

Testimonial Builder

Testimonials should be an essential component of any strategy to convert prospects to enrolled students. As demonstrated in *Reaching “Search and Shop” Students*, absent a friend or colleague who has attended a continuing education program, prospective students rely on testimonials for approval from “a person like them”. In other words, it’s the next best thing to a stamp of approval from a trusted acquaintance; it’s a “word-of-mouth” recommendation.

How to Use this Guide

In this guide, we will outline guidelines for crafting and producing testimonials and for ensuring a useful, engaging prospect experience. Additionally, we will outline four testimonial contributor categories, along with talking points and model testimonials for each contributor category: students, alumni, instructors, and employers. Distribute these talking points to testimonial contributors when you ask for submissions; with guidance, your contributors will offer concrete examples.

Basic Guidelines for Crafting Testimonials

Suggestions specific to each category of contributor are included in the following pages, but below you’ll find general resources for all testimonials.

Don’t Break the Bank

Testimonials and video content are not the most important characteristic of your website and, therefore, are undeserving of the biggest portion of your budget. It’s essential that you avoid an all-too common pitfall: spending money on uninspiring testimonials and video footage. Set a budget for testimonials and spend time finding the right contributors and coaching them according to the suggestions in this guide.

Include Must-Have Content

An extensive analysis of the most compelling testimonials reveals the following must-have themes:

- Career development
- Personal pathways back to education
- Brand name recognition
- Quality of instruction and academics
- Quality of technology and instructional design
- Flexibility of degree format

Avoid the Generic

- Make testimonials around the specific curriculum of a single program
- Avoid vague testimonials like “I formed a connection with my fellow students”

Use Both Text and Video

Cater to visual and auditory learners: offer at least one generic video and one generic text testimonial from each type of contributor (student, alumni, instructor, and employer). The icons above indicate testimonial format throughout this guide.

Make Testimonials Easy to Find

- Link program-specific testimonials to both to the [program page](#) and to a general “about us” or “[student stories](#)” website. Follow Penn State University’s example and maximize the airtime of your testimonials!¹
- Offer a [preview of testimonials](#) on your homepage or on a page one click removed from your webpage. Excelsior College includes compelling statistics about one alumna, encouraging prospects to read additional testimonials.



1) <http://www.worldcampus.psu.edu/degrees-and-certificates/childrens-literature-masters/stories/1281>
<http://worldcampus.psu.edu/about-us/student-stories>
 2) <http://www.excelsior.edu/web/experience/ear-from-our-grads>

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Contributor Categories

Student

Student testimonials present some prospects only chance to see that “people like me” succeed in continuing education programs. Be sure students with a variety of experiences are represented and encourage testimonial givers to offer concrete examples of any program attribute or outcome they cite.

Talking Points	Model After These	Avoid These
Describe your history before pursuing continuing education	“I was approaching the end of my military career and looking for a degree that would help me transition to the civilian workforce”	“My education background was checkered.”
Mention any accreditation or awards that influenced your decision	“The program’s AACSB accreditation reinforced my decision to choose Example University”	“The program’s reputation is well-known.”
If applicable, describe how aid and financial planning resources influenced your decision to enter a program	“Under the Post-9/11 GI Bill, my husband and I qualified for aid.”	“Education is priceless.”
Explain personal or professional obligations that affected your decision to pursue continuing education and what program attributes (e.g., online delivery) led you to accommodate education among other responsibilities	“When I had to be out of the country for a week, the course was organized so that I could work ahead before traveling.”	“The online format lets you work on schoolwork when your schedule allows.”
Discuss how courses have complemented your work responsibilities	“I was adding tools and skill sets from the classes to my job as a lead project engineer on a daily basis” ⁸	“The curriculum was cutting edge, developed to fit industry needs.”

Example Sample Testimonials

-  Ball State University delivers testimonials from distance education students in an [interview style](#) with student quotations. Staff writers incorporate the program’s accreditation and [GI benefits](#) information into the account of one student’s experience.¹
-  Students praise the Graham School at the University of Chicago for helping them develop confidence and for [inspiring a love of learning](#) in their students.²
-  Wilmington University impresses prospective students with the [sheer volume](#) of testimonials.³ Colorado State University’s OSHER Institute also overwhelms with nearly [40 glowing testimonials](#) from faculty members and students.⁴ Note that both examples feature headshots; we recommend investing in professional head shots.
-  Penn State University World Campus’ “student stories” feature [third-person, text accounts](#) of students pursuing bachelor’s and master’s degrees and certificates. Military personnel, flight attendants, and people of all ages are featured in testimonials, making these accounts colorful.⁵ [Video testimonials](#) cater to auditory learners.⁶
-  University of Massachusetts Dartmouth effectively uses [bulleted questions](#), which the user can expand to view answers.⁷ The questions are focused around a specific theme--the experience of learning online--and are structured to reflect prospective students’ anxieties (and hopefully alleviate them). For example, one question reads, “Did your view of online learning change at all after being a student in the online program?”

1) <http://cms.bsu.edu/academics/collegesanddepartments/online/academics/stories/201312thomas>
 2) <https://grahamschool.uchicago.edu/noncredit/certificates/creative-writing-writers-studio/testimonials>
 3) <http://www.wilmu.edu/onlinelearning/testimonials.aspx>
 4) <http://www.online.colostate.edu/osher/what-students-instructors-say.dot>
 5) <http://worldcampus.psu.edu/about-us/student-stories>
 6) <http://worldcampus.psu.edu/about-us/video-stories>
 7) http://www.umassd.edu/online/graduate/environmental_policy/studenttestimonial/
 8) <http://www.worldcampus.psu.edu/degrees-and-certificates/childrens-literature-masters/stories/1281>

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Alumni

Alumni testimonials help prospective students understand the end point of a proposed educational path. They are an opportunity for alumni to cite current jobs and to articulate the nostalgia and pride they associate with the brand name. Additionally, personal details (parental status, age, geography) help prospective students identify with alumni; similarly, information about time to completion reassures prospective students that the commitment is doable.

Talking Points	Model after These	Avoid These
Describe how you feel about your successful completion of the program.	"[In addition to a degree, I earned] an increased sense of self-esteem and a feeling of accomplishment and personal satisfaction." ¹	"I achieved a long-standing goal."
Explain specific skills or mindsets that continuing education afforded you.	"The patient plans I prepared as part of my coursework and the faculty feedback I received prepared me for my current role as a RN."	"I learned a lot of technical skills that I apply everyday."
Describe the career or personal goals that encouraged you to pursue continuing education.	"...[I wanted to] deepen my understanding of real estate finance and development." ²	"I wanted to pursue higher education."
Give a brief overview of your current job duties and employer. Describe your career goals and how your continuing education is helping you get there.	"My experience at Metropolitan College has meant career advancement to a highly responsible and technically challenging position in a leading-edge software company..." ¹	"I am a manager at a consulting firm and I apply business practices to my work."
Describe your path to higher education.	"I wasn't able to finish my bachelor's degree and after 15 years in the workforce, I enrolled [at Example University] to complete the degree."	"My education background was checked."
Discuss the flexibility your program offered relative to other education options.	"When I had to be out of the country for a week, the course was organized so that I could work ahead before traveling."	"The online format lets you work on schoolwork when your schedule allows."

Example Alumni Testimonials

-  Boston University Metropolitan College impresses visitors with sheer volume alumni testimonials, many of which feature tones of brand-name pride. Additionally, the staff have done especially good job of soliciting testimonials from alumni who are now well established in their careers, about 10+ years after completing a degree.¹
-  Alumni of New York University's School for Continuing and Professional Studies focus on flexibility, [experiential learning opportunities](#), and both previous and current career goals in their testimonials.²
-  Excelsior College alumni stress transfer credits that Excelsior accepted and mention [instructors' impressive qualifications](#) and encouraging approach to the material.³
-  University of Southern California's School of Education hosts a [student and alumni blog](#), which features both a question-and-answer blog entry (text-based) and a video interview with an alumnus. Interview questions address confidence gained, the human interaction involved in the online program, and school-life balance.⁴

! **Tip for Page Placement**

Don't make the mistake of placing alumni testimonials only under the alumni section of your website—prospects won't click on alumni-oriented resources. Find a place for alumni testimonials under "FAQs" or "Career Outcomes" links. Program-specific testimonials also help jazz up a program page.

1) <http://www.bu.edu/met/for-alumni/about-met-alumni/testimonials/>
 2) http://www.sops.nyu.edu/academics/departments/schack/alumni/shelley-rankin.html?page=S#Alumni_Spotlight
 3) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K215q8NSFqA>
 4) <http://rossieronline.usc.edu/meet-richard-cassella-from-our-student-testimonial-video-series/>

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Instructors

Prospective (and current) students expect the best of their instructors, especially when adult students divert precious money and time away from families and careers in order to pursue continuing education. Instructor testimonials are a chance to highlight teaching excellence, discipline-specific expertise, instructors' relationship with industry, and instructors' encouraging and helpful dispositions. Furthermore, instructors can often articulate better than any other group the qualities that differentiate your program from a competitor's.

Talking Points	Model After These	Avoid These
Describe investment in design and development of courses for the online format	"Our university has invested \$XXX in designing courses for the connected, on-the-go learner functioning in an online world. For example, we share articles using a Twitter hashtag."	"Technology has revolutionized online learning"
Discuss what's going on in the discipline and why it's an exciting time to pursue a degree or certificate in the subject	"New sources of data, including social media sentiments and mobile location data, make data analysis even more critical across sales and marketing roles."	"Statistics is a perennially important field."
Explain what makes the program academically rigorous	"We hold our distance students to the same standards as full-time, face-to-face students, using the same curriculum and grading criteria"	"Your degree is no different than that awarded to face-to-face students"
Identify curricular components that align with industry needs, preparing graduates to enter the workforce	"We've hired experts in Hadoop, ensuring our students emerge with the big data skills required of the best data professionals."	"Our curriculum is cutting edge, developed to fit industry needs."
Discuss technologies that facilitate optimal learning in a distance environment	"Speaking to students over a video conference line allows me to forge the same connection I would with a face-to-face student."	"Technology has revolutionized online learning"
Describe your interactions with students and any opportunities for experiential learning	"I have been impressed with the thought my students have put into the challenges they face in their careers and how they apply lessons from the course to these challenges in their discussion of the material."	"I haven't met an [Example University] student I didn't like."

Instructor Testimonial Examples



In this [video testimonial mash up](#), Oregon State University instructors explain that the university has invested in instructional technology for online course: in one example, an instructor describes filming tree growth patterns as a way to show a concept included in his curriculum. Another instructor describes exit interviews he conducts to improve his course each time he teaches. ¹



Gordon University instructors discuss their disciplines and what they enjoy about teaching at Gordon University. [Captions to the right give short synopses](#) of faculty expertise, credentials, and links to the program websites. ²



SUNY Empire State College focuses on the academic credentials and [discipline-specific expertise](#) of their faculty in these text testimonials. ³



A checkerboard of faculty photos decorate the website of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Kenan-Flagler Business School. When a user rolls over a photo with her mouse, the [photos reveal preview text](#) about the instructor and a full faculty biography when clicked. The full-length biography features subheadings, which break up text into the information about which a prospective student might be searching (e.g., academic credentials versus what distinguishes UNC-Chapel Hill's program from other MBA programs). ⁴

1) <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RwWGVDDr5n0>

2) <http://www.gordon.edu/facultyvideos>

3) <http://www.esc.edu/distance-learning/international-distance-learning/meet-our-faculty/>

4) <http://www.kenan-flagler.unc.edu/faculty/meet-our-faculty>

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Employers

Although not a common type of testimonial, employer testimonials can offer a perspective critical to conversion because they are a powerful way to validate all of the information your website provides about career-informed learning outcomes and alumni career success. Employer testimonials also help put a face to career success, adding a fresh perspective on the value of education.

Talking Points	Model After These	Avoid These
Describe the graduate's job responsibilities, focusing on the skills necessary for job (e.g., laboratory skills, proficiency in ArcGIS).	"Our employees need an understanding of both GIS and the power grid. Example University helped our engineers master the program, ArcGIS."	"Graduates represent top talent."
How did the graduate demonstrate that he/she possessed the skills for the job (e.g., how would you evaluate his or her performance)?	"[Example University] graduates needed the least training out of a new class of 20 laboratory technicians hired last fall."	"Graduates exceed in their roles."
Are there any metrics (e.g., promotions, customer satisfaction, quality metrics, safety metrics, or revenue goal) that illustrate the graduate's preparation.	"The average patient satisfaction score for [Example University]-trained physical therapists is four percentage points higher than the average."	"Graduates are always professional."
Describe graduates of the university as a whole—what have your impressions been?	"When I asked the [Example University] program director whether the graduates I hired were at the top of their class and he said they were about average, I was floored. These [ExU] graduates have performed so well, I assumed they were top of the class. It's a testament to [ExU's] quality."	"We look forward to partnering with Example University in the future."

Employer Testimonial Examples

Although very few organizations offer employer testimonials on their website, we found several examples tucked away on corporate or executive education websites and on career center websites. We recommend learning from the examples below and finding a place for them on your prospective student-facing web pages.

-  Worcester Polytechnic Institute asked executive education clients to [describe the challenges](#) facing their business and the solutions WPI provided. Testimonials included program name, subject matter, and format (f2f or online), and the skills the executive education programs afford (e.g., laboratory skills). Some of testimonials could be more specific--describing faculty awards instead of describing them as "top-quality" or describing graduates' average time in-seat before promotion relative to other employees rather than explaining that graduates "get up-to-speed" quickly.¹
-  Emory Continuing Education offers corporate education to employers like Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport. A testimonial from the airport training director credits a [concrete outcome](#), improved communication among supervisors, to Emory's program.²
-  In describing its partnership with SUNY Oswego, Welch Allyn, Inc. leaders explain that they are looking for a unique skill set and that they are able to [give co-operative participants employee-level responsibilities](#).³
-  Colorado State University College of Business posts employer testimonials on its career center website. One employer, Wolf Robotics, indicates that CSU is their [preferred and top source for internship candidates](#).⁴

1) <http://cpe.wpi.edu/testimonials.html>

2) <http://ece.emory.edu/corporate/clients.html>

3) http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1w_8fP82cCQ&feature=youtu.be

4) <http://biz.colostate.edu/careers/Pages/testimonials.aspx>