

5 Imperatives for Your 2026 Digital Marketing Strategy

Insights from our Survey of 120+ Marketing Leaders

Marketing leaders continue to operate in a reality of flat budgets, shrinking teams, and increasing pressure to demonstrate measurable impact on enrollment.

Our **survey of 120+ higher ed marketing leaders** revealed how teams are reallocating resources and rethinking digital strategy amid rising expectations and rapid AI disruption.

Build these five imperatives into your 2026 digital strategy to stay ahead in a competitive landscape.

1 Close the .edu opportunity gap



#1

The .edu is the most powerful enrollment driver—yet only #6 on leaders' priority lists

While enrollment remains the top strategic priority, many marketing leaders deprioritize **the .edu experience—the most effective and measurable link between marketing spend and enrollment results**. This disconnect leaves a clear opportunity gap in institutional marketing strategy.

YOUR NEXT STEP

Advance your enrollment strategy by anchoring your marketing efforts in your .edu—the most powerful driver of visibility, engagement, and conversion.

2 Strengthen your owned digital foundation



46%

plan to reallocate spend toward search visibility in the next year; 42% for web experience

Website, content, search, and brand remain the foundation of digital performance. With budgets flat and paid marketing costs rising, **leaders are reallocating dollars toward assets they control and can measure**—channels that consistently deliver stronger, more attributable impact.

YOUR NEXT STEP

Focus investment on refining these owned assets for stronger visibility, lead capture, and attribution across the funnel.

3 Adopt flexible capacity models



65%

of marketing leaders are being asked to do more with fewer resources

Institutions that **expand capacity through strategic vendor partnerships and scalable, high-performing owned digital assets** are better positioned to sustain enrollment growth. This approach builds resilience, even as budgets and resources remain static.

YOUR NEXT STEP

Build flexible teams and partnerships that expand technical expertise and capacity without increasing permanent headcount.

4 Amplify digital brand visibility



24%

of marketing budgets are allocated to brand, a top 3 priority across all institutional segments

As AI reshapes how students search and discover colleges, **digital visibility increasingly shapes brand strength and reputation**. Schools that strengthen their digital presence reach students earlier and build awareness that drives future demand.

YOUR NEXT STEP

Prioritize digital brand visibility that ensures your institution shows up where students search and engages them earlier in the journey to build long-term demand.

5 Prepare your .edu for the AI era



60%

have researched search visibility tools in the past year, but only 33% have conducted an audit

Most teams are experimenting with AI, but few understand how their institution appears in AI-driven search. Those that **combine search visibility with AI-powered personalization** will be best positioned to drive quantifiable enrollment impact.

YOUR NEXT STEP

Audit your .edu for AI search visibility, then invest in tools that personalize the site experience and drive enrollment impact across the funnel.

