

CHASING MISSION FIT

A Marketing Guide to Fill Your Institution
with Students Who Will Succeed

BART E. CAYLOR



Chasing Mission Fit: A Marketing Guide to Fill Your Institution with
Students Who Will Succeed

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CAYLOR, BART E., Author
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BART E. CAYLOR

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Dedicated to the memory of Tim Fuller, friend and mentor.
1957-2023

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INTRODUCTION

Why should a student pick your school?

I'll give you a hint. It's not because your institution has a "close-knit community" or a "9:1 student faculty ratio." These so-called "differentiators" aren't actually that different from 90% of small to mid-level institutions, barring large flagship institutions.

On our *Higher Ed Marketer* podcast, Guy Kawasaki—who originally helped Apple market the Macintosh computer and is now recognized as one of the top marketers in the world—joined us and discussed his thoughts on campus tours. He has four children and has been on close to sixty campus tours with them. He said, "Every single tour starts with, 'I am a student here. I am really happy here. The classes are small, the professors are available...'" So my advice to you is that you got to think about how you're unique and valuable as a college . . . I would like every college admissions director to go on five tours of other colleges and you will see you are all saying the same thing."¹

Guy's observations underscore the critical need for educational institutions to dig deeper and identify what truly sets

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them apart from the crowd. Students will pick your school because you resonated with them on a personal level. Which means the value of differentiation, at a base level, is in the needs of your audience and how you can best support them. Do this, and mission-fit students—students that truly resonate with your message and find the most success at your school—will come knocking at your doors.

Prospective students have so many choices; they likely don't even know all of the schools available to them. Which is why you should focus on marketing to their needs, instead of your functions. When you identify your key programs, and how you have helped past students thrive, you can position yourself for future students on the same journey and make it so they simply can't ignore you.

Easier said than done, right?

I know as a marketing professional, you likely grapple with restrictive budgets, understaffed teams, and the pervasive misunderstanding of marketing as a luxury, not a necessity. It's an uphill battle. These challenges only get worse when board members play armchair quarterback and change their strategies on the fly simply because their nephew (who does marketing in his garage) tried something that worked. You'll also be faced with challenges of emerging technologies, silos, a crowded landscape of similar institutions, and the common "just throw more money at it" marketing strategy.

With all these challenges, it's easy to fall into the trap of believing that a large budget and a bigger team are keys to effective marketing. But this is not the truth. In a crowded landscape of similar institutions, the real challenge lies in defining what makes you unique. Without this knowledge, your message becomes part of the collective noise, and you create friction.

INTRODUCTION

Meaning you slow your mission-fit student down from identifying you as the key to their future.

We, as marketers, need to reduce the friction people feel when searching for our institution.

As a first-generation student myself, I am deeply connected to the power education can have to transform a person's life. I believe that for students to benefit from the power of your education, they first need to find you among a sea of options. This book is tailored to higher education marketing professionals with the goal of helping you identify your niche, effectively utilize evergreen audience-focused marketing strategies, and reduce friction, so you can stand out to mission-fit students.

With three decades of design and marketing experience, I've collaborated with globally renowned brands such as AT&T, Motorola, and GE. And, in 2011, Caylor Solutions was born out of my desire to fuse best practices from corporate, non-profit, and education sectors together to serve education clients exclusively. From K-12 schools to higher education, we have created unique, authentic narratives for each. Which in turn has led to higher enrollment and brand recognition for these institutions.

I believe that every institution has a unique story that deserves to be told. And through this book, I offer you key insights and strategies to tell your institution's story effectively so you can fill your institution with students who will succeed.

If you're a smaller institution struggling to get new students, you're not alone. Many schools spend big on marketing efforts that still don't get them the enrollment numbers they need. They hope that if they spend enough, they'll attract the right students. And with \$2.2 billion being spent² in higher education advertising in 2019, there is a lot on the line for schools who leverage

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these cookie-dependent tools. What happens when the money runs out? Or when you spend more money, but you don't get more students enrolled? Or when gatekeepers such as Google and Meta change the rules of the game?

These strategies aren't sustainable. But there is some good news. As a smaller school, you have an advantage. You likely represent a niche—even if you don't know what it is yet—which better positions you to find your mission-fit student. The value is in your audience. You may not have all the resources of a larger school, but if you hone in on the right students with the right needs, and use the roadmap I provide, your enrollment can skyrocket! Let me show you how.



THE ENROLLMENT CLIFF IS REAL

The shadow of an impending “enrollment cliff” has been looming over higher education since the onset of the pandemic. The chatter among higher ed professionals has become a debate. Will the enrollment cliff even happen? Do we actually have to make adjustments for it?

So let me settle these questions and be clear: A considerable decline in new students is expected. It will happen. And it will severely impact many institutions, especially those that rely heavily on tuition revenue.

If you are not prepared for it, you will flounder.

Tim Fuller, founder of Fuller Higher Ed Solutions, shed light on some startling statistics. According to the 10th edition of the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education’s (WICHE) report, *Knocking at the College Door*, the majority of U.S. states could witness a significant enrollment dip by 2037.

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In the worst cases, some states might see their enrollment numbers plunge by as much as 24%.³

This cliff is not just a future phenomenon; the decline has already started. As of 2021, 70 American institutions have shut their doors within a 5-year span.⁴ Noticeably, almost half of those were faith-based institutions. Which means the pressure is on! Schools are racing to justify their value proposition to potential students even before we face the full brunt of the enrollment cliff. A joint study by the Associated Press and Stanford University added more grimness to the picture: over 200,000 students disappeared from the public school system during the peak of the pandemic.⁵ Scary, right?

But don't be quick to pin this crisis solely on the pandemic's shoulders. Covid-19—despite its far-reaching consequences—is just a symptom, not the cause of the enrollment cliff. The signs of this impending crisis were present way back in pre-pandemic times.

In late 2019, CUPA-HR, the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources,⁶ published a study on falling U.S. birth rates, a trend that traced back to the Great Recession of 2008. Economic uncertainties led to fewer births, and despite an eventual economic rebound, the birthrate never recovered.

Now the number of 18-year-olds in the U.S., which will peak at 9.4 million in 2025, is projected to tumble down to 8.05 million in 2029—a 15% decrease. This dip won't only affect higher education but our labor force as well! Plus, geographic and demographic shifts will further complicate the landscape. Cold, snow-prone states are expected to face significant enrollment declines, while regions like Texas show enrollment growth. Notably, Florida is projected to witness an 18% increase in its

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student population by 2037⁷ . . . so that's a win! Much of the enrollment growth will come from demographics who have historically been outside of traditional undergrad recruitment, such as first-generation, minority students.

But the numbers don't lie. As uncomfortable as they are, we can't avoid them. Currently, the U.S. has around 6,000 higher education schools⁸, and my estimate is that about 10% of these will close in the wake of the enrollment cliff. Don't let your school be one of them. This isn't just chatter—it's reality. And it's coming fast. It will take more than a meeting or two to prepare your school to face the cliff; however, if you identify your mission-fit students and *listen to them*, there is light at the end of the tunnel.

Before you take a sigh of relief and say, "we don't have traditional students, so we are safe," this will catch up with all schools. Soon the enrollment cliff will challenge all aspects of higher education recruitment. The reality of the enrollment cliff means you can no longer rely on outdated marketing strategies. Every school, believe it or not, can meet their enrollment goals. If, and only if, they focus on creating a centralized plan which attracts the right—mission-fit—students.

There are students out there who desire precisely what you offer. The young photographer who wants to turn photography into a serious career, or the mother who wants to go back to school and get her MFA in writing are all looking for an institution that services their specific needs. It's your job to get your school in their line of sight with a flag that says, "I'm here, and I am the best choice for your future success!" The schools who will weather the enrollment cliff are those who identify who their mission-fit students are and assertively position themselves to be noticed.

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But, if you fail to articulate your value to those students, your school will likely be at risk when the enrollment cliff comes along. Outdated notions like “If we just get more students at the top of the funnel, we will be okay” are dangerous. A simple increase in numbers doesn’t suffice if they aren’t the *right* students.

FIND YOUR MISSION-FIT STUDENT

Identifying your mission-fit student is a pivotal step in creating an audience-focused marketing and enrollment strategy. They aren’t just students who’ll get a degree from your institution; they’re the ones who’ll embody its spirit, embrace its culture, and become its best ambassadors in their subsequent careers.

Before diving deep into the student profile, it’s crucial to review your institution’s broader mission. What qualities, values, and aspirations define your school at a high level? Once you have a clear understanding of this, you can then dig deeper into specific programs, majors, or departments to further refine what a mission-fit student would look like in those particular academic settings.

To create a profile of your mission-fit student, consider these key areas:

1. Reflect on alumni who’ve both thrived at your institution and gone on to make significant strides in their careers.
 - Which of your alumni frequently return for reunions, maintain active ties, or contribute as donors?
 - Are there any success stories or case studies that you already use in your marketing material?

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- What common traits or backgrounds do these alumni share?
2. Look at your mission and values and ask yourself what students have most aligned with your institution.
 - Which students have best embodied the values espoused in your mission?
 - Are there student organizations, initiatives, or programs that particularly align with your mission?
 - Who are the active participants or leaders in these areas?
 3. Examine your offerings, be it a niche course, a renowned professor, a community initiative, or a celebrated extra-curricular program.
 - Which students were attracted to these unique offerings?
 - How did they maximize these opportunities during their time with you?
 - Have any students been pivotal in expanding or enhancing these programs?
 4. Do some research on the paths that successful alumni take after graduation.
 - What kind of industries or roles do your most engaged alumni gravitate toward?
 - Are there specific companies or sectors that repeatedly hire your graduates?

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- Do your alumni pursue further education? If so, in what fields and at which institutions?
5. Look at data and feedback—surveys, social media engagement, alumni testimonials.
- Which students actively participate or engage in online communities related to your institution?
 - Are there testimonials where students or alumni explicitly mention aspects of your institution that resonated deeply with them?

By asking these questions and delving deep into the answers, you'll see patterns and traits that define your mission-fit student. Remember, understand this isn't about exclusivity, but about ensuring that both the student and the institution find a mutual and enriching fit. Once you know more about your mission-fit student, you can take a closer look at the generation they are likely from and how you can best reach them.

GENERATIONAL AWARENESS

As the high school graduate supply dwindles, non-traditional students—online learners, adult learners, and people who have been to a higher education school but have not completed their degrees—will be a critical demographic for your school. So, you need to make non-traditional messaging a cornerstone of your enrollment marketing strategy. From Gen Z to Boomers, your audience has wildly different messaging preferences.

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Because your audience isn't solely the traditional undergraduate student anymore, you have to broaden your outreach horizon. Remember, the goal is not just to speak, but to be heard, understood, and valued by your audience. To do that, you need to be aware of how different generations receive your message.

GENERATION ALPHA (2010-2024)

This emerging group is growing up entirely in the 21st century, surrounded by advanced technology, global connectivity, and environmental consciousness. Unlike previous generations, they have a worldview shaped by digital immersion, cultural curiosity, and a blend of education and entertainment known as “edutainment.” Remember this generation's impression of education was formed by the 2019 COVID pandemic where they experienced hybrid and online education, so they are likely easier to connect with online.

To engage them effectively requires depth. I spoke to Mark McCrindle, Founder and Principal at McCrindle Research, on my podcast to discuss what made Generation Alpha different.⁹ He wrote a book titled “Generation Alpha: Understanding Our Children and Helping Them Thrive”¹⁰ and gave me unique insight. Unlike Gen Z's 8-second filter,¹¹ Gen Alpha is willing to dive deep when content captures their interest. You can blend educational content with entertainment to keep them engaged because this is their preferred method of learning and interacting. And remember, generative artificial intelligence is a part of their daily lives, not just a novel tech. Use it to personalize their experiences and make interactions intuitive. While it's early to pinpoint exact platforms, keep an eye on evolving digital spaces where they spend their time. AI-driven platforms, interactive

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VR spaces, or other immersive tech environments might be their go-to in the future.

GENERATION Z (1997-2012)

This group, often referred to as “digital natives,” grew up with smartphones, social media, and instant messaging. Communication for them is fast and fluid. They value authenticity and diversity. They are quite pragmatic, having grown up during the economic recession, and they place a high value on experiences rather than material possessions.

To reach them effectively, you should be brief, visual, and compelling. They have an 8-second filter when viewing digital content, and they quickly decide whether something is worth their time or not within those 8 seconds. Use platforms like TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, and YouTube to reach them. They use text messaging extensively, so don't expect a return call. Make sure you engage with them with authenticity and transparency because they prefer brands and institutions that interact with them on a personal level. With the novelty and “retro” feel of some communications, Generation Z are often open and excited about receiving communications like direct mail. In a recent TikTok trend, we can see they even enjoy the printed edition of the New York Times!

MILLENNIALS (1981-1996)

Often coined the “me” generation, Millennials are tech-savvy and value collaboration and innovation. They seek purposeful engagement and prioritize work-life balance, and they too are likely to value experiences over materialistic possessions.

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Millennials tend to research online extensively before making decisions, so be prepared to meet their search with information. They are active on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and X (formerly Twitter), which are great places to showcase your institution's values and social responsibility—especially because millennials care deeply about these issues and prefer to align with institutions that share in their personal passions.

GENERATION X (1965-1980)

They are referred to as the “sandwich” generation because they are likely juggling care for both their children and aging parents. They value work-life balance and are known for their skepticism and independence. Plus, they were the first generation to grow up with computers, making them a bridge between digital and analog generations.

Generation X tends to prefer email over other forms of communication. They appreciate straightforward, practical information that helps them make informed decisions. While they are comfortable online, they also appreciate traditional forms of communication. You can call or mail them, and they will likely receive both well.

BOOMERS (1946-1964)

Boomers are known for their strong work ethic, goal orientation, and resourcefulness. They value respect, loyalty, and face-to-face communication. They were late adopters of digital technology but have since become quite comfortable with it.

While many are online, they also appreciate and trust traditional forms of communication, such as direct mail and print media. Unlike younger generations, Boomers don't shy away

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from phone conversations. Plus, they appreciate heritage and tradition, so these are great values for you to put front and center on your outreach. They are more likely to engage with content that highlights the history and values of your institution.

Do not discount these differences! Generational awareness is the key to unlocking communication with your mission-fit student. Surviving the enrollment cliff won't simply come from "buckling down"; it will come from better connecting with your mission-fit students. The main change you need to make to connect deeper is to move from informational marketing to "useful marketing," a term coined by Jay Baer in his book *YoUtility: Why Smart Marketing Is About Help Not Hype*. In his book, he defined useful marketing as, "Providing answers to nearly every question a customer could conceivably ask—before they think to ask it."¹² And that means being proactive, adaptable, and ever-present in our communication strategy.

Once you know who your mission-fit students are, and what generations they are likely a part of, you can focus on meeting your mission-fit students where they naturally are.

REFINE YOUR WATERING HOLES

If you enjoy watching wildlife out in nature, you've probably learned that if you go to a water source, you have more chances to catch a glimpse of the animals you enjoy. Watering holes like a stream, or even an artificial water source like a bird bath, attract animals daily as they come to get what they already need. Instead of going out looking for wildlife, the wise nature lover positions themselves in a place where the animals will come to them.

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As humans, we're not so different from our wildlife counterparts. Every day, we also go to the same sources to get our information, inspiration, entertainment, and guidance. These are our watering holes. While animals depend on watering holes for life-sustaining water, we depend on watering holes for community and news.

In these spaces, people come together to connect, to belong, and to get the knowledge they need to make decisions for their future. Because they're coming already for something they need, you don't have to drive traffic to these places. So, like the avid nature watcher, the wise marketer positions themselves where the target audience is already going to be and publishes their content there. When you do this, your mission-fit student is less likely to be put off by your content and instead is often grateful they came by it.

A common pitfall, particularly among smaller institutions, is trying to be a one-size-fits-all solution that advertises to everybody. This will not work! Your enrollment efforts will flounder if you merely broadcast your brand's message on a billboard. Now more than ever, it's crucial for institutions to find their niche community and engage with them. You need to find the watering holes your mission-fit students naturally exist within.

While every target audience will have a different set of places, they go to daily to get their information, inspiration, entertainment, and guidance, there are two main categories of watering holes you need to identify: digital and physical spaces.

DIGITAL WATERING HOLES

Of course, the first places that come to mind here are the bigger social media platforms like Meta (formally Facebook), Instagram, and X (formally Twitter). You can find communities on these

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platforms that form around hashtags and groups. But there are other digital spaces you might not have considered if your target audience is young.

As the once self-proclaimed as “The Front Page of the Internet,” Reddit boasts over 52 million active users. Reddit forms its content around communities with interests in almost anything (like the subreddit dedicated to orange cats). With 18- to 29-year-olds making up the user majority, the website is teeming with marketing potential for younger generations.

Higher education marketers need to realize that hundreds of schools already have active communities centered around their school, like this subreddit for the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, r/UIUC. If they align with your brand, these subreddit communities are potential watering holes where your audience is hanging out.

If you’re trying to connect your brand with a younger audience, you need to check out Discord. Created as a voice chat and messaging alternative for gamers in 2015, the platform has since then expanded to be a hub for thousands of servers covering everything from finance to fashion. Because of its beginnings in the gaming community, Discord boasts a male-centric collective audience. As of early 2022, 65 percent of Discord’s user base was male. With over 140 million active monthly users in 2021, there’s a good chance your young prospective student is familiar with Discord.

And don’t forget other gathering areas that may be outside the social networks such as gaming platforms and the niche platforms serving those users like Twitch or other online communities that can be found on every imaginable subject: Taylor Swift, homeschooling, or both (google it).

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PHYSICAL WATERING HOLES

Physical watering holes are the brick-and-mortar spaces where your audience goes to get that face-to-face interaction they can only get in the analog world.

Here are some examples of physical watering holes:

- Barber shops
- Boutique specialty shops (think record stores catering to hard core audiophiles)
- Religious community centers and churches
- High school teams
- Clubs (ex. Boys & Girls Club)
- Community centers
- Locally owned businesses
- Food pantries
- Neighborhood nonprofits

Unlike digital spaces, it's hard to be in many physical watering holes all at once. It will cost more in terms of funds as well as personnel and time to canvas these places and get your marketing messages there. But having a marketing presence in physical watering holes like the ones above tend to make a greater impact on the target audience as the space is more intimate and focused on the individual members of the community you're reaching out to.

To be effective, you've got to publish your messaging in places where your audience is already going to get their information, inspiration, entertainment, or guidance.

GO BEYOND TRADITIONAL

Your mission-fit student might not even be the quintessential 17-year-old high school student, ready to plunge into the undergraduate world. These students might form a significant part of your audience right now, but we know the enrollment cliff is coming, which will directly affect their numbers. Luckily, they are far from the only group that institutions should be targeting.

You should also be targeting:

1. Non-traditional students
2. Dual enrollment students
3. Graduate students

According to Forbes, “More than 25% of freshmen do not return for their second year in college.”¹³ Which means one in four adults who attended higher education school do not possess a degree. These are potential students for you! They are an untapped group who represent a sizable demographic which could bolster your enrollment numbers. Especially for schools that can offer flexible, adult-friendly programs. These could be adults who got sidetracked by life’s plot twists—like having babies or chasing a dream. And now they’re scouting for a flexible way to finish their education. For them, the comfort and flexibility of online education presents an attractive pathway. For you, it’s a goldmine of potential students.

However, marketing to an adult student means your competition may be more from life and overcoming doubts than the other institutions you may typically believe you compete with. They might not enroll in your school the first time they see your

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advertisement. Not because they are saying “no,” but because they are saying “not now, but maybe soon.” Life might not be right for them now, but if they know about your school, and how it can help someone like them gain more advantages in life, they will keep you in mind and make plans to attend your institution. And any money they bring your way in five years is worth the advertising you’ve spent on them.

Next, don’t forget about dual enrollment students. These are high school students earning credit through AP tests and concurrent enrollment classes. When you sell credits at a discounted rate to these students, your institution becomes the logical next step for that student. Which in turn creates a pipeline for you to rely on.

Finally, we turn our attention to graduate students—those fresh from their undergraduate studies and those returning after a few years in the field. Both are prime targets for advanced degree programs like MBAs. Much like your non-traditional students, they will likely appreciate the ability to find schooling which fits into their busy schedules and helps them advance into the next stage of their career.

All three of these different types of students are key to keep in mind when refining your mission-fit student ideal. Once you understand which ones you want to heavily target, you can find their most likely watering hole to reach them.

INFLUENCERS, DEMOGRAPHICS, AND PSYCHOGRAPHICS

Another key thing to think about when targeting your mission-fit student is who and what will influence them.

When aiming to connect with your mission-fit students, it's crucial to consider the various layers of influence that shape their decisions. Understanding the demographics—like age, location, and socio-economic status—will help you target your message effectively. But demographics only scratch the surface.

Going a step further, you should look at psychographics—values, interests, and lifestyle. These can dramatically influence how and why a prospective student chooses an educational path. For example, a student passionate about environmental sustainability will be more attracted to a school with strong environmental programs and an eco-friendly campus.

In our digitally connected age, don't underestimate the power of social influencers. Students are increasingly looking to YouTube stars, bloggers, TikTok, or Instagram influencers for advice and reviews on what school to attend. These digital personalities can sometimes exert as much influence as parents or traditional counselors, so consider how your institution engages with or could be reviewed by these platforms.

Different generations are influenced differently. While Baby Boomers might rely heavily on word-of-mouth and traditional media, Generation Z students are more likely to be influenced by social media and online reviews. Therefore, a multi-generational approach in your strategy could be beneficial. This could mean hosting webinars or virtual campus tours to appeal to tech-savvy younger students, while also holding traditional open houses

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and informational sessions for parents and less tech-savvy individuals.

A multifaceted understanding of who your mission-fit students are and what influences them is essential. Who are they? How will they most likely hear about education? What communication channels do they use? And, most importantly, what will they likely need to know about educational opportunities available to them? Tailoring your outreach to resonate with these key influencers and communication channels will yield a more effective, efficient strategy in attracting students who are the right fit for your institution.

Your website serves as the first port of call for most prospective students and their families. Make sure it speaks to who you are and why you specifically are the best school for them. It's your digital ambassador, painting an intricate picture of your ethos, programs, campus life, and unique selling propositions. These will actively sell not only your prospective students, but their family as well!

Parents, and even more so, mothers, play a crucial role as advisors in a student's decision-making process. And occasionally they are the decision-makers when it comes to choosing an institution. You cannot discount them. Think about the influence your parents had on your own life. Even if they did not decide where you went to school or what you went to school to study, it is likely they still had a big influence on your decision.

Recognizing the weight of outside influences on your students and incorporating it into your overall strategy is vital.

EMBRACE DIFFERENT ETHNICITIES

Have you ever watched the Disney movie “McFarland, USA?”

It’s a heartwarming movie that revolves around the power of understanding and embracing cultural differences. Set in a small agricultural town in California’s Central Valley, the film tells the true story of a group of high school students from an economically disadvantaged Latino community who rise above their circumstances through their passion for cross-country running.

As the students navigate their way through various challenges and obstacles, they learn that their cultural background and heritage can be a source of strength and unity rather than a barrier. And through their shared love for running, the students foster a sense of belonging and pride within the community. “McFarland” showcases the power of cultural understanding and highlights how embracing diversity can lead to extraordinary goals. And because the coach (played by Kevin Costner) embraced this diversity, his life changed for the better.

Your marketing strategy should do the same for your mission-fit student. Inclusivity is key. And that inclusivity needs to expand to involve their families, especially in cultures where collective decision-making is the norm.

Look at Hispanic culture. Here, education is often a family affair. Mom, Dad, and even Grandma play influential roles in deciding which institution will pave the way for their child’s future. Particularly when parents are non-native English speakers, this decision-making process becomes even more collaborative. This cultural nuance requires a shift in marketing strategies. If your mission-fit student is Hispanic, your brochures, websites, admission forms— and every other cog in your marketing

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machinery—should have an option for the language your audience might use.

And these adaptations are not confined to Hispanic populations. Depending on your geographical region and student demographics, this could be as varied as Japanese, Portuguese, or any number of languages. The rule of thumb is simple: speak your audience's language, metaphorically and literally. Sensitivity to cultural nuances is a necessity.

Your institution should acknowledge that students aren't a monolithic entity, but a mosaic of different experiences and backgrounds.

