

WHITEPAPER | NO. 9

Building a Content Strategy for Higher Ed

Introduction

With enrollment rates at postsecondary education institutions expected to [fall over the next 15 years](#), universities are [increasing their spending](#) to better attract and engage with prospective students. Meanwhile, student debt [continues to rise](#), and the practice of discounting tuition is [reaching its limit](#). Something has to give.

How can higher ed marketing departments work to fix this? By understanding who your prospective students are, what their motivations are at different stages in the applicant journey, and how you can best respond to their needs in that moment. In doing so, you'll be better positioned to create authentic and engaging content that communicates the value in supporting certain causes through your institution.

Oftentimes, your institution's website or social media account is the first [and most influential](#) touchpoint for a prospective student and their parents. If that experience is frustrating due to poorly organized content, unclear messaging, outdated information, or boring stock photos, you risk losing that contact forever. In fact, 1 in 10 high school seniors and their parents claim to eliminate a college or university from their list of potential schools due to a poor website experience. If you want to succeed in attracting students, you need to communicate with a purpose and show how that person will fit in on your campus.

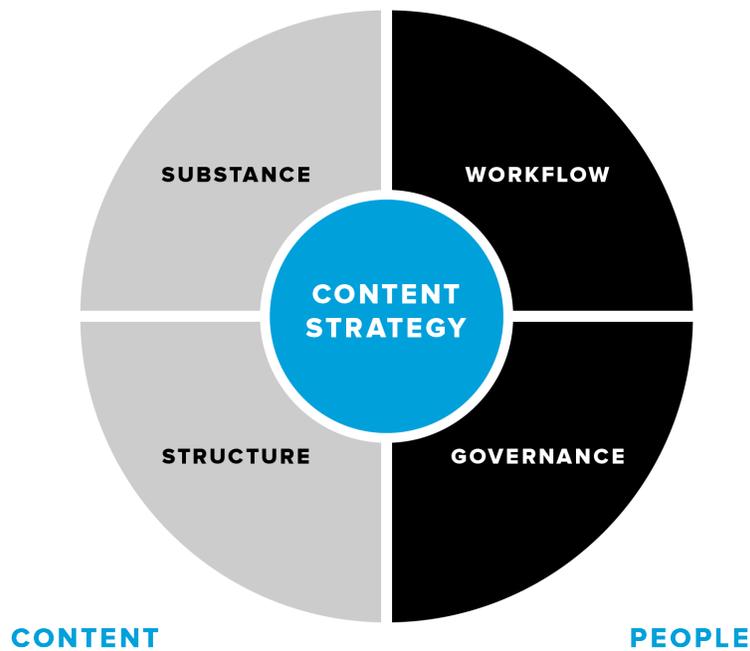
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Content strategy is the foundation that helps you communicate effectively with your audience. It's not just what you say, but how you say it. By ensuring that your message is unique, accurate, organized, and relevant, that initial contact from a prospective student or graduate can result in a real relationship rather than a missed connection.

WHAT IS CONTENT STRATEGY?

Content strategy is the map that guides your content creation efforts. It helps you plan, research, create, deliver, and analyze your content. A true content strategy considers not just web copy, but also the planning, creation, delivery, and governance of everything that appears on a website.

How do you know what content to create? Your content should be appropriate for your college or university, for your users, and for its context. Above all, it needs to be appropriate in its substance, style, structure, and method of delivery. Content strategy is the research and planning that helps you get there from where you are now.



SOURCE: BRAIN TRAFFIC

WHY DO YOU NEED A CONTENT STRATEGY?

Creating content is easy enough. With school magazines, student highlights, alumni notes, faculty research, and donor stories, schools typically have plenty of content sources to pull from. Making sure everyone is on the same page, has access to the same tools, and is working towards common goals is where things can get tricky. With the high volume of content produced by higher education institutions, it's easy to lose track of who is creating what and why.

Content that is useful, useable, well structured, and easy to find is vital to improving the user experience of your website. Content strategy helps ensure content is on brand, using the correct tone, targeted, and tailored to the right audience. This will help guide your institution towards creating valuable content that attracts, engages, and delights prospective students, alumni and potential donors.

The goals of a successful higher education digital content strategy are to:

- 1. Build the Brand** – Tell a compelling story that differentiates your school from its competitors
- 2. Broaden Reach** – Provide publishing guidelines and editorial standards for lead-generating content that creates new prospects and more engaged students
- 3. Create Emotional Bonds** – Deliver content that allows current/prospective students, parents, donors, and alumni to see how your college or university delivers upon their passions
- 4. Re-engage Supporters** – Provide tactics for bringing back disengaged alumni and donors
- 5. Support Execution** – Offer a realistic governance plan appropriate for your marketing team

HOW DO YOU BUILD A CONTENT STRATEGY?

Glad you asked. Building a content strategy is a detailed process that can seem overwhelming for small teams responsible for a large digital presence. But it doesn't have to be.

In this eBook, we provide a proven three-part process for creating a digital content strategy that will inspire visitors to see themselves fitting in at your school through your website. This process focuses on uncovering the specific content and functional requirements necessary for your website, and how this aligns with your school's current digital communications, engagement, and marketing strategies. Following this process, you'll be well equipped to create a content strategy that effectively engages target users and delivers desired results.

Part I: Research

Any successful content strategy is grounded in research. To understand your users, you need to talk to your users. In the first phase of building a content strategy, start by building a research gameplan with internal stakeholders that will enable you to learn everything you can about your target audience.

STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

Stakeholder interviews allow you to prioritize institutional goals, identify key differentiators, and better define what role the website plays in your school's strategy for admissions marketing and donor communication. To ensure all opinions and objectives are considered, it's helpful to schedule individual interviews with key stakeholders. Key stakeholders include anyone who has strategic input on future institutional goals or how to communicate with your target audiences. These conversations not only help you gather valuable information, but help get key people to buy into the process and feel like their opinions have been heard.

TARGET USER WORKING SESSION

The target user working session provides you and a broader project team the opportunity to sit down together and discuss what assumptions you may have about your audience and their needs. Since the goal of this session is to better understand your users, it's important to include any colleagues who have the closest interactions with the people you want your website to engage. This meeting answers questions including, but not limited to:

- Who is your most important audience?
- How are they finding and getting to your website?
- Why are they coming to your website in the first place?
- How do they engage with you online and offline?
- What types of content do they gravitate towards?

USER SURVEY

Conducting a survey of your website users is an important step in understanding their unique characteristics and uncovering what content needs they may have. A user survey can provide quantitative information on who is visiting your site, what resources they find useful, and what compels them to give.

To ensure survey results are as unbiased as possible, it's best to collect responses through your website rather than sending the survey to personal networks or existing email lists. And in order to receive a significant number of responses, you may need to offer some form of incentive for completing the survey (gift cards usually work). This ensures that you aren't only getting responses from people who are already your biggest fans.

FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEWS

After collecting quantitative data from a large number of website users, it's time to follow-up with a targeted subset of survey respondents to gather qualitative data through one-on-one interviews.

This is a great time to revisit key takeaways from your earlier user working session. Who did you identify as your primary audience in that session? By conducting follow-up interviews with these target users, you will start noticing themes regarding how your audience perceives the school, the type of content that resonates best, and what inspires them to take action.

WEBSITE AUDIT AND ANALYTICS REVIEW

Conducting a content audit and traffic analysis of your current website helps you determine what's working and where there's room for improvement. This can be a lengthy process, but it's the best way to compare the qualitative feedback you've received from your target users with quantitative website analytics data. We recommend including the following as part of this process:

- **Website Content Inventory**
 - What content currently exists?
- **Traffic Analytics**
 - Who is visiting the site today?
 - What devices are they using?
 - What are the top pages?
 - What does a typical user flow look like?
 - What does your conversion funnel look like?
- **Accessibility Review**
 - How well can people with visual disabilities access and engage with the current website?
- **SEO Evaluation**
 - How friendly is your site for search engines to crawl?
- **Social Media Audit**
 - Which social media channels are driving the most traffic to your website?
 - How is social being used to attract students, drive donations and alumni engagement?
- **Competitive Review**
 - Who are your closest competitors? (Hint: They may not be peer institutions.)
 - How does your site's monthly traffic rank compare?
 - What are peer institutions doing in terms of content and messaging?

SUMMARY REPORT

Successful marketing is part art and part science. After collecting this broad mix of quantitative and qualitative research, it's helpful to distill the data into a single report that aggregates everything you've learned, identifies themes, and makes recommendations for how to move forward. This report can be presented and discussed internally, and the research will serve as the basis for your content strategy moving forward.

Part II: Putting Research to Work

It's time to turn your research into actionable insights. You're now ready to build out user personas and map out content to each persona as they traverse the applicant's journey.

STEP 1: CREATE DETAILED USER PERSONAS

[User personas](#) are fictional, but research-driven representations of single users that represent your key website user groups. Although user personas are depicted as specific people, it's important to remember that they're not real individuals. User personas are meant to synthesize the observations of multiple people. They're representative mindsets that feature specific demographic information, background stories, and common pain points.

To be successful, your web content should be appropriate for your brand, your users, and for its context.

User personas are important because they're at the heart of your website's content strategy. To be successful, your web content should be appropriate for your brand, your users, and for its context. Your content needs to be appropriate in its method of delivery, style and structure, and in its substance. User personas help determine what "appropriate" means for your users, and how you can adjust your content strategy to meet their needs.

PERSONAS ARE USEFUL TO:

- Keep users' experience and priorities top of mind
- Evaluate and prioritize content and site feature ideas
- Build empathy for your users
- Discover key insights about their goals

PERSONAS DO NOT:

- Represent fixed, precise definitions of your users

EXAMPLE PERSONA:

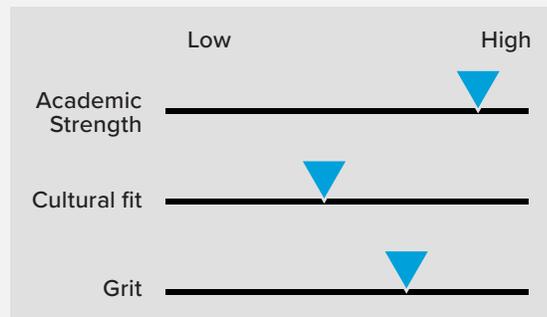
Sarah

Financially-strapped overachiever



“It will be a financial stretch, but it’s worth the investment to find my career”

ATTRIBUTES



DEMOGRAPHICS

- 17 years old
- 4.0 GPA; 1550 SAT
- Lives in Long Island, NY
- Speaks fluent Tagalog at home
- Tutors other students after school
- Captain of volleyball team; plays in school orchestra; editor of school newspaper

BEHAVIORS & BELIEFS

- Want all information at the tips of her fingers – NOW
- Mobile first, uses many devices
- Heavy social user; has thousands of “friends”

WEBSITE NEEDS

- Mobile optimized
- Pictures and videos showing student life and dorm options
- Academic program details
- Admission requirements and timelines
- Financial aid requirements

GOALS

- Wants to work in media and PR
- Needs significant financial aid
- Wants the feeling of community on campus
- Will need to balance school with a part-time job
- Parents want her to stay close to home

Need help creating your own user personas? Don’t sweat it. We’ve created a free user persona template that will allow you to easily organize your research and create well-formatted personas in no time. [Get the Persona Template](#)

STEP 2: DETERMINE CONTENT MESSAGING AND TONE

To be credible, your content must support an articulated brand hierarchy.

A brand hierarchy is made up of three things: your school's unique selling proposition (USP), brand pillars, and brand tone. When combined, these three elements paint a clear picture of how you communicate with your audience.

Unique Selling Proposition - This is why your brand exists. It's what your university is here to achieve and the difference it seeks to make in the world.

Brand Pillars - These are three or four distinct elements, which when aligned together in your brand, make it unique, important, meaningful, and secure.

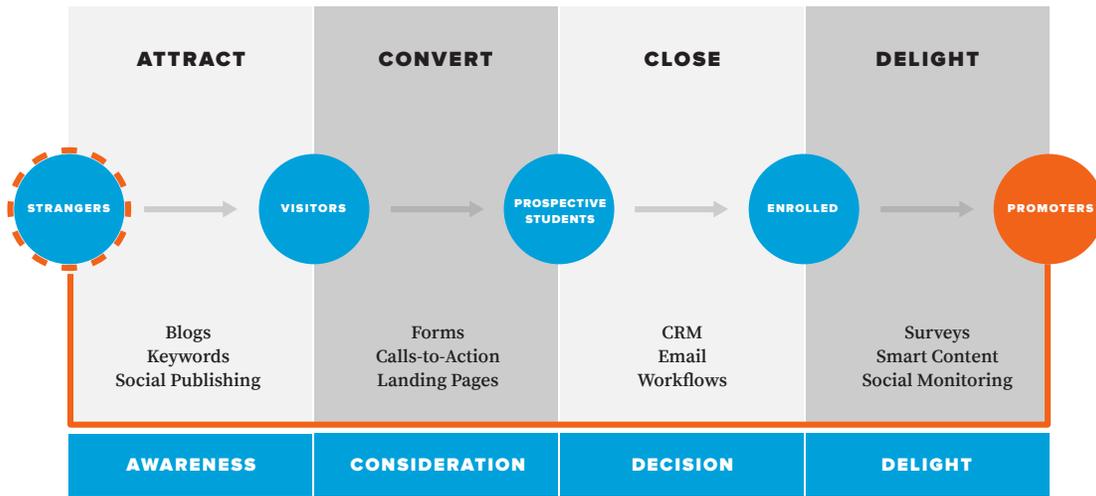
Brand Voice and Tone - Voice and tone are the personification of your brand. This is your brand's personality, voice, and manner. *Brand voice* is made up of the words, phrases, and characteristics that set your organization apart. *Brand tone* is how you communicate who you are to your audience.

A brand hierarchy helps you determine what content to produce, what that content should look like, and what it should sound like. Keep in mind that you may not have to build this from scratch. This framework more than likely already exists in some capacity at your college or university. The important thing is so make sure it aligns and is adapted to be more specific to your specific audience. Whenever possible, it's best to support your brand attributes with quotes from real users.

STEP 3: MAP CONTENT TO THE NEEDS OF YOUR USER PERSONAS

After building out user personas and identifying your content messaging and tone, it's important to plan out how that content will address each stage in their journey.

What is an applicant's digital user journey? It's a series of steps your website visitors take along the path to conversion. By meeting your website visitors, alumni, and potential students where they are in that journey, you will be able to provide content that is more meaningful, relevant, and personalized.



AWARENESS

In the awareness stage, your users may have been referred to your website by a direct mail piece, a guidance counselor, college fair, or online via online search, email, or digital ad. At this stage, they likely don't know much about your school, what it offers, or how it matches with their goals. Their top priority is to learn more and assess your credibility.

Calls-to-Action: Download Viewbook, Read Student Stories, Read about Life at School; Subscribe to Newsletter

CONSIDERATION

Users in the consideration stage likely have a high level of knowledge about your school and offerings. They may be considering enrolling, but first they must weigh their options and the impact their decision will have educationally, socially, and economically. Users in this stage want to know the details about academic programs, dining options, and life on campus.

Calls-to-Action: View Academic Programs, Fill out Inquiry Form, Contact Us, Register for Campus Tour, Financial Calculators

DECISION

In the decision stage, prospects crave personalized communication. They may visit campus, pore over your social media feeds, or have one-on-one conversations with current students or alumni as they consider where to enroll.

Calls-to-Action: Apply, Enroll

DELIGHT

After deciding to attend the university, current students and alumni seek ways to stay involved. This is the time to offer resources to help students and say thank you through your online presence and personal interactions. Career services, events, networking opportunities, and student/alumni profiles are all great ways to do so. Students and alumni at this stage want to see how they are still part of a vibrant community that is having an impact. If you can demonstrate this, you will keep users engaged and create brand ambassadors.

Calls-to-Action: Register, Refer, Donate, Attend



Part III: Success in the Long Run

You’ve done it. You’ve built a successful content strategy. But don’t high five and buy a round of drinks just yet. To ensure that your content strategy will be successful over the long haul, you need a structured content governance plan that identifies who’s in charge of each and every task.

CONTENT GOVERNANCE

Content governance describes how to manage your digital content in a controlled and orderly fashion. With the right governance, even a small team with a modest budget can support a small scale but high quality and consistently delivered content marketing plan.

Not to be confused with an organization chart, a content governance model should provide a practical framework that will allow you to carry out your content strategy. To visualize this process, it’s helpful to create content workflows. Workflows identify what tasks need to be done, who is responsible for such tasks, and what tools are necessary to support these activities.



- Tasks:** What needs to be done to effectively manage all site content?

- Roles:** Who will be working on planning, creating, editing, publishing, and optimizing site content?

- Tools:** What needs to be done to effectively manage all site content?

Start simple with a basic editorial plan for one published article per week, each targeted to a different audience persona. The key is to review your content marketing plan consistently to determine what’s working, what needs to be adjusted, and where there might be holes in your content.

ONGOING MAINTENANCE

People and institutions evolve. To stay ahead of the curve, we recommend checking in with your users at least once a year via surveys, focus groups, or events. Based on their feedback, you can hit reset on your content strategy and adjust based on their needs.

Next Steps

Now that you've done the hard work of researching, planning, and building out your content strategy, it's time to bring it to life. The first step in executing your content strategy is to build out an editorial calendar.

A content calendar will help you keep your content creation efforts organized and in one place. The right content calendar, at its basic level, should help you gather content ideas and schedule content that's in progress by tracking things like the article's status, targeted draft date, and targeted publish date.

For some teams, larger, enterprise software options may be necessary or valuable, but for others, free software or even spreadsheet templates may be enough to get the job done. At eCity, our marketing team is constantly collaborating on content ideas and assignments, so it's important for us to each have the ability to edit the document without having to worry about always sharing updated documents or editing a document that's already out-of-date. In fact, we love our content calendar so much, we've made a free, customizable version of it [available to access](#).

Still feeling overwhelmed at the thought of creating and executing your own content strategy? No worries. We've built content strategies for schools large and small, from Ivy League institutions to private secondary schools. We can help you too. [Give us a shout to discuss your next project](#).

**Let us help create a
content strategy to attract
students, donors, and top
faculty to your school.**

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