

- Build relationships with **local media**; encourage faculty to share expertise as sources.

- Monitor references to your college; **share positive stories** on your site and social media.

- Develop and promote opportunities for students and faculty to volunteer for **local philanthropic causes**.

- Reduce town-gown tensions by communicating regularly with **local officials** about your plans and goals—and theirs.

EDUCATION BEAT:
CELEBRATING THE BIG EASY, IN GOOD TIMES AND BAD

New Orleans's famed music, nightlife and cuisine create a powerful draw for out-of-state students to area universities, such as Loyola, Tulane and Xavier University of Louisiana. "It's a city where people look you in the eye and say 'hello' when they pass you on the street," says NOLA Media Group education reporter Jed Lipinski.

Yet **a city's challenges can create opportunities as well**. After Hurricane Katrina devastated the area in 2005, **Tulane** helped restore enrollment by highlighting humanitarian opportunities. The campaign "dove-tailed with a strong desire among a lot of idealistic young people to come to New Orleans and help the city rebuild," Lipinski says.[18]

EVEN ONLINE, LOCATION MATTERS

Colleges launching online programs often assume they'll draw students from around the world. Yet they're most likely to attract those who live nearby, says education consultant and web strategist Michael Lofstead.

- Students choose online programs based on college brands they know and trust.

- They want degrees from colleges that local employers will recognize.

- **Takeaway:** Unless your college has a national or international reputation, market your online program mainly to regional students.

PART FOUR
FOLLOW UP

Once students arrive on campus, you want them to have the experience of a lifetime. After all, that's why educators do what they do. Satisfied students can help spread the good word about why new generations of students should follow in their footsteps.

CREATING STUDENT AMBASSADORS

For generations, colleges have relied on current students and recent graduates to lead tours and talk up their school to prospects. Today, with college prospects increasingly turning to Facebook and other social media for details about a school's offerings, savvy institutions are borrowing from that model to **create teams of online ambassadors** to monitor and respond to social chatter. As with tour leaders, these are specially selected students likely to show the school at its best, says education consultant and web strategist Michael Lofstead.

Akin to tech support teams at companies, these students act as a first-tier response when students inquire about issues ranging from admissions and financial aid to housing. According to Lofstead, **the best programs have a structured process** including:

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT Create guidelines for language and conduct that best represent the college.
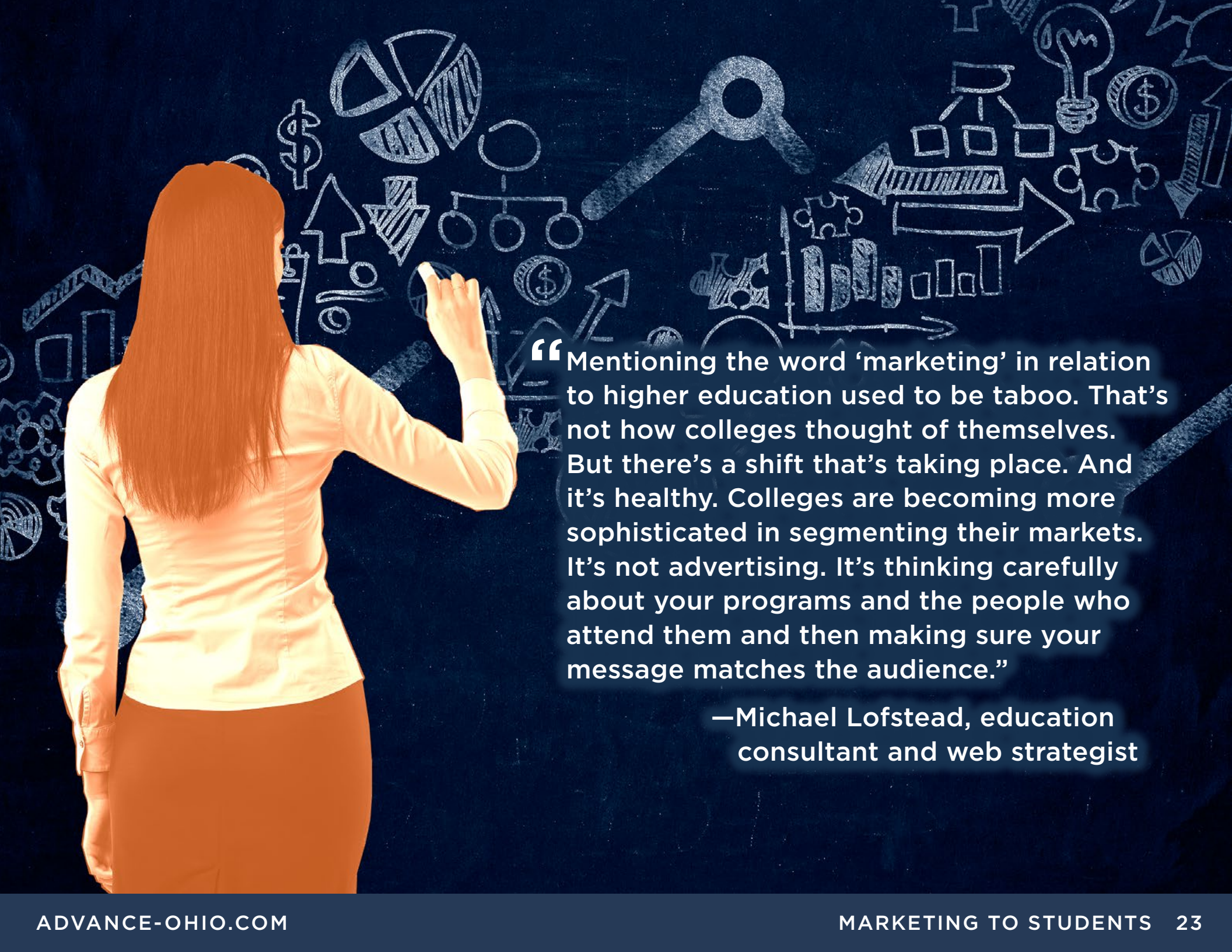
TAKING THE CONVERSATION OFFLINE
Outline ways to move from a public forum to a one-to-one conversation, turning a casual visitor into a recruitment opportunity.

SEAMLESS HANDOFFS TO THE EXPERTS
Establish processes for putting a prospect in touch with college officials with greater knowledge of details.

EDUCATION BEAT: GUIDANCE GOES INTO OVERDRIVE

"It used to be that you could work a summer job to pay for your education. **Today, because the investment is so huge, people are asking, 'How is this going to advance my career?'"** says cleveland.com education reporter Karen Farkas. College rankings often include earning power of their graduates, and some states, including Ohio, have tied state funding of colleges to retention and graduation rates.

To increase retention and job prospects of students, many colleges are using intrusive advising, Farkas says. That's a positive, not a negative. When Farkas first covered higher education in the 1980s, campus advisors were something of an afterthought. These days, they're much more hands-on. Such schools as **Cleveland State University**, the **University of Akron** and **Kent State University** have intensified their focus on freshman. Farkas adds that Akron has hired a firm that pairs each freshman with a success coach.[19]

> "Mentioning the word 'marketing' in relation to higher education used to be taboo. That's not how colleges thought of themselves. But there's a shift that's taking place. And it's healthy. Colleges are becoming more sophisticated in segmenting their markets. It's not advertising. It's thinking carefully about your programs and the people who attend them and then making sure your message matches the audience."
>
> —Michael Lofstead, education consultant and web strategist

CONTACT
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Advance Ohio offers a comprehensive package of digital marketing solutions to businesses large and small. As part of Advance Local, one of the largest media groups in the U.S., we're leaders in strategic innovation and customized solutions that help our customers grow. Advance Local's media groups are the leading provider of news and information in their individual markets. Holding the #1 position in all Advance Local markets means our brands are deeply rooted in local communities and best positioned to create deep connections with consumers. Learn more about our education marketing solutions by contacting us at 216-999-3900 or marketing@advance-ohio.com.

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Advance Ohio is an exciting digital company with a start-up personality that provides a suite of cutting-edge solutions that help a wide range of businesses reach their marketing goals. We use data to implement industry-proven solutions that drive measurable results for our customers.

With first-party non-personally identifiable data access to more than 80 million devices owned by consumers across a range of award-winning news and information brands, Advance Ohio offers a powerful combination of premium digital data and strategic marketing innovation. Because of our access to so many data points through our owned media properties, we have insight into user behavior and intent that other agencies do not.

NOTES

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