

Clicks, Conversions, and Campaign Wins



**A Complete Guide to Platforms and
Channels Driving Success in Community
College Digital Marketing**



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By Cheryl Broom, CEO

GradComm delivers innovative, research-driven marketing that helps community colleges boost enrollment, strengthen their brand, and better serve students.

The Digital Journey of a Community College Student

At 26, Casey wasn't sure if college was still an option. After pausing their education to help care for their younger sibling, they focused on work and family, navigating a job market that made advancement challenging. Still, the idea of building a stable career stayed in the back of their mind.

One rainy morning, while waiting at a bus stop, that idea moved closer to reality. Scrolling on Snapchat, Casey saw a short video about local career training programs. Curious, they swiped up, but before they could explore further, their bus arrived.

A week later, between laundry loads and streaming short videos, another ad appeared—this time featuring a student, not much older than Casey, who shared how a certificate program helped them land a steady job.

After a late shift, Casey decided to search online for “community college healthcare programs near me.” A text ad for a free medical assistant program caught their eye. The landing page was clear and inviting, with details on program options and class schedules. A chatbot popped up: “Want to talk to a counselor?” Casey clicked yes.

The next day, a counselor reached out by text, answering questions about applying and exploring financial aid. Casey appreciated the personal connection and the practical guidance.

A few days later, an email arrived with a friendly reminder of the many support services available. That was the nudge they needed.

Casey clicked “Apply Now” and felt a surge of optimism. For the first time in years, they weren't just thinking about the next paycheck. They were taking steps toward a future they had envisioned all along.



From Story to Strategy

What Matters in Community College Marketing

While fictional, Casey's story offers a glimpse into what's possible when a college has a well-constructed, multi-tiered, student-centered digital strategy. Unfortunately, most community colleges aren't there yet. Few have the kind of targeted digital marketing, responsive chatbot, clear program web pages, and targeted follow-up that made Casey feel seen and guided.

And that's a missed opportunity—not just for students, but for marketers too. College marketers often compare themselves to other colleges but overlook the fact that today's students are accustomed to the seamlessness of commercial websites and the customer journeys they provide. That is what they expect from colleges.

A strong digital marketing strategy doesn't just improve the student journey; it saves colleges time and money. It replaces trial-and-error marketing with clarity and manual tasks with automation. The result? Fewer wasted ad dollars, more efficient campaigns, and teams that spend less time second-guessing and more time doing what they love: helping students succeed.

At GradComm, we believe marketing should do more than just reach students. It should truly move them. In 2024 alone, we facilitated over \$4 million in digital marketing for community colleges across the nation. That's not just a number. It reflects how seriously colleges are taking their digital presence and how essential digital marketing has become to student recruitment.

What follows is a comprehensive analysis of strategy performance data from the 100s of large and small campaigns we ran in 2024. Our goal is simple: to help colleges like yours make smarter, more confident media buying decisions that connect, capture, and convert prospects into students.

Whether you're just starting your digital strategy or refining an already robust approach, these insights are designed to support you every step of the way.

If you are new to digital media buying, a general glossary of terms has been provided [on page 24](#).



When you share a student success story, map it out from first contact to enrollment. This helps you see where your digital touchpoints are working together, and where there's room to strengthen the journey.



How Today's Students Make Enrollment Decisions

Whether they're 18 or 38, today's students navigate an increasingly nonlinear, digital path to college that begins long before they click "apply." Along the way, they encounter multiple digital touchpoints: a scroll-stopping social ad, a targeted Google search, a carousel of student stories, or an email that reminds them that the future they dream of is still within reach.

From high school seniors to career changers, most students now expect institutions to meet them where they are: online and on their own terms. They're information-seekers who value autonomy, clear outcomes, and seamless experiences, and their decision-making is increasingly shaped by digital content. They also expect the same easy user experience that they would get from commercial platforms, websites, and emails.

According to a 2023 survey by EAB of more than 6,000 prospective students, the top five sources used to research college programs were all digital. **In fact, 94 percent of students said they visit a college's website before applying, and 84 percent say a poor web experience damages their perception of the school (EAB, 2023). That means first impressions are now made in milliseconds, often via mobile.**

Search engines also play a crucial role. A 2024 [Ruffalo Noel Levitz](#) report found that the overwhelming majority of students, across age groups, begin their college research on Google or another search platform. This means paid search and SEO aren't just helpful, they're a critical component of any enrollment pipeline.

The same goes for social media. **72 percent of Gen Z students say they've used platforms like Instagram, TikTok, or YouTube to explore college options (Niche, 2023).** But it's not just younger audiences. Parents and returning learners also engage with platform-specific content that answers their questions and introduces them to new opportunities, particularly when messaging is clear, relevant, and visually compelling.

Meanwhile, decision timelines vary widely. Some students apply after weeks of research. Others may revisit program pages for months before acting. That's why consistent, personalized digital outreach is so important: it nurtures curiosity into commitment. From CRM-based email campaigns to retargeted ads and follow-up texts, thoughtful digital engagement can be key in guiding a student from consideration to conversion.



Search Engine Marketing: Still a Smart Investment?

Search Engine Marketing (SEM), also known as Pay-Per-Click (PPC) or “paid search”, remains one of the most reliable and powerful tools for reaching students who are actively searching for programs, colleges, or career pathways. Unlike paid social media, which captures attention passively, SEM meets students exactly where they are in the moment they’re looking for information and ready to act.

That’s what makes SEM so critical for community colleges. Even as AI tools and chatbot search grow in popularity, traditional search engines like Google remain the first stop for most prospective students, especially adult learners navigating a complex decision. When someone types “evening welding classes near me” or “how to go back to college at 35,” search ads are often the gateway to enrollment.

GradComm’s 2024 campaign data reveals something important: SEM done right still delivers outsized value.

- **Search ads can be remarkably efficient when campaigns are highly targeted and locally relevant.** GradComm’s clients paid an average of \$0.65 cost per click (CPC), far below the \$4.39 industry average for education. This low CPC is driven by our own advanced bid management software and well-structured keyword and ad copy strategies that achieve high quality scores.
- **Students respond to clear, goal-oriented messaging.** GradComm’s text ads averaged a 20.56 percent click-through rate (CTR), more than triple the education benchmark of 6.21 percent. This level of engagement shows how well-optimized search copy can cut through clutter and directly address what students seek.
- **SEM drives immediate action, not just awareness.** More than 42,000 phone calls were generated directly from search ads managed by GradComm in 2024. This volume of direct contact illustrates SEM’s power to prompt real-time student engagement at critical decision points.

NUMBERS TO KNOW

*Higher Education Industry
Benchmarks for SEM*



AVERAGE CPC
\$4.39



AVERAGE CTR
6.21%



AVERAGE COST PER LEAD
\$55

- **Campaigns convert interest into enrollment behavior.** Over 19 percent of those who clicked on a SEM ad (representing 254,000 clicks) demonstrated clear enrollment intent by independently navigating to apply or register pages. These outcomes demonstrate that when SEM is executed strategically, it becomes a direct pipeline to conversion and not just more web traffic.
- **Search provides both visibility and engagement at scale.** Our college campaigns, cumulatively, delivered 7.6 million impressions and 1.3 million total clicks. The combination of reach and high intent proves SEM's unique ability to build awareness while still capturing ready-to-act students.

As competition intensifies and advertising costs rise across the board (87 percent of industries saw CPC increases in 2025 and higher education over 40 percent), GradComm's performance shows what's possible with a smart strategy. Even as costs climb, our campaigns continued to deliver high-quality engagement at lower-than-average costs in a year where "Education & Instruction" was one of the hardest-hit verticals for CPC inflation.



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A search strategy built on audience intent, optimized copy, and precise targeting remains the most direct path to student action. And when executed well, it's also one of the most cost-effective.



Chris Walker,
President

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Top-Performing Search Terms for Community College Campaigns

These are the most frequently searched keywords related to community colleges and the ones that consistently generate the highest click-through rates in paid search campaigns. They reflect genuine student intent and are key indicators of what prospective learners are actively seeking online.

student financial aid for
community college

good community colleges
near me

financial aid

city college programs

2 year colleges

community colleges in [city]

financial aid city college

community college
programs

city college online courses

city college online

find community colleges
near me

city college classes

top associate degrees

community college near
me

community colleges near
me

community college
certificate programs

associates degrees

summer community
college courses

how to apply community
college

job training

online community college
degrees



Always pair high-intent keywords with location-based targeting. “Evening welding classes” is good. “Evening welding classes in Fresno” is better. That extra specificity can double your click-through rate without increasing cost.



Email: Do Subject Lines, Timing, and Targeting Matter?

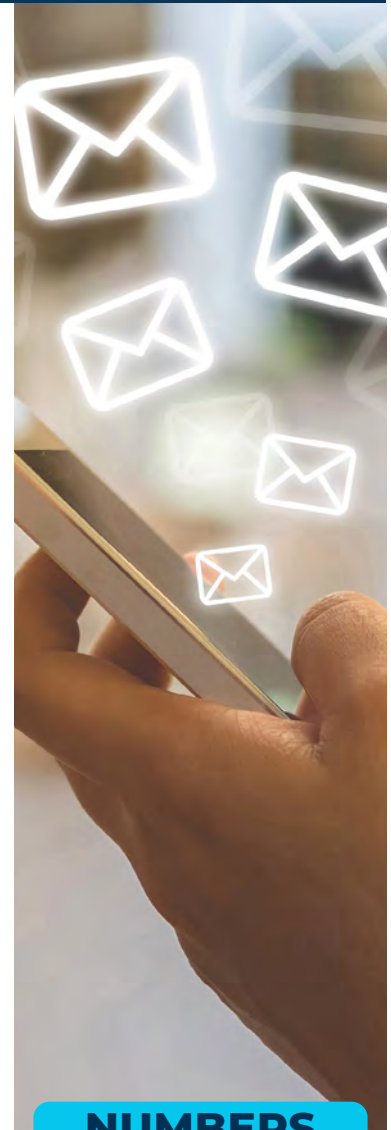
In 2024, GradComm ran over 100 community college email campaigns, representing 3.7 million emails that resulted in 95,000 website visits. Emails covered enrollment reminders, career training promotions, financial aid updates, and other relevant topics. At a time when some question the relevance of email in our social-first world, the data resoundingly proves otherwise: email remains one of the top-performing channels for enrollment-driven outreach.

Consider this: [according to Omnisend](#), nearly 100 percent of users check their email daily. This is true even for community college students, regardless of their age. In fact, in [GradComm's](#) 2024 survey of 2,700 California Community College students, roughly 80 percent of students report checking their email accounts at least once a day, and 28 percent check email every few hours or more.

These numbers aren't just impressive; they underscore why email continues to be one of the most effective tools in a community college marketer's toolkit. After analyzing all our 2024 email campaigns sent to carefully purchased, intent-driven lists, GradComm uncovered key takeaways about what works, when to send, and who to target. The results make one thing clear: email isn't just alive—it's thriving.

What the Best Subject Lines Have in Common

A well-crafted subject line is often the difference between an opened email and one that's ignored. But email success isn't measured by open rates alone. Strong campaigns also generate clicks, form completions, and real enrollment activity. GradComm's analysis of over 70 campaigns for California community colleges found that while subject line performance varies based on audience, timing, and message framing, the best subject lines had a few things in common.



NUMBERS TO KNOW

*Higher Education Industry
Benchmarks for Email*



AVERAGE OPEN RATE
13%



AVERAGE CTR
1.19%



HIGHEST OPEN RATE

Subject Line: Better Career = Better Salary! ¡Mejor Carrera = Mejor Salario!

Client: Allan Hancock College

Open Rate: 23.83%

Audience: Career Education, Job Seeker, Ages 25–65, Zip Codes

Analysis: This subject line excels by tying economic mobility to education, a value-based message that resonates across age groups. The bilingual format likely boosted open rates among Spanish-speaking households, and the math-like structure made it both eye-catching and instantly understandable.

HIGHEST CLICK-THROUGH RATE

Subject Line: “Explore Unexpected Career Paths at Allan Hancock College”

Client: Allan Hancock College

CTR: 3.06%

Audience: Non-Traditional Programs, Male, Age 19–35, HHI 70K & Under, Zip Codes

Analysis: This message appealed to curiosity and nonlinear career journeys, effectively engaging an audience likely in transition or reconsidering traditional paths. The phrase, “unexpected career paths”, challenged assumptions and likely drew in readers open to new opportunities. It performed exceptionally well with younger, underrepresented males, a demographic that is often hard to reach.

HIGHEST NUMBER OF CLICKS

Subject Line: “You May Qualify for NO COST Tuition”

Client: Los Angeles Community College District

Total Clicks: 19,754

Audience: 18–20 Year Olds, No College Degree, Zip Codes

Analysis: This subject line combined a financial incentive with a personalized possibility. “You May Qualify” introduces just enough uncertainty to encourage a click, while “NO COST Tuition” is an unmistakable value proposition. It addresses common concerns about affordability, particularly among younger audiences in high-cost areas.

As you can see, there’s no one-size-fits-all formula for subject line success, but **the highest-performing examples in our campaigns shared three things: a promise, clarity and relevance**. Whether it was appealing to financial needs, career aspirations, or personal exploration, the best subject lines made a promise, and the content inside the email delivered on it. When paired with well-targeted audiences and timed around enrollment cycles, these emails didn’t just get opened, they moved potential students to act.

Timing Can Improve Engagement

When analyzing the three highest-performing emails by click-through rate (CTR), one clear trend emerged: each was sent approximately one month before the start of its respective semester, regardless of season.

- West Los Angeles College's campaign, "*How Does FREE College Sound?*", sent on July 23, 2024, to promote Fall 2025, achieved a 3.03 percent CTR among parents of high school students.
- Glendale Community College's *Promise Program* email, sent a few weeks prior to the summer semester, earned a 3.05 percent CTR.
- Allan Hancock College's email, "*Explore Unexpected Career Paths at Allan Hancock College*," targeting non-traditional men aged 19–35, led the pack with a 3.06 percent CTR and was sent the month before spring classes started.

“

This data reinforces a key point: specificity beats generalization. The more precise the match between subject line, timing, and audience motivation, the more likely students are to click and act.



Betsy Flores,
Digital
Strategist

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Despite different seasons and audiences, this relatively consistent 30-day lead time suggests a sweet spot for engagement. This tells us to send when urgency builds, but while students still have time to act.

Bigger Budgets Mean Bigger Impact

Not surprisingly, email performance improves significantly with scale. Campaigns with budgets over \$2,000 achieved a cost-per-click (CPC) of just \$0.72, while those under \$500 averaged \$3.12 per click—a 333 percent difference in cost efficiency. The key driver? Larger budgets enable broader reach and more precise audience targeting, allowing colleges to connect with higher-intent prospects at a lower cost per action.



Test your subject lines in both desktop and mobile previews before sending. Many students check their email on their phones. If your subject line gets cut off, your best hook could be invisible.



Meta: Your Click-Through Powerhouse

In 2024, GradComm ran over 50 different campaigns across Facebook and Instagram, reaching tens of millions of prospective students and driving CTRs that regularly beat the 1.10 percent industry benchmark. **What's fueling this performance? Authentic stories, inclusive messaging, and a balanced creative mix.** Here are five takeaways to help you devise a more impactful Meta strategy.

1. Across campaigns, **video content consistently delivered the highest engagement**, especially when it centered on real students. The Inland Empire Desert Regional Consortium's (IEDRC) campaign, filmed on a cell phone and featuring dogs and campus snacks, pulled in a 7.57% CTR. Irvine Valley College's polished testimonial spot, anchored by student voices, followed with a strong 3.23%. Whether casual or high-production, what mattered most was authenticity.
2. Video wasn't the only star of the show. **Static ads remain essential** for generating awareness, driving website traffic, and improving efficiency. For example, Allan Hancock College's awareness-to-consideration static ad (shown below) delivered more than 21,000 clicks, outperforming all other individual creatives across all campaigns through community awareness targeting.
3. **Carousel ads are another must-have**, offering visual variety and consistently high CTRs when used to spotlight different programs or student outcomes. Carousels have multiple slides and allow colleges to paint a more complete picture of what they are advertising.



NUMBERS TO KNOW

Higher Education Industry Benchmarks for Meta



**AVERAGE CPM,
CUSTOM AUDIENCES
\$12-\$25**



**AVERAGE CTR
1.10%**



**AVERAGE CPC
\$1.06**

4. **Spanish-language ads frequently outperform English ads** across the board, with campaign data showing high levels of engagement and CTRs exceeding 4 percent. For example, Los Angeles Community College's Spanish-language Meta ads targeted Spanish-speaking audiences with interests in adult career, vocational, and trade education, as well as parents of teens, and a lookalike audience from website remarketing, achieving a 4.46 percent CTR.
5. Campaign success is substantially influenced by **smart audience targeting**, including CRM retargeting, lookalike audiences based on student behavior, and language-specific segments. These audiences consistently yielded the highest engagements.



The bottom line? On Meta platforms, performance is all about relevance, resonance, and reaching the right people with the right mix of content.



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When a campaign feels like a student talking to another student, not a brand talking at them, that's when the magic happens. Our job is to help colleges show up authentically, and when they do, the results speak for themselves.



Rachel Dwyer,
Client Success
Manager



Lead with a student's face in the first frame of your video or image. Eye contact in the feed stops the scroll and builds instant trust, before a single word is read.

YouTube: Inspiring Action with Authentic Stories

GradComm's 2024 YouTube campaigns, with over 19 million impressions, proved that you don't need big budgets to make an impact. Storytelling works, especially when it's authentic, career-aligned, and culturally relevant.

- The strongest performers weren't big-budget productions. [West Los Angeles College's video](#) featuring "Jada" and [IEDRC's "Ready, Set, Career" video](#) featuring "Fabian" each achieved a 70 percent completed video view rate, demonstrating the power of **peer-led content**. We saw that voice overs help reinforce key messages, but they are most effective when they feature the voices of genuine students.
- While YouTube isn't known for driving website traffic as much as building brand awareness, we found that **Spanish-language videos** led to higher-than-average website visits. For example, [Cuyamaca College's "Mayores Opciones"](#), which only uses photos and words on screen, generated more website visits than most other campaigns, reinforcing the value of multilingual campaigns in diverse regions.
- We found that campaigns targeting **military, online gamers, and low-income work industry audiences** drove the most completed video views, particularly when the messaging emphasized workforce outcomes and personal growth.

NUMBERS TO KNOW

Higher Education Industry Benchmarks for YouTube



AVERAGE COMPLETED VIDEO VIEW RATE

22%



AVERAGE COST PER COMPLETED VIEW

.20 cents

The best YouTube campaigns don't try to sell. They show. When students hear someone like them share a real story or goal, it builds trust, not just awareness. That's what makes the message stick.



Chris Carroll,
Art Director

TikTok: Where Creative Wins

In 2024, GradComm booked 50+ TikTok ads across multiple community college campaigns, reaching 21 million unique potential students, and consistently beating the industry benchmark of .84 CTR.

- Our top performers (Contra Costa College, Saddleback College, and the Inland Empire Desert Regional Consortium), ranged from a 2.04 percent to 2.93 percent CTR, driven by one key ingredient: **platform-native creativity**. The highest-performing spots ditched traditional ad polish in favor of quick edits, student voices, upbeat tracks, and visually bright content that felt right at home in a user's "For You" feed.

NUMBERS TO KNOW

Higher Education Industry Benchmarks for TikTok

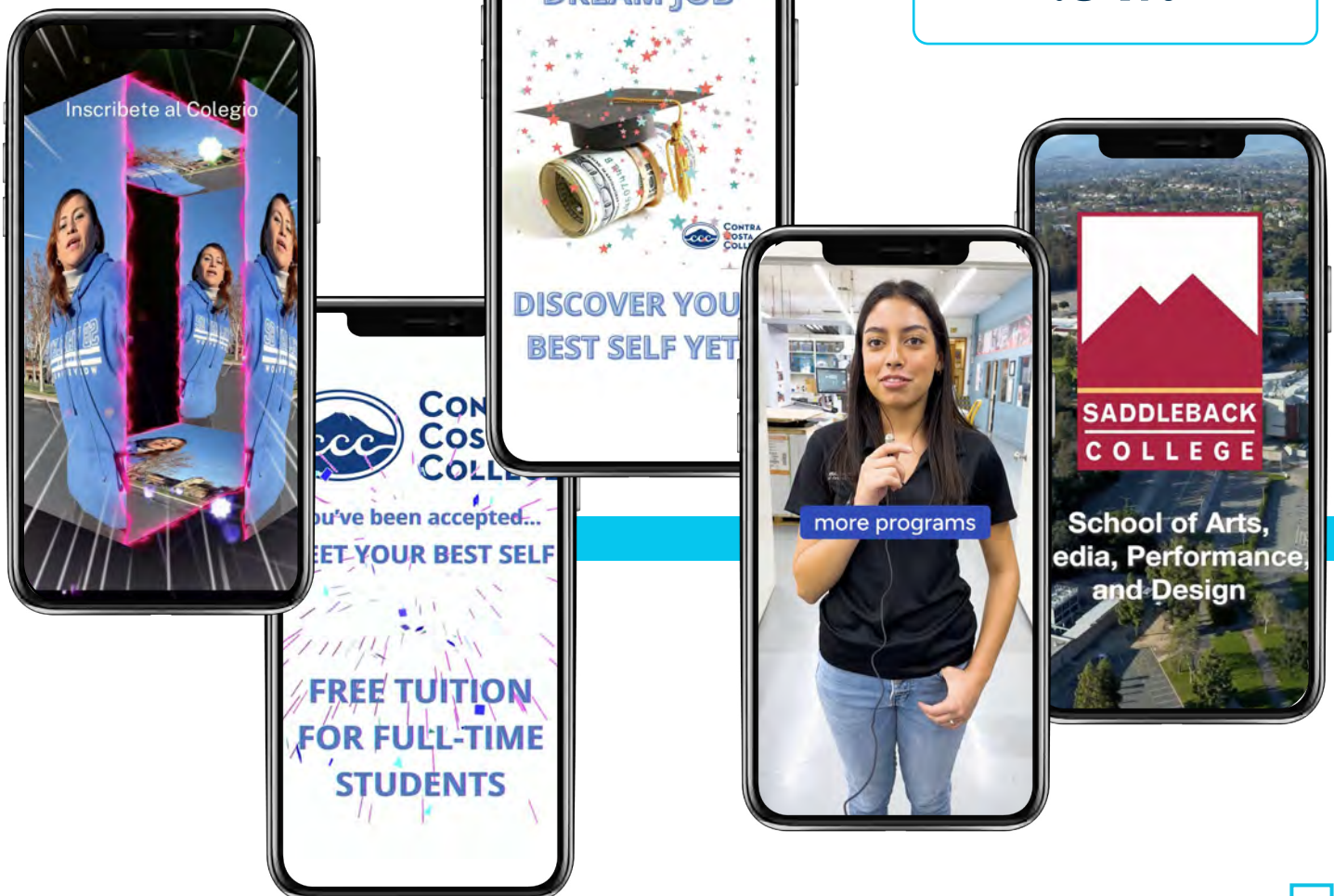


AVERAGE CPM,
CUSTOM AUDIENCES
\$15-\$20



AVERAGE CTR
.84%

TOP PERFORMING ADS



- Creatives that embraced **TikTok trends**, such as transitions, memes, or viral audio, consistently outperformed traditional formats. And branding? The most successful ads flashed the college logo within the first two seconds, anchoring recognition before the swipe.
- Spanish-language TikTok ads also performed well, and there's a clear opportunity to **expand bilingual creative** to better reflect the strong engagement we're already seeing on Meta and YouTube.

Here's what's key: TikTok isn't a traditional ad channel; it's a content engine. If you're ready to meet students where they are, lean into the trends, keep it real, and lead with story over stats.

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TikTok rewards creativity and ads that are clear and clever. The spots that work best don't interrupt the scroll—they belong in it. Bright visuals, student voices, and fast hooks are our go-to formula for making colleges stand out where it counts.



**Michael Mahin, Ph.D.,
Creative Director**

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Lead with recognition. Flash your college logo or name in the first two seconds to anchor brand recall, then hook viewers with bright visuals, upbeat audio, and student-led storytelling that blends seamlessly into students' "For You" feed.



Snapchat: High Engagement for Teens and Parents

GradComm has run dozens of Snapchat campaigns for community colleges, and the results are hard to ignore. This youth-centric platform consistently delivers some of the highest click-through rates (CTRs) of any channel in our media mix, with top-performing ads achieving a CTR of up to 5.75 percent.

- Unlike other platforms where video usually dominates, **both static and video formats performed well** on Snapchat. Video ads saw a slight edge in CTR, while static creatives helped balance Cost per Thousands (CPMs) and stretch budget efficiency.
- **Messaging matters:** Ads that led with hooks like “Get a Head Start on College” or “Earn College Credit While in High School” outperformed others by a wide margin. Audience targeting also played a key role.

NUMBERS TO KNOW

Higher Education Industry Benchmarks for SnapChat



**AVERAGE CPM,
DETAILED AUDIENCES
\$20-\$25**



**AVERAGE CTR
.94%**



**Classes are
FREE**



**and
Transferable**



**Just one
semester long**



Use quick, bold captions on your videos. Since Snapchat is viewed without sound by default, captions ensure your core message lands instantly.

- While Snapchat doesn't offer education-specific categories, segments like **High Schoolers** and **Parents**, as well as lifestyle-based affinity groups, such as **Partygoers**, showed strong engagement (with CTRs regularly above 3.5 percent), especially when paired with playful or hyper-relevant creative content. In one standout example, a nightlife-themed ad run by the Inland Empire region achieved a 6 percent CTR, demonstrating that **Snapchat excels when colleges lean into tone and imagery** that feels native to the platform.
- Spanish-language ads also performed well, with an average CTR of 3.06 percent, reinforcing the importance of **bilingual messaging in diverse regions** like Southern California.

Bottom line? If you're trying to reach younger students and their influencers where they already are, Snapchat remains a powerful tool, especially when paired with smart, creative, and segment-savvy targeting.



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It surprises a lot of our clients, but we've consistently seen strong engagement from parents on Snapchat. They're not just there to check in on their teens; they're actively responding to ads about dual enrollment and college credit opportunities. When the creative speaks to their aspirations for their kids, they click.



Jamie McNinch, Director of Client Services

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Display/OTT Streaming: Digital's Unsung Hero

GradComm reviewed 92 display campaigns across community colleges in 2024, analyzing over 111,000 clicks and 158,000 latent clicks (later, organic visits to the site). Standout campaigns revealed that **precise targeting and cultural relevance make all the difference.**

- One of the biggest wins? **Geofencing.** Targeting users by physical location, such as high schools or shopping centers, consistently delivered above-average engagement.
- Even stronger? **First-party data.** CRM retargeting paired with addressable geofencing (AGF) campaigns perform exceptionally well, often doubling the industry average CTR.
- **Custom audiences** also perform well. Display is one of the few digital platforms that allows for ethnic targeting. We observed that campaigns targeting Hispanic, Asian, and African American households with household incomes under \$70,000 achieved CTRs 48 percent higher than the industry average.

NUMBERS TO KNOW

*Higher Education Industry
Benchmarks for Display/OTT*



**AVERAGE CPM
WITH OTT
\$10-\$18**



**AVERAGE CPM
WITHOUT OTT
\$5-\$10**



**AVERAGE
CTR
.23%**



- **Vietnamese and Spanish-language ads** also performed well and resonated with multilingual adult learners and families in culturally meaningful ways. We saw several clients reach high click-through rates on these ads, followed by strong follow-through beyond the click, including form fills and even application page visits.

The takeaway? **Display ads work best when they're precise, personal, and multilingual, especially when paired with innovative audience strategies and real-world relevance.**



The beauty of display is how many precise levers we can pull. We can target by zip code, language, ethnicity, income bracket, or even the exact high school a person attends. The campaigns in this analysis prove just how powerful that can be. When you align the message with the audience's lived experience, engagement skyrockets.



Amy Hazlehurst,
Senior Digital Media
Strategist



When running OTT campaigns, match your creative to the likely viewing environment. A 15-second ad with clear text overlays will perform better for viewers watching on mobile while multitasking.

Conclusion

Navigating 2025's Digital Landscape

The higher education digital marketing landscape is entering a new era characterized by greater privacy (and less access to user data), shifting platforms, AI search, and rising student expectations. With the deprecation of third-party cookies and tightening privacy laws, marketers are losing long-relied-upon tools, forcing institutions to rethink how they track, target, and convert prospective students.

Meanwhile, Google's integration of AI-driven search experiences and the continued fragmentation of social media with the increase in platforms make it harder for colleges to capture attention and earn trust online. And perhaps most critically, students are now digital natives who expect seamless, personalized, and mobile-first interactions at every stage of their journey.

In this new environment, institutions must be proactive, adaptable, and relentlessly student-centered. Those that embrace more innovative data strategies, accessible UX design, and human-centered content will be best positioned to thrive in 2025 and beyond.

Casey's journey isn't fiction. It reflects the new digital reality. Today's students move fluidly between platforms, expect support on their terms, and respond to content that feels personal, relevant, and real.

In this shifting landscape, community colleges have a powerful opportunity: to meet students like Casey where they are and guide them with empathy, strategy, and precision. By embracing data-informed decisions, channel-specific creativity, and authentic storytelling, your marketing won't just keep up with 2025, it will lead the way.



Key Takeaways

1. **Digital Disruption Is Now the Default**

The living room used to center on one screen; now everyone has two or more. Learners multitask across devices, making their attention highly divided.

2. **Student Attention Has New Gravity Points**

Younger audiences shift between screens and platforms fluidly, meaning traditional campaign models (e.g., single-channel pushes) no longer suffice. Omnichannel engagement is key.

3. **Mobile-First Is a Must**

Students are discovering, researching, and deciding on mobile. Ensure all content, from application portals to videos, is mobile-optimized and fast-loading.

4. **YouTube Is Core, Not Optional**

YouTube continues to dominate for discovery and learning. Short-form, snackable, and emotionally resonant content drives results. Community colleges should invest in student testimonial videos, career spotlight shorts, and how-to enrollment guides.

5. **AI and Predictive Personalization Will Shape Expectations**

Audiences now expect content tailored to them. Use CRM data, website behavior, and audience segmentation to personalize touchpoints and increase conversion.

6. **Search Behavior Is Changing**

Students aren't just typing questions, they're using voice, visual, and contextual search. Keywords still matter, but visual and video content indexed for discovery is rising in importance.

7. **Trust Signals Matter More Than Ever**

Authenticity wins. Peer reviews, student outcomes, and social proof often outperform polished advertising. Highlight testimonials, job placement rates, and third-party validations.

8. **Speed > Perfection**

The pace of the digital landscape favors timely, relevant content over overly polished or delayed campaigns. Agile content development and real-time optimization are strategic advantages.

9. **First-Party Data Strategies are Critical**

As third-party cookies disappear, your owned data, such as CRM records, email engagement, and website analytics, becomes your most powerful tool. Colleges that invest in building and activating their own data ecosystems will gain a critical edge in targeting, personalization, and campaign performance.

10. **Move Beyond One-Size-Fits-All Messaging**

Today's students expect relevance, not generalizations. The most effective campaigns are those that speak directly to a student's goals, challenges, and timeline. This explains why general broadcast strategies are generally less effective than digital marketing, which enables more precise targeting.

How GradComm Can Help

If all of this feels like a lot to keep up with, you're not wrong. That's where we come in.

At GradComm, we specialize in helping community colleges cut through the noise with strategy that works. From brand development and video production to media planning, content creation, campaign execution, and enrollment-focused storytelling, we don't just deliver impressions, we deliver outcomes.

Need help reaching older learners? Want to make your CRM data actually do something? Considering TikTok but unsure where to begin?

We've got you.

Our team partners with colleges across the country to build campaigns that are targeted, measurable, and most importantly, student-centered. Because when your marketing puts students first, the results follow.

Let's move your message and your enrollment forward.

Contact us at hello@gradcomm.com or visit us online at gradcomm.com.

“

Lauren Milbourne
Public Affairs
and Information
Officer

Allan Hancock
College

Partnering with GradComm has proven to be an invaluable tool in the Allan Hancock College marketing toolkit. Since we began working with GradComm, their team has effectively helped my team identify objectives and then strategically plan out and deploy various marketing campaigns. They prioritize regular briefings, take action when the need to pivot arises, and review results as we go. They are adept at seeing the big picture while simultaneously focusing on fine details. Their creativity and customer service are top-notch. **The result?** Beautifully designed print marketing materials, digital campaigns that consistently exceed industry standards, and an elevated brand image of Allan Hancock College.

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Digital Marketing Glossary



Completed video view rate

The percentage of viewers who watched an online video ad through to the end without skipping. This metric helps evaluate how engaging or compelling a video ad is.

CPM (cost per thousand)

The amount an advertiser pays for every 1,000 impressions, regardless of whether the ad is clicked. CPM is a key metric for evaluating the return on investment (ROI) of brand awareness or reach-based campaigns, where visibility—not clicks—is the primary goal.

CRM (customer relationship management)

A technology platform or system used to manage an organization's interactions with current and prospective customers. In higher education, CRMs help track student inquiries, applications, communications, and engagement over time. When it comes to retargeting ads, CRM data can be especially useful. For example, email addresses can be used to create custom audiences on platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and Google.

CTA (call to action)

A prompt that encourages the audience to take a specific action, such as “Apply now,” “Watch the video,” or “Download the guide.” CTAs prompt users to engage and act, making them a critical component of any effective advertisement.

CTR (click-through rate)

The percentage of people who click on a link or call to action (CTA) after seeing an ad, email, or other digital content. CTR is calculated by dividing the number of clicks by the number of impressions and multiplying by 100. It is a key metric for measuring engagement.

Display

Visual ads like banners, images, and videos shown on websites to promote products, services, or brands.

Impressions

The number of times an ad is displayed on a user's screen, regardless of whether it is clicked. Each view counts as one impression, even if the same person sees the ad multiple times. Impressions are a foundational metric for measuring reach and visibility in digital advertising. However, impressions only tell part of the story because they do not track actual engagement.

Lookalike audiences

Groups of people who share similar characteristics, behaviors, or interests with your existing students and/or college demographics. Many platforms allow marketers to target lookalike audiences who are more likely to engage, convert, or respond based on shared traits with high-performing audiences. One common way to build lookalike audiences is by using data from current students in your CRM, or from recent website visitors, allowing platforms like Meta or Google to find new prospects with similar behaviors or interests.

OTT (over-the-top)

A type of advertising that is delivered directly to viewers through streaming video services or devices, bypassing traditional cable or broadcast television. OTT ads appear on platforms such as Hulu, Roku, Amazon Fire TV, and others. These ads are often unskippable and highly targeted based on viewer data.

ROI (return on investment)

A performance metric used to evaluate the profitability of a marketing campaign or investment. ROI is calculated by comparing the net gain (or loss) from a campaign to the total amount spent. In higher education marketing, ROI helps determine which channels and strategies deliver the most value, whether the goal is increased applications or enrollment, donations, or community engagement. A strong ROI demonstrates that your marketing budget is driving measurable results.

SEM (search engine marketing)

Also known as pay-per-click (PPC), SEM is a digital marketing strategy aimed at increasing a website's visibility in search engine results through paid advertising. SEM involves bidding on keywords, so your ad appears when users search for relevant terms, driving targeted traffic to a website.

SEO (search engine optimization)

Improving a website's visibility in organic (non-paid) search engine results. SEO involves optimizing site content, structure, and technical elements so search engines such as Google can better understand and rank your pages. For colleges, strong SEO ensures that prospective students searching for programs, financial aid, or campus resources can easily find relevant and trustworthy information, ultimately driving more qualified traffic to your site.

All About benchmarks

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2025-2026*



PPC/SEM

Industry Average
GradComm
Client Average

Cost per Click (CPC)	Click-Through Rate (CTR)	Cost per Engagement
\$4.39	6.21%	\$59
\$0.66	26%	\$5



YouTube

Industry Average
GradComm
Client Average

Completed View Rate	Cost per Completed View
22%	\$0.20
61%	\$0.03



Facebook/ Instagram

Industry Average
GradComm
Client Average

CPM (Custom Audiences)	Cost per Lead	CTR	CPC
\$12-25	\$59	1.1%	\$1.06
\$12	\$29	1.95%	\$0.89



Display/ OTT Streaming

Industry Average
GradComm
Client Average

CPM (with OTT)	CPM (without OTT)	CTR
\$10-18	\$5-10	0.23%
\$12	\$6	0.27%



Email

Industry Average
GradComm
Client Average

Open Rate	CTR
13%	1.19%
17.52%	2.56%



TikTok

Industry Average
GradComm
Client Average

CPM	CTR
\$15-20	0.84%
\$10	2.5%



Snapchat

Industry Average
GradComm
Client Average

CPM (Detailed Audiences)	CTR
\$20-45	0.94%
\$25	1.85%

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Thank you!



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