EAB

The Future of **Institutional Digital Ecosystems**

Lessons Through the Pandemic and Today's Imperatives for Success

Foreword

For years, a school's web presence has enabled university leaders to promote critical attributes about their institutions to prospective students and their families. Through thoughtful design, strategic calls to action (CTAs), and sophisticated use of video and interactive features, the .edu has grown to become a frequently sought-after hub for individuals interested in attending an institution.

With 67% of students reporting that they use college websites to locate information about higher ed choices,[1] chief marketing officers (CMOs) have acted on a clear mandate: the need to create on the .edu a virtual home where students can learn, inquire, and ultimately apply to their school.

In early 2020, as the impacts of COVID-19 began to be felt, CMOs and other college and university executives began witnessing significant changes in the use of the .edu. All manner of audience types became more dependent on the university website as a central location where they could easily access timely, vital information. Overnight, visitors and administrators found themselves needing more flexibility, new digital resources, and a higher standard of content, yet many sites were not in a position to respond successfully to meet these demands.

This EAB white paper, titled "The Future of Institutional Digital Ecosystems: Lessons Through the Pandemic and Today's Imperatives for Success," takes stock of how universities and colleges around the United States responded to this surge in traffic and the higher expectations caused by the pandemic. Our work is based on recent interviews with university marketing and digital marketing executives, a survey of CMOs, and insights gained from a focus group that represented a cross section of marketing leaders. We have combined the understanding gleaned from these interactions to create a roadmap that can equip marketing leaders to proceed with confidence in their .edu investments going forward.

Observations in this EAB white paper fall into **three main categories:**

▷ Details on important shifts in .edu strategy that were applied during the pandemic

▷ Lessons learned about the impact of those changes across the past 18 months

▷ Projections for how current trends will influence the .edu of the future

In addition to summarizing key insights gathered during our research, we also include data and direct feedback provided by interviewees to emphasize important takeaways.

Furthermore, our conclusions fall into five thematic areas:

1 Addressing the Surge in Demand

2 Elevating the Digital Experience and Expanding to New Use Cases

3 Optimizing Staffing for a Digital-First Future

4 Lengthening and Deepening Reach with Digital Touchpoints

5 Expanding Innovative Uses of Online Resources to Generate Growth

Final Reflections on the Future of Institutional Digital Ecosystems

As always, the EAB research team is pleased to connect directly with you to review our conclusions live. Please feel free to contact Emily Upton at **eupton@eab.com** if you would like to schedule a time to discuss any of these issues.

1 | Addressing the
Surge in Demand

Addressing the
Surge in Demand

The pandemic forced colleges and universities to widen their apertures in terms of the breadth and depth of content provided on the .edu. **Two main drivers were behind that development:**

1   A spike in usage by a wide range of website visitors (internal and external)

2   A resulting requirement to then better serve those audiences related to their pandemic-induced needs (previous relationship patterns with the brand were suddenly forced to change)

Regarding the spike in usage, websites have always been one amongst a number of complementary tools used to facilitate knowledge of an institution. However, the .edu suddenly became the primary (and in some cases the *only*) means by which interaction between campus staff and external audiences could occur. **Here are a few notable examples:**

Recruiting and admitting activities that had previously been conducted in person (interviews, fly-in days, summer programs, faculty meet-and-greets, etc.) required migration to online experiences.

Campus tours—highly personalized interaction with exceptional yield results—had to be conducted virtually.

Events designed for matriculation and prevention of summer melt (connections to ambassadors, admitted-student weekends, orientation events, etc.) began to take place on a new set of digital platforms designed to facilitate authentic interactions.

Though virtual engagement was already in motion prior to 2020, the pandemic accelerated and intensified the need for institutions to shift substantial resources to virtual interactions exclusively. Significant investments in technology, web-based software, and in some cases staff presented an especially difficult challenge coming at the same time when institutions were experiencing great uncertainty with issues related to revenue.

Perhaps even more disruptive for the .edu than the challenge of supporting exponential growth in the number of visitors, though, was that of responding to these expanding audiences within a suddenly new, digitally expectant environment. Environment-induced complexity necessitated that the .edu evolve to react to user needs—and fast.

In many ways, the moment that chief marketing officers, digital marketing officers, and campus web enthusiasts had long hoped for had finally arrived: substantial interest in digital communications and significant recognition for high-quality user interactions were at the forefront. As leaders quickly learned, however, the immediate pressure to respond to this demand stretched budgets and talent and led to uncomfortable trade-offs in how best to provide information desired by new audiences.

In particular, several challenges emerged:

⯮ The cycle time of .edu updates sped up significantly.

Until 2020, meaningful changes to the .edu were measured in months and years; however, during the pandemic, changes to the .edu became common every few weeks and sometimes even more frequently. One CMO echoed a common refrain: "As soon as we pushed out new information, it was already out of date."

⯮ The .edu morphed from serving mainly as a marketing tool to including a heavy "news feed" component.

Not only were updates to core .edu pages occurring more quickly (per above), but new information had to be uploaded and kept current, such as updated visa rules for foreign students, changes to on-campus housing, new safety directives, data on current COVID-19 numbers and test sites on campus, rescheduling of institution events, and locations where students could pick up prepackaged meals. In short, the .edu became a "go-to" repository of information that the community consulted daily. The sheer amount of coordination required internally to create this information, vet its accuracy, and then post it in an organized and accessible manner became a significant burden for marketing and public affairs departments.

⯮ Web governance policies were stressed.

Pre-pandemic, many schools had in place strong web governance policies that focused on standardization of published content. For example, earning the right to be a web publisher required training and approval, and marketing departments spent significant effort ensuring consistency and confirming that information was current and functionally error-free. With the increased workloads that came with the new level of urgent demands presented to staff members, many of the policies that previously had been priorities could no longer meet the needs of students and administration. Overnight, more efficient governance practices were born.

⯮ The influx of new pandemic-related tasks presented a new challenge: how best to balance new priorities with real-time vigilance.

Research indicates that most institutions responded by creating a tiered system to manage non-pandemic-related priorities; any issues that would have a significant impact on the university's reputation were elevated, while increased tolerance for errors/inconsistencies across the remainder of the .edu was often encouraged. Decentralized governance structures showed signs of strain while centralized structures braced under the increased volume.

Ultimately, based on their experiences during the pandemic, stakeholders throughout the college and university community have now formed new habits with regard to the .edu. **Administrators expect demand for accessing information via this source to remain high post-pandemic, and they have offered several suggestions for how leaders should adapt their web presence to better serve the diverse range of use cases that have become more critical over the past 18 months:**

> " For us, there is no distinguishing between a public-facing .edu, the intranet, or other digital property—there is a user on a journey that we must responsively, relevantly serve. And we spend a lot of time making sure we get the journeys of prospective students right." - CMO

Recognize and manage a diverse set of user journeys.

Though it may have seemed adequate to develop a site that would serve the majority of primary and secondary audiences, marketers we interviewed urged adoption of an alternate conceptual approach. A different framework was suggested: invest in understanding and expanding the many critical user paths to ensure those search-intended paths are frictionless and end in measured goal completion with a positive brand experience. As user needs are met and data is collected, utilize the knowledge to focus inbound channels and site information architecture on the most relevant content and pathways for the various audiences who arrive at the site.

Use designated sections of the .edu to continue promoting important messages.

Many schools scurried to create subsites to clearly house information related to the pandemic, even branding and advertising these sections with slogans that emphasized campus resilience and incorporating prominent website graphics and banners (a good example is that of "Safer Stetson" at Florida-based Stetson University).[2] Marketing leaders recommend that institutions continue to use this strategy (albeit with a repositioning of the subsite brand) because it allows a university to continue disseminating critical information via a channel that audiences have come to rely on. Some schools have already started the branding pivot, for example, changing banner titles from "COVID-19 Updates" to "Return-to-Campus Information" or "Important Information When Planning Your Visit."

Launch surveys of key community audiences to understand emerging needs and preferences.

Continuing to engage stakeholders in the .edu is a clear priority. Though prior insights on stakeholders' preferences may exist, the needs of many audience groups have evolved significantly. Therefore, marketing leaders recommend conducting a traffic analysis to confirm common pathways and identify new pathways being taken through the .edu. Formal surveys and focus groups can augment those findings and deepen the understanding of evolving preferences. Not only will insights gained continue to make the .edu sticky among these audiences, but they also will allow marketing and public affairs departments to proactively plan and sequence enhancements rather than be reactive as unanticipated demands arise (as was common during the pandemic).

2 | **Elevating the Digital Experience** and Expanding to New Use Cases

Elevating the Digital Experience and Expanding to New Use Cases

Visits to your institution's website have increased, and the sophistication of your web presence must correspondingly rise. Progressively, this means not only developing more use cases for the .edu but also directing a more customized experience to specific individuals, based on your knowledge of their preferences and their past use patterns.

The definition of website personalization seems straightforward: "The process of creating customized experiences for visitors to a website. Rather than providing a single, broad experience, website personalization allows companies to present visitors with unique experiences tailored to their needs and desires."[3]

However, because personalization involves a great deal of strategy, creative direction, and advanced technology work in order to come to life, these efforts warrant evaluation among marketing leaders.

In our survey, 23% said they are currently providing a truly personalized experience for web users, but nearly 50% plan to make significant efforts to do so in the future.

The reality for CMOs is that their audiences are daily consumers of best-in-class, personalized online experiences. As a result, users are comparing the .edu to Nike.com, Amazon.com, or other consumer brands that offer a more sophisticated user experience overall.

> **When it comes to online experiences, consumers don't compare brands against others in the same category. Instead, brands are compared against the best, most personalized experience consumers have ever had."[4]**

Yet, serving customized, personalized content is accompanied by a set of operational difficulties:

» Uncertainty over where to begin.

Especially at schools with limited staff and data to analyze, it may not be obvious which areas of personalization will prove most fruitful.

» Expensive.

Updating user journeys and creating content that responds to consumer preferences often requires additional creative direction and technology purchases.

» High cost of getting it wrong.

As described in more detail below, worries exist about the negative implications of a misstep, especially since institutions are trying to present themselves as trusted sources of information on so many other fronts.

Gaining access to usable data on visitors' preferences and their pathways is particularly challenging. Fortunately, that challenge is becoming easier to manage due to some of the very innovations that were put in place during the pandemic. New digital insights are available and can be used to direct personalized strategies. For example, the virtual campus tour embraced by many colleges and universities over the past 18–36 months often provides robust analytics about which aspects of the tour are most popular with audience subsegments. Accumulating this data, analyzing it, and then combining it with audience segment preferences from other online experiences can provide institutions with a roadmap to wade into early personalization efforts.

Another key step to take with personalization efforts is tightly marrying source data to the CRM. This allows institutions to scan for all individuals in their inquiry pool (or other stakeholder pool) who should be receptive to particular content and thus equip the team to create more customized, outbound messages.

Despite the obstacles that come with personalization, at a minimum users expect their online experience to be relevant. In a recent EAB survey of 15,000+ high school students, 55% of the respondents indicated they want content from schools that is personalized and identifies them by name or area of interest.

Interviewees from our study offered the following suggestions related to how to ensure nascent efforts see success and avoid creating ill will:

▶ **Start small.** Select audiences who are particularly important for the institution to cultivate, and invest real energy in developing appropriate information and content that will meaningfully correspond to their interests.

▶ **Deliver information holistically.** Design an omni-channel approach (website, emails, texting) to provide curated content that fits together into a thoughtful message flow.

▶ **Measure responsiveness.** Set up advanced analytics or, at a minimum, assess real-time metrics (response rate, time spent per web page, etc.). Consider employing broader surveys to assess what information is most valuable (and to unearth squeamishness amongst certain audiences).

The importance of this last point cannot be overstated. **The ability to identify patterns, track behaviors, and quickly evolve messaging is key to delivering effective content going forward.**

> " Despite the promise of personalization, several individuals interviewed for this white paper expressed concern over how best to execute the practice. Chief amongst these was how to balance a student's exploratory process with predetermined segment strategies. As one interviewee noted, **"College needs to be about exploring widely and trying things outside of your comfort zone…. Let's not take away the right to discover and the benefits of chance [when students visit us]."**
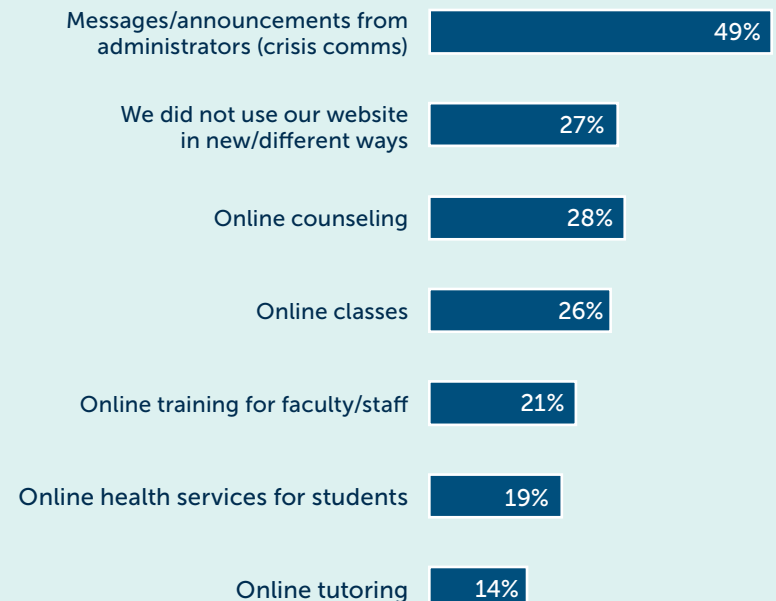
The best practice is to ensure personalized strategies do not pigeonhole students into a single track too early. The journey toward personalization begins with a broad approach, and over time—with additive insights—narrows itself into the right messages that motivate visitors to take the desired action.

Other digital-first transformational changes on campus have provoked less controversy and enjoyed a more widely accepted transition. Doubling down on these online use cases (while brainstorming others) was revealed in the research to be a promising avenue for institutions to follow. **In fact, our EAB survey and interviews reported a wide range of use cases for the .edu that**

were either launched or imbued with greater urgency during the pandemic, including several of those listed below:

Covid-19 Resulted in Shifts to The .EDU

During the pandemic, colleges and universities began using their websites in new and different ways. Which of the following uses, if any, did you employ for the FIRST TIME in light of the pandemic? (Select all that apply.)

Messages/announcements from administrators (crisis comms)	49%
We did not use our website in new/different ways	27%
Online counseling	28%
Online classes	26%
Online training for faculty/staff	21%
Online health services for students	19%
Online tutoring	14%

One advantage of taking many of these activities online is that they are inherently personal to begin with, and delivering them through the institution's digital presence enhances their quality. For example, one web administrator noted that prior to the pandemic, their school's governance policy required publishers from all departments around campus to attend in-person training sessions at least once per year (and prospective publishers to participate in classes even more frequently). The pandemic changed this approach completely, and newly christened virtual sessions have seen improved attendance and (anecdotally) higher interaction.

Moving activities online can also create efficiency in terms of the physical footprint; in particular, online classes, training, and tutoring may decrease the need for physical space, opening up potential efficiencies for the university.

Colleges and universities are working to keep pace with how the experience someone has with an institution is quickly being transformed into a digital-first brand experience. CMOs recognize how the pandemic has accelerated the pace of this transformation. Audience expectations are rising quickly, regardless of whether that experience is on the .edu or within an online learning platform or even as internal stakeholders working with each other. The race is on to ensure those digital interactions are first-class, differentiated, and most of all, relevant.

# 3 | **Optimizing Staffing**
for a Digital-First Future

Optimizing Staffing for a Digital-First Future

With so many university stakeholders relying on the .edu for information and resources during the pandemic, web services staffs saw demands for their time and expertise explode. This trend was particularly pronounced because so many college stakeholders initiated or increased their publication of content—all of which needed to comply with overall web governance policies and standards. Setting up new processes to respond to inbound questions that represented four to five times the usual volume became vital. Despite creative staffing responses, many digital/web staffs reported the need to prioritize mission-critical activities over more routine requests that were received. The result was a growing backlog of projects, and several institutions reported launching .edu "cleanup" efforts to remediate the situation as errors and out-of-date, out-of-compliance information proliferated over the past 18 months.

In the majority of cases, the increased workload shouldered by web departments was not accompanied by an infusion of new staff. As the graph shows, the size of the web department either stayed the same or decreased in 88% of institutions in our survey.

Considering the staff involved in your web services, what statement below best reflects your situation over the last 18 months?

18% 12%

70%

18 months
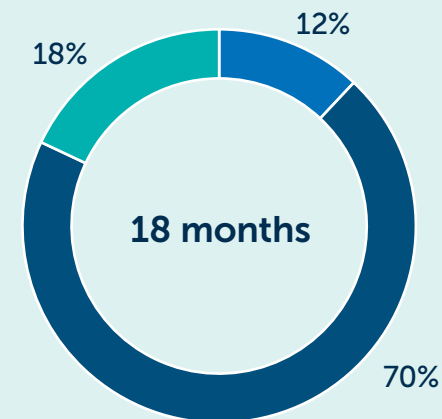
■ Staff members has decreased

■ We Added Staff Members

■ Staffing has remained the same

Not surprisingly, budget was cited as the primary reason additional investments in staff were not possible. Many institutions experienced sizable decreases in revenue across the pandemic, with expenditures for existing staff severely constrained and no available resources for new investments.

For those institutions witnessing a net decrease in staff, the reasons given were primarily threefold in nature:

1 **First,** involuntary separations were implemented as institutional budgets required trimming in the face of revenue constraints.

2 **Second,** as observed in other industries in the United States, staff voluntarily departed in search of new opportunities (often in different geographic regions of the country).

3 **Third** (and most prevalent), existing vacancies or newly vacated positions were not backfilled. The combined results of these staffing challenges impacted digital/web departments' ability to complete the myriad of tasks on their agendas. As one marketing VP noted, "We always tried to be the best to our internal stakeholders...but at times, we hit the wall."

Lack of investment in new staff did not always mean lack of new resources. Due to the need to stand up virtual tours, online interaction platforms, and digital communications capabilities, some marketing departments were given authority to invest in new technologies (in addition to new consulting/contractor staff). Since many of these types of platform investments will be necessary for years to come, concern exists that lower staff levels may also need to be maintained to offset increased costs.

Despite the challenges profiled above, several CMOs and digital leaders portrayed the pandemic as a time when their teams actually saw an increase in morale and pride. Intra-team reliance increased, and new workflows organically sprouted up to handle the higher volume of incoming questions and requests for assistance. Several institutions developed improved work queues in existing tools such as Slack, others created new work hours/arrangements to expand help hours, and all leaders noted they had increased their focus on creating fun (albeit virtual) moments for the team to dial back—especially around holidays, team member birthdays, and significant days on the college/university calendar.

Despite the valor with which .edu staff supported needs during the pandemic, it is clear that additional resources are likely to be needed in the future as digital and web-based activities continue to proliferate. Making the case for more staff is tricky, in part because perceptions still exist that the .edu is a cost center rather than a revenue contributor. Oftentimes limited by insufficient data linking the .edu's impact on attracting students, CMOs are left feeling flummoxed about how best to articulate the need for more resources. The challenge becomes increasingly frustrating when viewed through the prism of other campus departments that actually touch fewer parts of the community yet are supported more readily. As one VP of Marketing noted,

> **"** There are 100 people on our facilities team, and I only have 10. **Yet every day, our website touches way more people!"**

Four clear strategies emerged from the research as being valuable in tackling the conundrum above:

▶▶ Upskill/cross-train existing staff.

Historically, many marketing and public affairs teams have been specialized by responsibility; going forward, "no one can just be a photo editor," as one CMO commented. Leaders must identify nascent skill sets and budding interests amongst their staff and then purposefully train those individuals to become more diversified in their contributions.

▶▶ Pursue nontraditional candidates.

As use cases for the .edu expand, talented individuals who historically have not been drawn to working at a college or university may become more interested as a result of the expansions. Flexible work arrangements (e.g., remote work, project-based work) also increase the potential of attracting new candidates and potentially decrease the committed cost of talent acquisition.

▶▶ Create values-driven arguments.

Several CMOs suggested advocating for new staff using arguments that align more closely to priorities at the institution. For example, many university leaders have begun prioritizing concrete steps to ensure stronger equity, diversity, and inclusion on campus. Marketing leaders note that making the .edu more informative and more accessible to wider audiences fits well within this mission, and some of them have successfully applied for special funds to improve the school's web presence as a result.

▶▶ Provide ROI to justify more investment.

Increasingly, CMOs must wear the "revenue management hat" when advocating for new resources. The first step is to position your asks as smart solutions, for example, virtual tour technology is a great in-person proxy, chatbots are helping mitigate FAQs, tagged content can automatically populate onto relevant pages and help avoid the need for manual entry, etc. The second step is to assess and update your analytics and tracking system to help you prove the value you are driving. Having indisputable proof to support your needs is the "gold standard" for making your case.

One respondent from a small private institution noted their school records **more than**

1.2 million
ANNUAL VISITS ON ITS .EDU.

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On this last point, and as noted above, not all institutions have made the critical investments required in order to feel confident advocating for additional budget. **Several CMOs have worked around these constraints using homegrown efforts to launch experiments that track data in the necessary ways. Common steps include these:**

1. **Connect CMS and CRM data flows to enable information sharing;** in particular, ensure that inquiry leads generated through the .edu (as well as other digital interaction successes) are reflected in CRM profiles of individual prospective students.

2. **Track the pathways of the .edu-driven leads.** How do they perform over time? How does this performance differ by student background?

3. **Based on this accumulated data, create experiments and proofs of concept** designed to inflect patterns for particular subgroups of students—and commit to specific outcomes.

4. **Use results to justify more investment in the future**, including staff and additional resources.

The digital ecosystem that is, and surrounds, the .edu is becoming more complex, while the pandemic has put a significant strain on institutional resources. The future of the .edu rests on web services teams who can shift from being reactive to being proactive—complementing their skills and capacity with innovative technology, partnering with bench-extending service providers, and moving to a revenue-driving approach to .edu staffing and evolution.

4 | Lengthening and Deepening Reach with **Digital Touchpoints**

Lengthening and Deepening Reach with Digital Touchpoints

Transferring campus activities to an online platform during the pandemic became essential. Especially during the onset of COVID-19, classes, convenings, and other campus events simply could not take place in person (though some easing of restrictions has transpired since then). Going forward, it is interesting to ponder the question of how digital capabilities within the .edu will complement, rather than replace, in-person activities, thus creating a sort of hybrid ability to communicate with different constituencies in instances where the .edu deepens and lengthens the institution's messaging.

Research suggests that uncomfortable implications of this evolution exist because of the tension involved in meddling with campus interactions that are often associated with tradition and heritage. Although much enthusiasm about embracing virtual activities (especially temporarily) can exist, there is also a wariness that the unique value of the event in question may be compromised.

Interviews suggested that a bigger philosophical question must therefore be answered:

Do we want to be a digital-first institution?

If the answer is yes, and if staff, faculty, students, and leaders are aligned in this belief, choices can be considered within the rubric of a virtual or hybrid environment in which digital/virtual elements are not viewed as options but rather are presumed to be components of how all activities are rolled out. Without agreement on this core principle, conflict will erupt frequently as campus stakeholders debate how digital capabilities play a role in individual use case after individual use case.

> It is important to note that some institutions remain hesitant about moving to a digital-first environment. One VP of Marketing noted, **"We are a residential institution; this is our focus. As the pandemic wanes, we are going back to whatever version of normal we can."**

Institutions that are committed to digital-first (or digital-friendly) approaches still must grapple with how best to use virtual capabilities to deepen connections to stakeholders. **Four key recommendations/ lessons emerged from the research:**

1 **Create a strategic virtualization plan.**

Because so many activities moved online during the pandemic, it is wise to first step back and inventory successes and failures. Some moves, such as embracing online training of staff, may remain and demand further investment. Other moves, such as online classes, will at a minimum require adjustment. After you have conducted an audit of past efforts, consider developing a go-forward plan that prioritizes a small set of activities to be enhanced with a digital component. Soliciting feedback from a wide range of constituents is key, as is developing a staged approach that is gradual in nature. Once complete, the go-forward plan should be heavily socialized to ensure that wide support and adoption occur.

2 **Encourage campus administrators to embrace virtual capabilities that enhance their effectiveness as leaders.**

The pandemic forced presidents, provosts, faculty members, and other senior leaders to alter their approach to campus communications. Online office hours, senior team meetings, and campus-wide addresses became common. Now that in-person gatherings are returning, it is important to reemphasize that these virtual communication pathways must continue. As one CMO expressed, "Leaders must learn to embrace virtual engagement, or they will lack a key tool in their communications repertoire." An additional reason exists to encourage leaders to engage in digital communications: once comfortable with the medium, these individuals tend to be more receptive to additional investments in not only virtual learning tools but also in the .edu.

3 **Be open to experimentation across the campus community.**

Several institutions have created "innovation hubs" that inspire innovation across the full digital ecosystem—including the .edu— with the idea of distributing interesting ideas developed by faculty, students, and other stakeholders across the campus. Creating a delegated, more grounds-up approach to .edu innovation can be uncomfortable at institutions with a mostly centralized approach to web governance, and it also can be difficult to implement if there is still reticence to embrace a digital-first culture.

4 **Calls to action (CTAs) are even more important now.**

With many .edu sites hosting a range of novel content and attracting an increased number of users, the role of CTAs has become all the more critical. In the past, many institutions have optimized their websites to effectively reach prospective students and parents, with the goal of converting interest into inquiry pools and applications. Going forward, a similar approach is essential for other constituents. That said, the role of CTAs is not limited to the .edu; there is a broader network to connect. An email can direct to a webinar, or YouTube can direct to an .edu subdomain, or the main .edu can link to online learning platforms. Institutions should assess the key actions they would like stakeholders to take when visiting digital experiences and then thoughtfully create the most appropriate CTAs to spur action.

One last note: Especially in the case of alumni, these efforts should not just be about driving donations; rather, consider encouraging alumni to again become involved with a set of institution-related activities that may differ from pre-pandemic activities (e.g., virtual interviewing, career center networking, volunteering, etc.).

As you embrace the .edu to lengthen and deepen your message, especially with newer audiences, it's best to avoid verbosity. Attention spans are at an all-time low...and getting lower. Be clear, and don't bury the lead.

5 | **Expanding Innovative Uses** of Online Resources to Generate Growth

Expanding Innovative Uses of Online Resources to Generate Growth

Despite the massive transition of materials, activities, and information to digital platforms, hybrid life (the combination of in-person and virtual interaction) is likely to continue. It is undeniable, however, that enhanced digital functionality on its own creates new avenues of growth for institutions that otherwise would not be readily accessible. Interestingly enough, and due to the newness of the nature of these use cases, CMOs emphasized that these use cases are often less controversial than debates surrounding online classes or tutoring, which some leaders still argue requires an in-person component.

In particular, **research suggests two avenues for expansion/growth that could be interesting for CMOs and schools that are looking to capitalize on newfound virtual capabilities:**

⯈⯈ Creating new curriculum.

Movement toward online classes has motivated institutions to reevaluate the typical resource constraints inherent to launching new courses and majors. Whereas in the past, sufficient student demand would need to be measured, new faculty (or cross-trained faculty) identified, and even new classroom and office space dedicated, expanding offerings in the newly accepted digital environment is making this process more seamless.

⯈⯈ Developing skills/job training partnerships with local businesses.

Much has been written about the escalating labor shortage in the United States (in late April 2021, there were over 9 million unfilled jobs across the country).[5] Businesses struggling to fill job openings are often forced to equip existing employees with additional training and/or hire individuals whose skill set for the job in question is not entirely formed. Several universities have partnered with businesses to provide necessary training for these individuals, and strong online/virtual capabilities can make such efforts more viable and popular. Reaching out to businesses (many of which may already be suppliers to the institution) to inquire about ways the university could create new skills-based curricula is a good first step to determine what types of demand exist.

Despite enthusiasm for digitally driven growth, CMOs also expressed caution and skepticism about embracing new opportunities, because substantial deferred maintenance exists on current .edu priorities. In their minds, it seems unlikely that new investments will occur when funding/resourcing for current web priorities is so unsteady. As one CMO stated,

> **66** These ideas sound interesting; but I've never been at an institution that isn't hopelessly behind [on accomplishing current priorities]. It's just so expensive."

Though not an external growth opportunity per se, numerous contacts cited the rising importance of their .edu serving as an information hub for the local city/town in which they are located. During the pandemic, college websites often displayed timely information not only on institutional developments but also on region-wide COVID-19 trends and updates, consequently developing a following amongst local residents. Continuing that engagement is a priority for several CMOs.

One final note: Research suggests that institutions hoping to seize new opportunities related to digital/virtual offerings should consider codifying the responsibilities into a formal role with specific goals and then assigning ownership to one or a small group of people (rather than diffusing accountability across many departments).

Final Reflections on the
Future of Institutional Digital Ecosystems

Final Reflections on the Future of Institutional Digital Ecosystems

During the course of our research, it became clear how proud CMOs and digital marketing leaders are of the supporting role their teams have played at their institutions during the pandemic. **When asked to think through some of the big takeaways from the past 18 months, the following three themes clearly came into focus:**

1 **[Despite the rockiness of the past 18 months] Realize how much better prepared you are for the next crisis.**

Interviews revealed just how unprepared many schools were for the rapid digitization of the college experience that occurred in early 2020. Eighteen months later, confidence that institutions are in far better shape to react quickly is evident. As an example, CMOs noted that their staffs now have a more efficient approach to creating online content, facilitating better communication and decision-making approaches, and developing stronger relationships with experts across the college community who may be called on to help in specific situations. These marketing leaders noted that newfound confidence amongst their teams has already led to better institution-wide responses in several non-pandemic-specific situations—including the 2020 protests over racial injustice and the 2020 US presidential election.

2 **Establish big strategic goals for your .edu.**

CMOs who participated in our research uniformly believe that the .edu is a critical resource to communicate the college's brand to the entire community of stakeholders. As one marketing leader noted, the .edu is unique in being an

"everywhere platform;…[one that is] accessible to the entire community at any hour of the day and extends our brand anywhere in the world." Don't lose sight of this potential power amongst the day-to-day challenges you are facing.

3 **It's not just the .edu—it's your entire virtual presence.**

The .edu needs to be seen as an anchor to an entire ecosystem of digital communications and interactions. Some CMOs likened the situation to a hub-and-spoke system, with social media, email, text, and other communications efforts being used to draw in constituencies. Synchronizing these efforts takes time and coordination but provides audiences with a better overall experience.

> **With the pandemic has come a new focus on making certain that the college website and other online experiences are better prepared for the future—especially when it comes to recruitment outcomes. The surest route to success involves rigorous goal setting, leveraging audience insights, and ensuring positive and productive working relationships with the full range of internal stakeholders, including faculty. EAB's Agency Services team welcomes the opportunity to learn more about your specific priorities in the coming year and share how our unique website strategies can enhance your entire digital ecosystem and ensure you are driving, attracting, and converting your priority audiences.**

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Endnotes

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2. https://www.stetson.edu/other/safer-stetson/
3. https://www.optimizely.com/optimization-glossary/website-personalization/
4. https://www.forbes.com/sites/tomspiggle/2021/07/08/what-does-a-worker-want-what-the-labor-shortage-really-tells-us/?sh=5424919c539d/
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As always, the EAB research team is pleased to connect directly with you to review our conclusions live. **Please feel free to contact Emily Upton at eupton@eab.com if you would like to schedule a time to discuss any of these issues.**

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