

Creating a Strategy for Community Engagement

Community involvement is an often overlooked, yet extremely important factor in any college access marketing campaign. Many campaigns forego this key element and focus on more traditional tactics, such as TV, radio, print and billboards. While use of these media outlets will undoubtedly help a campaign message build momentum, ultimately it is the on-the-ground outreach and engagement within the community that will sustain the message and change the college-going behaviors of students of all ages. All of the events, presentations, outreach, partnerships and publications used should be strategized and leveraged into a comprehensive campaign plan. Without a strong community engagement component, the audience may be urged to action, but will have nowhere to go for assistance in carrying out these actions. This information brief will provide organizations with strategies to help increase involvement among groups and organizations that target audience members are a part of or rely on for support and guidance. Building these into your campaign will help ensure the high level of interaction needed to effectively communicate with your target audience.

Who should I be communicating with?

First, define who the campaign is targeting and remember that less is often more. The more specifically your target audience is described, the more your message will resonate. If you attempt to reach too broad an audience, your message may get lost and connect with few. Also, it will be much easier to gauge the effectiveness of your message in a smaller group and later expand your message than to determine the effectiveness with a broader target group. Narrow down your exact target audience by being specific. Commonly chosen target audiences include students, community or faith-based organizations, businesses or parents, broken down further by age, ethnicity, neighborhood, income, gender, etc.

You may also want to consider a secondary audience that your campaign targets, working from the assumption that your primary audience is the focus, but a secondary audience will also be touched by the message. While this secondary audience may not be your direct target, campaigns may choose to include them in their efforts. For instance, a primary audience may be middle school students, and a secondary audience might be their parents. In this case, the materials prepared for the students will more likely also be seen by their parents, which may influence their thinking about taking a course or looking into college opportunity for themselves.

Within college access, a strong emphasis on the involvement of ‘key stakeholders’ exists. Many organizations may not know how to define key stakeholders, how to reach them, or effective ways to engage them in a campaign. This level of community outreach involves an in-depth awareness of your target audience and its challenges. Such information will help you determine how to relevantly tailor your campaign and help define organizations and groups that have already coalesced around a topic. Within these groups, it is important to identify trusted audience leaders to embrace and spread your message.

Another important strategy is to involve an individual from your target audience in the campaign. Such a person can provide you with invaluable information that may not otherwise be accessible regarding the status of this community and its feelings and beliefs about college-going. This individual may also serve as a spokesperson, making it easier to communicate with your target audience via focus group testing, presentations, and similar outreach strategies. Traditionally, a trusted voice can carry a message deeper and uncover sensitive information that an outsider may not be able to.

What is important to know about the audience?

Without gathering key information initially about your target audience, you may waste time, effort, and resources with an uninformed message and services. The more accurate your information about your target groups preferences, the easier it will be to facilitate two-way communication and implement the necessary tactics. This communication is key as it allows you to shape your campaign as it happens, instead of waiting until the end to make necessary adjustments. Information about their preferences, attitudes, and barriers are examples of important background information.

Preferences

Research members of your target audience, and assess their communication preferences. Do they primarily receive and trust messages from face-to-face interaction with community members, or through cultural or faith-based groups? What type of media do they predominantly rely on for important information? Are multiple languages spoken in the home? Do they have time to attend workshops in the evening or during the daytime? These are the type of questions that should be addressed prior to developing key messages and services for your campaign. Omitting this important preliminary step could cause costly adjustments and possibly alienate a population before a campaign is fully engaged.

Using a Trusted Voice:

Vermont’s “Start Where You Are” Campaign

The campaign title reflects research indicating that many Vermont teens would prefer to maintain their community and family ties after high school and the reality that a variety of education and career paths are possible in Vermont regardless of a student’s starting point.

The campaign included the hiring of a local native and first-generation college graduate, Hannah Hurlburt. She will travel the state in a customized “Start Where You Are” vehicle emblazoned with the campaign logo and other visual elements, sharing her own story and talking with students and parents at teen centers, schools, workplaces, and community events.

www.startwhereyouarevt.org

Attitudes

Freely explain why college access should be of importance to your audience. If your research indicates that the community already perceives college-going as important, significantly less work will be required to leverage community help. However, if your audience--local businesses, for instance--needs to be convinced that college access should be important to them, then you will have to gather additional research to more fully explain the benefits of increased college access for them and for residents in their community.

Barriers

Identify the existing barriers to college access for your target audience and help them understand that the benefits - whether monetary or otherwise - outweigh the costs. This cost-versus-benefit messaging should inform the basis of your campaign. Providing ways that college-going improves life-long opportunities are only relevant if the real and perceived barriers to entry are addressed and overcome.

Once barriers, attitudes and beliefs are addressed, adding campaign messages that will facilitate college-going behavior will be easier. Doing this prior to gaining community support and gauging existing community issues could be seen as an intrusion and could create negative feelings towards your organization as an outsider that is pushing its own agenda.

Why should I build a database and how do I begin?

A database will allow you to target subsets of your target audience with specialized messages as well as help track and systematize your outreach efforts. After conducting research about your target community, compile a list of organizations, churches, schools, libraries, child care centers, businesses, government officials, media and other such agencies. Aggregating all of this information into an easily accessible and sortable database may seem overwhelming, but will ultimately provide you with an invaluable tool for continued campaign success.

While some organizations or groups may not seem directly related to college access (school clubs, early child care centers, etc.), they should not be excluded from your efforts if they could interface with your target audience at some point. There may be indirect connections, such as other children in the home, parents who are looking for college opportunities, etc. Do not immediately discount an affiliation based on a group's purpose.

Maine's "Kick Start" Campaign

Through campaign research, the Kick Start campaign organizers determined that 8th-10th graders, particularly boys, were their most in-need target audience. Initially, the campaign developed sophisticated offerings which their target audience disliked and found meaningless. By working with focus groups, Maine was able to determine that humor, specifically, middle school humor, worked best in delivering messages to this audience. This is reflected in their PSA's, collateral, website, and game show.

www.kickstartmaine.com

What is meant by 'integrated messaging' and why is it important?

Integrated messaging means that all of your efforts – from media to PowerPoint presentations – reinforce each other and strengthen messaging. Each campaign element builds upon others to increase the level of visibility needed to affect change. Without such a strategy, a campaign may be viewed as untargeted, inconsistent, confusing, and misunderstood. To build sustainability within a specific community and beyond, integrated messaging is crucial. This integration will help a community understand a message and maintain it as its own, with or without outside assistance. This support and alignment from the community should be your ultimate campaign goal. Once funding for the existing campaign ends, the community will be far more likely to continue to strive for college access if they have assumed some ownership of the message.

The internet provides an easy tool for identifying organizations and such a task can be assigned to an intern or volunteer. Information can be compiled into an excel spreadsheet, access database or other software and coded by type (community based organization, Spanish speaking organization, church, etc.). Coding organizations by more than one option (community based and Spanish speaking) will allow you to very specifically target messages within the community.

This type of database will allow you to send 'save-the-date' cards, updates on deadline, announcements regarding upcoming events, and conduct pre- and post-surveys, etc. Within this database, you can track the information collected, as well as use information to follow-up with the community contacts and track their attendance at various events. Reports generated from this database will allow you to track progress, making it easy to update messaging and follow the attitudinal change of your audience.

How can I use local media and what should I consider when choosing 'channels'?

A 'Channel' refers to any communication between your organization and your target audience, including face-to-face meetings, online social networks, email list serves, TV stations, and magazines. Your messaging

does not have to include traditional media outlets, although if you choose to use traditional media, be aware of the languages prevalent in the community and include these languages in your media plan.

The research you compiled on your target audience should help you identify the most appropriate channels to use. For example, the rural community you seek to engage may prefer messages in a local paper or radio station. Perhaps your urban audience would be more interested in messages provided through various community groups. Your research may reveal that the Latino population could be best reached through numerous faith-based organizations. Your exploratory research should determine what tactics your campaign employs.

Keep in mind that traditional media may not be the most effective channel for your target audience. Even though flashy campaigns on TV and print appear to be the most effective medium to reach large groups, they are expensive and all compete for the same viewers that large corporate campaigns target. The airwaves are overwhelming consumers with commercial

messages. As a result, consumers have learned to avoid commercials in various and complex ways. The use of mass media also does not allow you to tailor your message to smaller segments of a target population. For these reasons, organizations need to carefully consider whether spending funds on traditional marketing would be the most effective way to achieve their intended outcomes.

How do I evaluate my impact on a community level?

From the outset, a campaign needs to carefully consider how it will define and measure success. Will it be the number of students applying to college from the target audience? Will it be defined by the change in attitude of community members regarding college access? Could it be viewed as an increase in the number of Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) forms completed? Evaluation is something that your organization will need to think about and define before creating its messaging. After researching your target audience, you should be able to determine what changes are needed to raise college-going behaviors and then decide what factors you seek to impact.

Some traditionally used campaign evaluation factors are:

Qualitative Measures:

- Results of attitudinal surveys regarding college, financial aid, etc.
- Increased levels of community engagement supporting college-going behaviors
- Stories of individuals who decided to attend college as a result of the campaign
- Blog posts written by students about college access
- Community organization testimonies or letters of support
- Quality of press clippings – not quantity

Quantitative Measures:

- Increases in college-going rates within your target audience
- Increases in financial aid applications submitted
- Increases in adults returning to college
- Numbers of community organizations actively participating in activities
- Numbers of students participating in events
- Numbers of students actively contributing to a blog on college access

It is important to think about how you will define your success and include both qualitative and quantitative measures. You must also remember that external factors may affect your campaign. An evaluation plan will have to allow for unanticipated changes from external forces in your targeted community, as well as in the larger environment.

To better define campaign success, align your goals and objectives to measurable outcomes. Try to avoid establishing outcomes that cannot be measured, as you will have no way to determine your success. As you develop your plan, make sure that your measurable outcomes are identified and included.

Writing Measurable Outcomes

Unit of Analysis	Weak Outcome	Strong Outcome
Support among local businesses	Local businesses will support this effort	At least 3 local businesses will have developed job shadowing programs with 3 local schools.
College-going rates	College-going rates will have increased	The percentage of high school graduates who enter a postsecondary institution immediately after graduation will have increased by 15% annually.
Press Clippings	Send press releases to 106 media outlets	10 media outlets will seek out further information about our campaign – 4 English, 3 Spanish, 3 Portuguese – and run stories quarterly.

This brief was created by Jessica Krywosa, Project Manager, Pathways to College Network. For questions or comments, Jessica may be reached at krywosa@teri.org or 617-535-6851.

CollegeAccessMarketing.org (CAM) was created to provide advice, support, and resources to college access marketing practitioners. The site is continuously updated, and maintained by partner organizations Pathways to College Network and the Southern Regional Education Board's *Go Alliance*.



**Pathways
to College
Network**

DIRECTED BY TERI

Pathways to College Network is an alliance of prominent national organizations committed to advancing college access and success for underserved students, including those who are the first generation in their families to go to college, low-income students, underrepresented minorities, and students with disabilities.

Pathways is directed by TERI and its pathwaystocollege.net web site provides evidence-based resources to support the work of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners.

For more information about Pathways, please contact 617-535-6829.

Media inquires may contact 617-556-0565.