

# Flipping the Script on Community College Marketing

*By Robert Palmieri, RHP Strategies LLC*

## *Introduction*

This article challenges some of the prevailing marketing and website strategies utilized in higher education today, and in particular the community college sector. Based on recent work conducted on behalf of PAACE grant recipient, Fulton Montgomery Community College (FMCC) of New York, an innovative approach that prioritizes career pathways in the college's overall marketing vision and brand was introduced. Through the elevation of academic programming in both promotion and website design, the college was able to more effectively appeal to potential adult learners as well as prospective students overall. Preliminary findings of digital and enrollment metrics as well as student interviews and focus groups demonstrate the emerging success of this model as well as the potential to scale at other community colleges. Specific recommendations are offered to assist schools with developing the essential marketing and website foundations for the implementation of this career pathways approach utilizing a Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) framework.

## *The Enrollment Crisis*

According to data from the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, community college enrollment declined -16.5% or 877,395 fewer students nationally in fall 2021 compared to fall 2019, including significant decreases among students 25 years old and older. There have been positive signs for fall 2022 with increases in the number of younger freshmen but unfortunately older students continued the downward trend. Most community colleges have not caught up to pre-pandemic levels or even pre-Great Recession enrollment levels.

Starting in 2025, the number of high school graduates across the country, particularly in Northeastern and Midwestern states is expected to decline significantly according to the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE). This "Demographic or Enrollment Cliff" is the result of widespread declines in birthrates since the Great Recession in 2008 which is expected to continue for multiple decades. Combine this with higher wages being offered for entry-level positions, a growing sentiment that questions the value of higher education, and competition from other colleges and online institutions, and you have the perfect storm for an enrollment crisis.

A bright spot to this enrollment crisis, is that there are nearly 51 million people across the country aged 25 to 54 years old who have a high school diploma or some college but no degree (U.S. Census, 2021). This likely equates to tens of thousands if not more potential adult learners residing in the service area for each community college. To

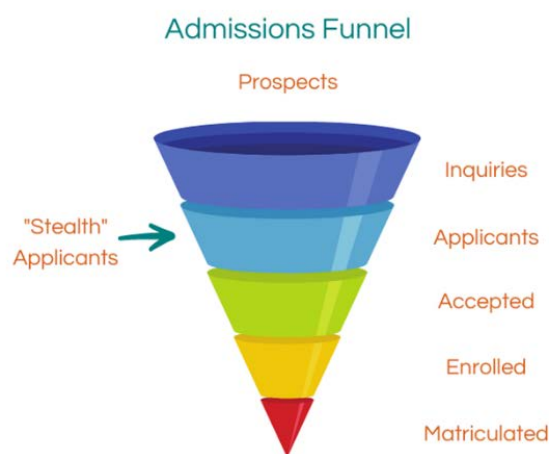
convince a greater number of these adult learners to attend or return to higher education, it is more important than ever for community colleges to distinguish themselves and develop more effective strategies of engagement.

This will not only require a shift in marketing vision and branding but budget realignments that require investments in new technologies and professional development through the adoption of strategic enrollment management principles.

### *The Enrollment Funnel*

The incorporation of strategic enrollment management principles is critical to building the necessary foundations for comprehensive marketing and enrollment strategies. Strategic enrollment management is characterized as both a concept and a process that enables the fulfillment of the institutional mission and students' educational goals (Bontrager, 2004). In its application, it can be viewed as an art and a science that prioritizes data informed decision-making with a focus on the entire student life cycle from prospect to graduation and beyond.

For attracting and recruiting new traditional aged and older students, the admissions or enrollment funnel as illustrated below provides a helpful framework that details specific stages prospective students typically encounter on their journey to making an enrollment decision. The incorporation of the enrollment funnel can assist community colleges in strategically building their incoming student class. A similar framework can be used for former adult students of your institution who left without earning a degree which will be more of a focus later on in the article.



The prospects stage is the largest part of the funnel and represents prospective students who have not yet engaged with your school. These potential students are often identified through digital strategies or the purchasing of names in specific geographic regions. The goal is to convert these prospects and encourage them to take an action such as completing a form to request more information, take a campus tour, attend a recruitment event, or contact the admissions office and move them to the inquiry stage.

From there, the focus is to encourage the inquiry or lead to take the step of applying. This can take multiple years depending on where the lead is in the process such as a sophomore or junior in high school or an adult learner not yet ready to make a higher education decision. Sometimes prospects skip the inquiry stage and apply directly, referred to as “stealth” applicants as illustrated. At the applicant stage, the goal is to admit or accept the student based on submission of transcripts and/or completion of other requirements. With open admissions for most programs at community colleges, the admit stage is relatively straightforward but can be complicated by the rolling admissions process. Finally, the goal is to encourage accepted students to register for classes and enroll as matriculated new students in a specific academic program.

Utilization of the admissions or enrollment funnel structure for recruitment can help community colleges move away from enrollment by chance to a strategic approach of enrollment by design. This requires deliberate engagement and communication strategies for each stage of the funnel to help move prospects to inquiries, inquiries to applicants, applicants to admits, and admits to enrolled. These strategies can be further enhanced by developing distinctive messaging and content specific for adult learners. This article however, will focus mainly on top of the funnel strategies for the prospects and inquiry stages which is also referred to as the awareness stage for marketing.

### *A New Marketing Approach*

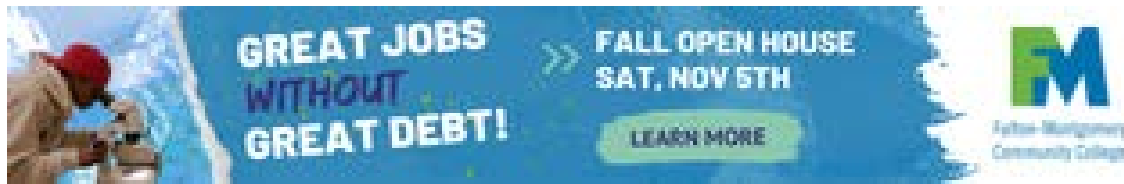
The awareness stage for marketing is typically focused on brand awareness which includes general content about the existence of your school. The audience that you are trying to target during this stage may not know about your college or only have a limited knowledge of your brand, academic programs, and services you offer even if they live right down the road from your campus. The goal is to capture their attention and showcase the life changing benefits of attending your community college.

Many community colleges incorporate prevailing higher education marketing strategies that are focused on name recognition and promotion of the overall college and student experience. This can work for certain students, but it doesn't fully take into consideration the important characteristics of the students who attend community colleges.

Community college students are primarily commuters who reside within driving distance of campus. They include traditional aged students but also a significant number of adult learners who may have children and a multitude of other family obligations. A significant portion are low income and need to work while attending school. Many are the first in their families to attend college and may not have the support and encouragement to pursue higher education compared to students whose family member(s) have earned a college degree. There is also greater variability in academic preparedness with some students feeling less confident in their ability to be successful, especially those who haven't participated in formal education for a prolonged time period (AACC, 2023; CCRC, 2023).

When taking this information into consideration, the prevailing higher education marketing strategies will likely not be as effective, especially for prospective adult learners of community colleges. I believe a more pragmatic approach is required which focuses on the value and outcome of pursuing a degree or certificate. Specifically, community colleges should prioritize careers and the program pathways that either lead to direct employment or employment and advancement after transferring to a 4-year college or university. The focus on career preparation and potential jobs as well as the low tuition cost will differentiate community colleges in the competitive higher education marketplace as showcased in the examples below.





In order to effectively implement this new career marketing approach, several recommendations are provided to help community colleges begin to build or realign their marketing infrastructure.

### **Design Specific Academic Program Ads**

- Although this may also be counter to some of the prevailing higher education strategies, community colleges should introduce specific academic program advertising (especially digital ads) as an integrated part of their general career focused ad campaigns. These ads may include individual academic programs and certificates that lead to in-demand careers in your region or clustering various programs together. Program specific ads targeting potential adult learners can also be more effective by focusing on flexibility through various online modalities, evening or weekend classes, or the ability to complete a credential in a short time period as showcased in some of the examples below.

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WITHOUT  
GREAT DEBT!**



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 BULLHEAD CITY: **HALEY EDENS** | HEDENS@MOHAVE.EDU | 928.704.4931  
 LAKE HAVASU CITY: **SHANNON LAY** | SLAY@MOHAVE.EDU | 928.325.3221

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Aug 24 - Dec 11 | Fri | 4-6:30pm  
4 credits, Course Registration #22754

**WEL 100 Safety for Welders**  
Aug 24 - Dec 11 | Sat | 9-10:00am  
1 Credit, Course Registration #22752

**WEL 110 Advanced Shielded Metal Arc I**  
Aug 24 - Dec 11 | Sat | 10am - 3:30pm  
4 credits, Course Registration #22753

**WEL 103 Basic Shielded Metal Arc I**  
Aug 24 - Dec 11, 2020 | Mon, Tue | 4-6:48 pm  
4 credits, Course Registration #22613

**WEL 124 Intro Gas Tungsten Arc Welding**  
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— Kayla Craft, owner of Yoga Kayla

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### Be Bolder & More Creative in Your Messaging


- When developing your career marketing approach, I think it is also important to recognize the negative perception community colleges have in the public as somehow inferior to a baccalaureate education, the 13<sup>th</sup> grade, or not “a real” college. In order to change this incorrect perception, community colleges should start incorporating bolder and more creative messaging to attract greater attention from prospective students as well as from the residents in your communities. This includes being more direct about highlighting the pathways and outcomes of obtaining a degree or certificate which will likely take you and others at your school out of their comfort zone. Examples could include showcasing partnerships with area businesses that hire your graduates, utilization of statistics about the number of expected jobs in a regional industry or actual job placement rates, showcasing students at internships or in their place of work, or utilization of expected salary information for the programs that lead to the highest paying careers as showcased in the examples below.



# THE NEW CORNER OFFICE


There are career paths that you might not know about. Whether you're making a change or just starting out, you have more options than you think. Find new career paths at [FindSomethingNew.org](https://findsomethingnew.org)

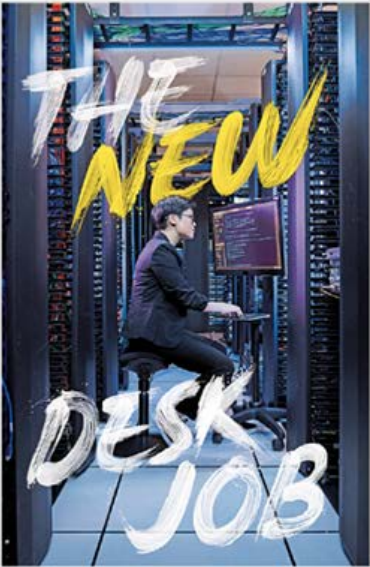




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# Advance your career.







### **Prioritize Digital Marketing in Your Budget**

- In today's digital age, digital marketing is an essential investment for community colleges. It allows community colleges to personalize each advertising campaign and directly target traditional aged prospective students and potential adult learners in their service area. Unlike traditional marketing, you are able track the effectiveness of online ads and videos and change or modify them if they are not performing well. Make no mistake, other colleges and universities are already digitally advertising in your backyard. Your absence or lack of continuous and comprehensive digital marketing is putting you at a strategic disadvantage. Partnering with a digital marketing firm will help determine the right balance of tactics including display ads, native ads, Search Engine Optimization (SEO), Pay Per Click (PPC), Over the Top (OTT) video streaming, social media marketing, etc. It is important to test different types of ads and tactics to see what resonates by closely monitoring various metrics and key performance indicators such as click through rates and video viewership. Ultimately, these efforts are intended to increase lead generation through inquiries, on-campus visits, applications, and yield/ enrollment activities in your enrollment funnel.

### **Collect Student, Employer, & Faculty Testimonials**

- It is important to build the necessary capacity to consistently collect success stories, pictures, and videos of current students, students at their

internship and clinical sites, graduates at their place of employment, graduates who successfully transferred, employer supervisors, and faculty members. These testimonials will provide fresh and authentic content for various marketing initiatives, social media pages, and especially your college website and academic program subpages which will be expanded upon later. It is important to prioritize the collection of testimonials for all academic offerings including transfer programs to help showcase the career pathways after graduating from a 4-year college or university.

### **Purchase Student Lists**

- Many colleges and universities buy student contact lists from a variety of providers as part of their top of the funnel marketing and engagement strategy. This likely includes high school prospective students in your service area. Community colleges should not leave anything to chance and should strongly consider purchasing similar student lists but also potential adult learners who only have a high school diploma or some college. In addition to various engagement initiatives including email and direct mailings, you can geotarget the addresses of these lists with digital marketing ads. Geotargeting can also be an effective retention strategy to use for current students who may not be responding to your outreach to register for the next semester.

### **Mine Your Database for Former Students**

- With the help of a computer programmer in your IT department, community colleges should develop a data report from their Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) system of students who left without finishing a degree. Start by going back 3 to 5 years and include fields such as contact information, birth date, credits accumulated, academic progress, holds, and any other pertinent information. To ensure these students have not continued their education at another college it is recommended that you cross-reference with the National Student Clearinghouse. From there, you can utilize various vendors to help provide updated contact information. Engagement of this population of former students can also include geotargeting and utilization of a modified version of the enrollment funnel framework.

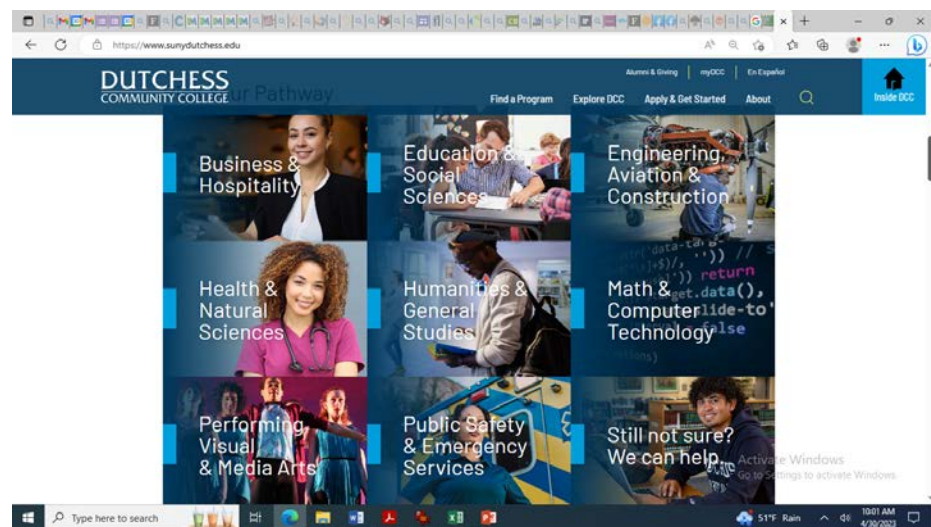
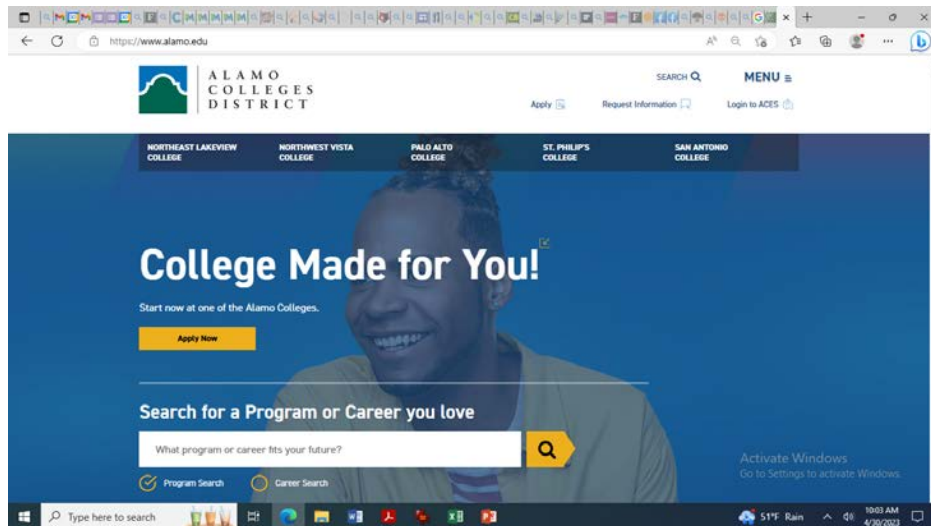
## **Invest in a CRM**

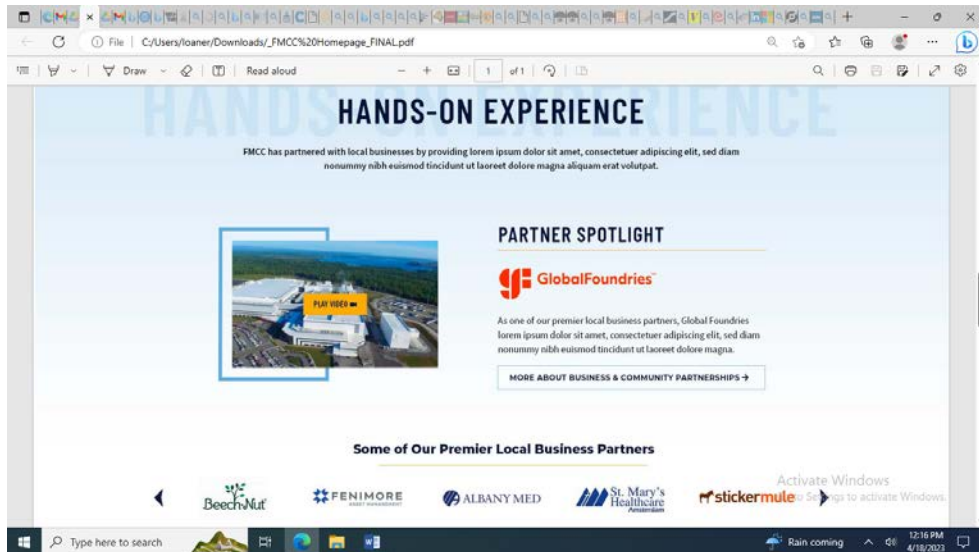
- In order to effectively and efficiently manage the stages of the enrollment funnel as well as the entire student lifecycle, community colleges should invest in a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system. This integrated technology will allow community colleges to automate and personalize communications and build stronger relationships with prospective student inquiries, applicants, current students, former students, alumni, business and employer partners, as well as other populations. It tracks engagement activities across a variety of channels such as the opening of emails and provides data intelligence to make real-time decisions. Various CRM platforms can also be leveraged to improve and streamline business processes for recruitment events, inquiry forms, applications, as well as student retention. It is a transformative investment which requires a commitment to training and the establishment of new employee skillsets.

## *Website Design & Focus*

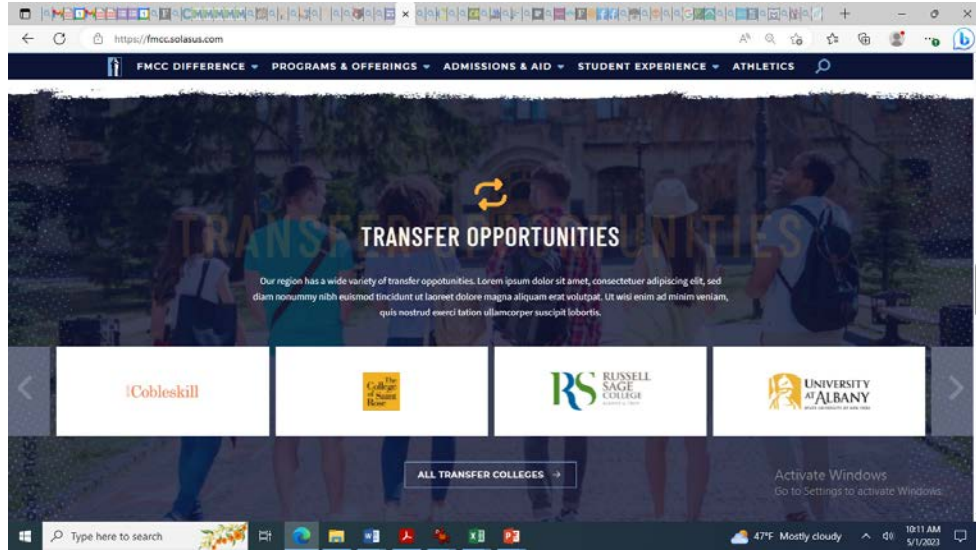
The college website is the main foundation for your marketing strategy. An effective website reflects your community college's image and attracts the attention of your target audiences. It should be designed to be mobile responsive, have quick load time, and incorporate a strategic enrollment management perspective that includes various calls to action for the stages of the enrollment funnel. Paramount to this perspective, is the prioritization of career pathways for your academic program and certificate offerings. The new bolder career-focused promotional campaigns will drive adult learners and other prospective students to your website and academic program and certificate subpages to learn more and hopefully take an action to become an inquiry or applicant.

The prioritization of your academic programs and certificates starts with your homepage. This is an opportunity to showcase various career pathways and program spotlights that will encourage students to want to learn more through career and program search features, pictures, student testimonials, videos, salary information, employer and business partnerships, main transfer colleges, and more as shown in the examples below.



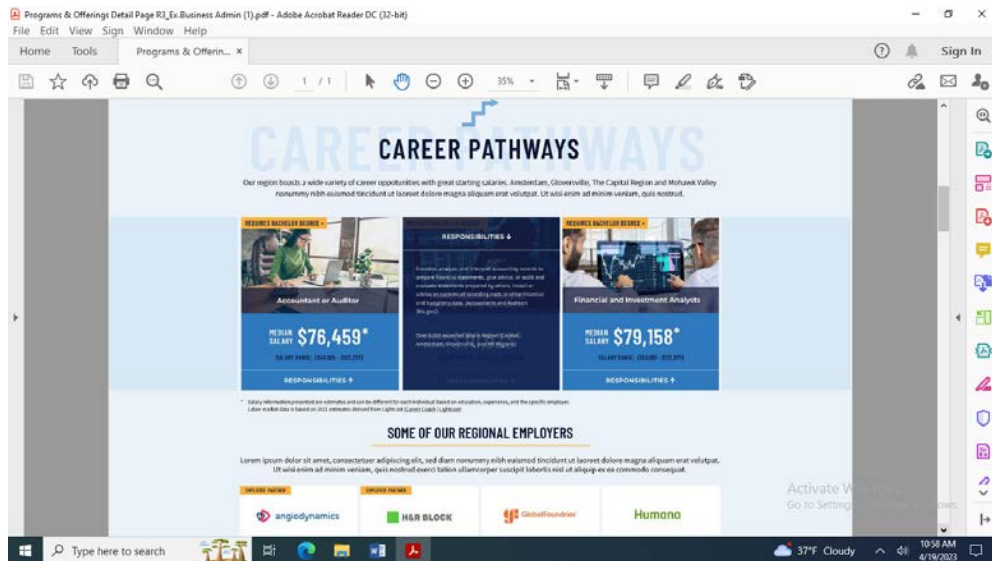
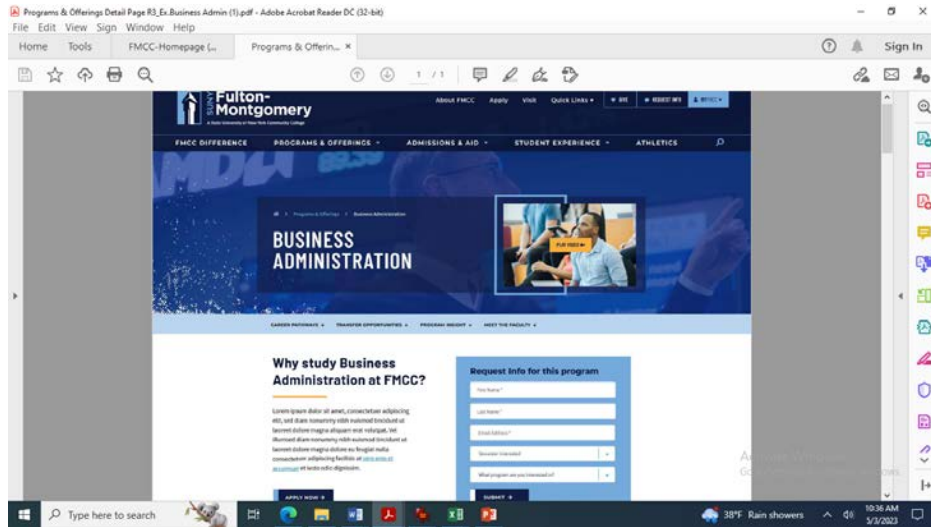


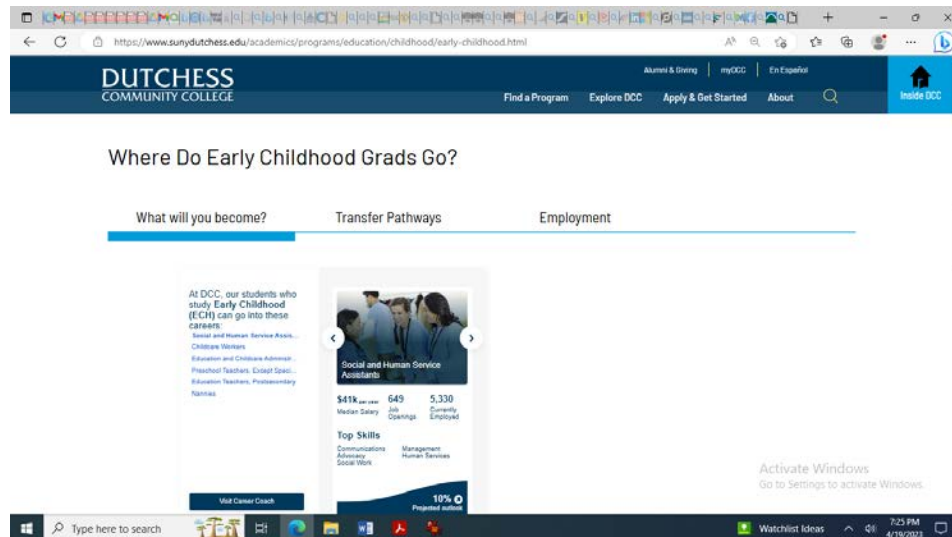




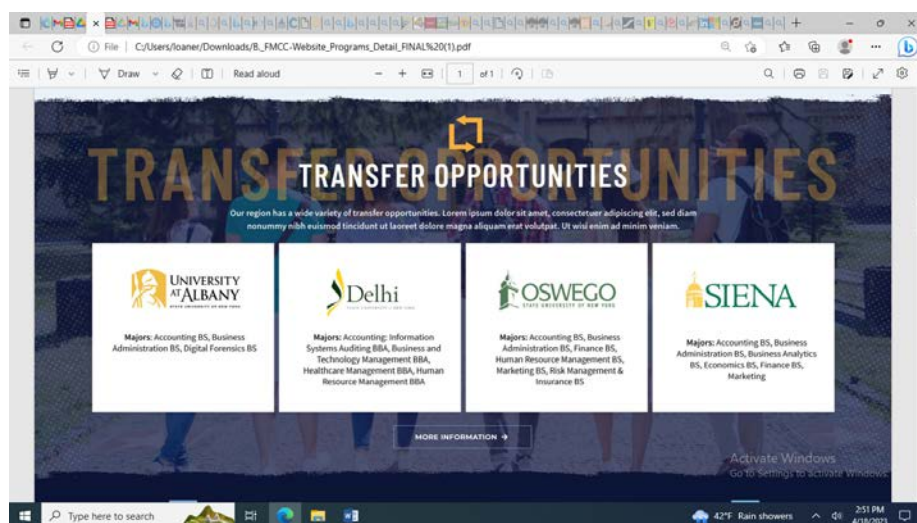
In reviewing hundreds of college websites, I found that many schools have very engaging homepages but fail to continue this approach for their subpages, especially the academic program sites. These academic program subpages are often too text heavy and don't effectively showcase the value of a degree or certificate through potential career outcomes. This is a lost opportunity as it cannot be understated the importance these pages are for recruiting and converting prospective students, especially adult learners.

The first step to designing transformative academic program and certificate pages is conducting extensive research which includes meeting with faculty members, academic advisors, career and transfer counselors, traditional aged and adult students, and graduates. Utilization of labor market data from various resources can help you identify potential career positions for each program as well as major employers in your community who hire or have the potential to hire your graduates. It is also important to highlight the salary expectations, projected growth rate of careers in your surrounding community, placement rates by your college if collected, and a brief description of the responsibilities of the position as illustrated in the examples below.





In addition to focusing on programs and certificates that lead directly to employment, you should also showcase the pathways for transfer programs that lead to careers that typically require a bachelor's or graduate degree. This is especially important for your General Studies, Liberal Arts & Sciences and related transfer programs. Even though there may be infinite career avenues for these degrees after transfer, showcasing some of the most common pathways that students can take will help prospective students, including undecided students see the potential possibilities. The incorporation of specialized transfer tracks or transfer paths can be beneficial in this process. This will allow you to showcase career pathways for students interested in transferring into Education, English, Mathematics, Psychology, Sociology, Science, and other programs. In addition to highlighting the types of careers associated with these transfer majors, it is also recommended to visually emphasize the main transfer colleges along with the potential baccalaureate (and graduate) programs as shown in the example below.



As mentioned in the *New Marketing Approach* section, the best promotion of your community college and the academic programs are the authentic testimonials from students, graduates, employers, and faculty. Highlighting these stories through pictures, quotes, and videos will further elevate your academic program pages and keep it fresh to encourage repeated visits. In addition to academic program pages, the following recommendations are provided to help community colleges begin to design or redesign the other areas of their websites from a strategic enrollment management perspective.

### **Simplify Your Focus and Navigation**

- Your website should be designed primarily for marketing purposes. The populations you are looking to appeal to are adult learners, traditional aged prospective students, as well as family members, high school officials, businesses, alumni, and other visitors from outside the college. Current students, faculty, and staff should be directed to separate portals, intranets, or specialized sections of your website. Starting with this approach will allow you to streamline the navigation menu with limited options to allow visitors to easily find what they are looking for. It will also provide you with the additional time you will need to showcase the career pathways on your academic offering pages.

### **Incorporate Calls to Action**

- As part of your streamlined navigation menu, every webpage should have standard calls to action options that align with the stages of the enrollment funnel. These actions are typically for requesting information or contacting admissions, visiting campus, and applying for admission. Many times, there is also a giving or donating call to action for advancement or alumni departments. You may consider additional calls to action featured at different locations for your academic program pages and other enrollment-related pages as a reinforcement to help move prospective students to the inquiry or application stages. The visiting campus subpage should provide a multitude of opportunities for prospective students and other visitors to come to campus including daily campus tours, open houses, academic program and general information sessions, individual appointments (both virtually and in-person), sitting-in on a college class, etc. Your CRM will be instrumental in managing all of these calls to action options.

## Prioritize Enrollment-Related Webpages

- It is important to design your website predominately from the point of view of a prospective student or family member. Some colleges have developed specialized adult learner sections to help organize and house relevant information. This requires taking time to critically review your current enrollment-related webpages in order to make them more engaging and streamlined where critical information is presented in a more digestible format. The areas to prioritize include the admissions, affordability (costs), financial aid as well as career & transfer and internship subpages since these are integral to the new career marketing vision. Be creative and utilize graphics and expandable sections rather than just paragraphs of text. You can also incorporate short videos made in-house on how to access portals, make payments, etc. Some examples of more engaging enrollment-related webpage sections are presented below to assist you in this process.



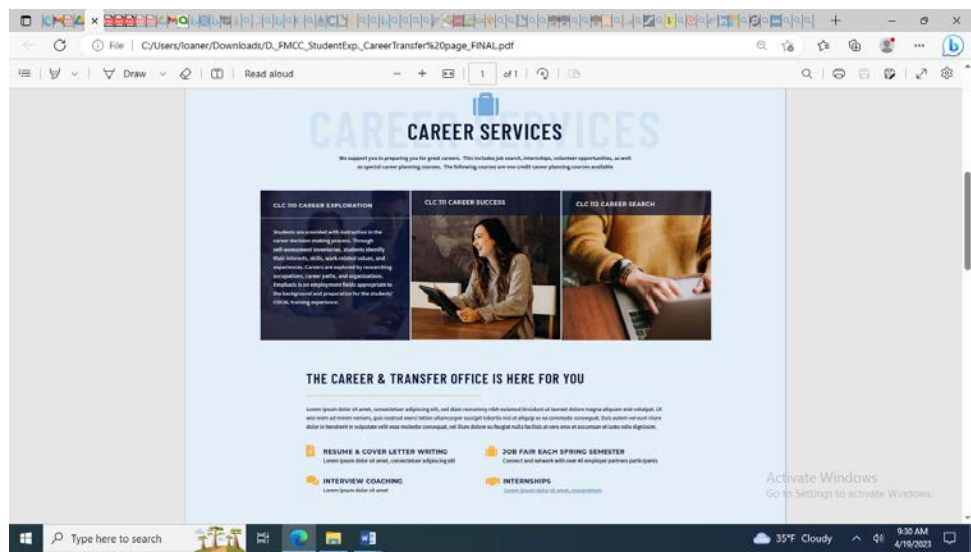
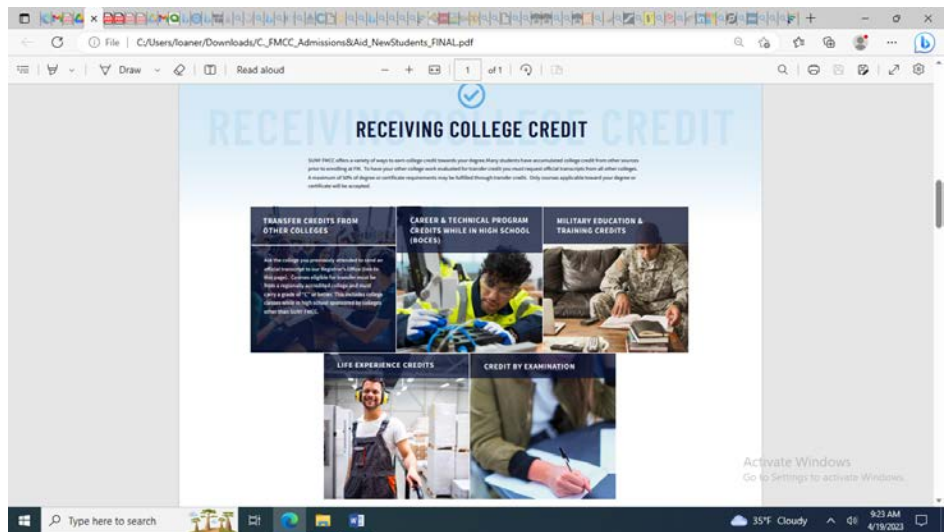
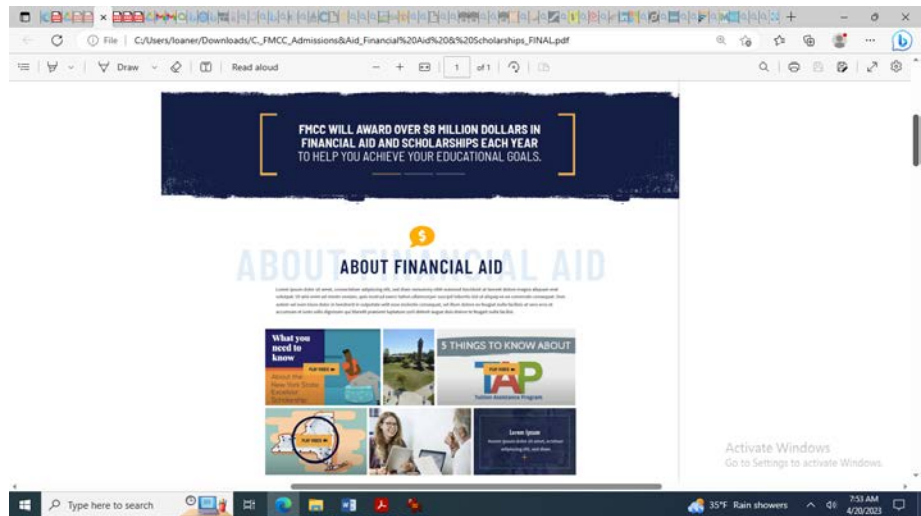
The following is an overview of the cost of attendance per semester. Please see the Tuition & Fee Schedule provided below for details, and contact the Bureau's Office to discuss more in-depth.

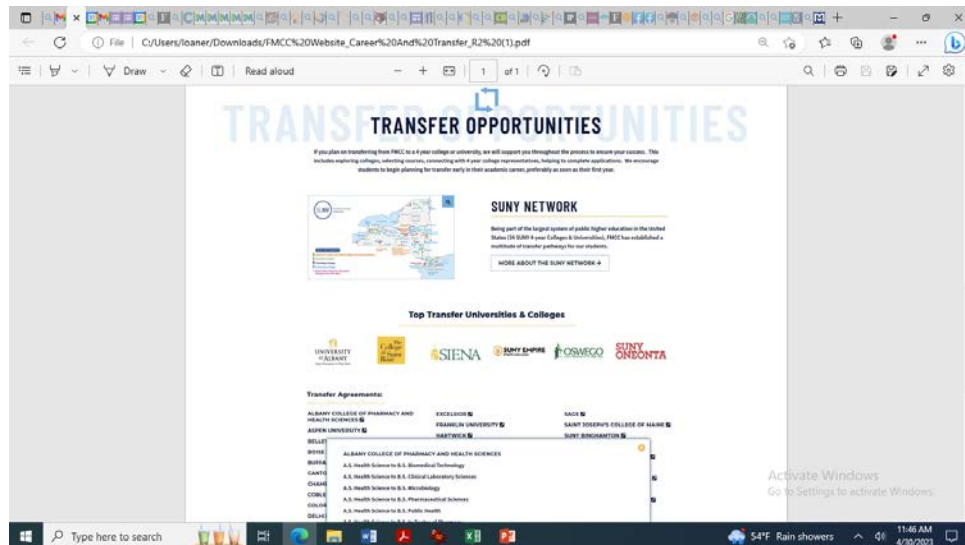
FULL-TIME COMMUTER (NEW YORK STATE RESIDENTS)	PART-TIME COMMUTER (NEW YORK STATE RESIDENTS)	INTERNATIONAL/OUT-OF-STATE* (FULL-TIME)	COLLEGE WHILE IN HIGH SCHOOL**
<b>\$2,592</b> 10 CREDIT HS INDE TUITION	<b>\$648</b> 3 CREDIT TUITION	<b>\$2,592</b> TUITION	<b>\$216</b> 3 CREDIT TUITION
<b>\$726</b> FEES	<b>\$174</b> FEES	<b>\$876</b> FEES	<b>\$0</b> FEES
<b>\$3,318</b> TOTAL, PER SEMESTER	<b>\$822</b> TOTAL, PER CLASS	<b>\$3,468</b> TOTAL, PER SEMESTER	<b>\$216</b> TOTAL, PER CLASS

\*Tuition and fees include a \$2,000 Federal Student Scholarship for International and Out of State students. Room and board costs are not included.  
\*\*Taking Classes in High School or IB/CLEP.

Activate Windows  
Go to Settings to activate Windows.







## Conclusion

Introducing a career pathways marketing vision through bolder messaging and enhanced website design will distinguish the community college sector in the higher education marketplace and encourage a greater number of adult learners as well as traditional aged prospective students to consider their local community college. This innovative approach also leverages the strong relationships that already exist with area businesses and industry and the community college's ability and flexibility to quickly modify curriculum and offer programs and certificates that meet the needs of employers and in-demand jobs in their region.

After the launch of an intensive and extended career focused marketing campaign as well as the implementation of various strategic enrollment management strategies, Fulton Montgomery Community College experienced enrollment growth for the first time in eight years in nearly all areas in fall 2022. It was also one of the only community colleges in the State University of New York (SUNY) system that didn't experience a decline in adult learners. This was achieved with only a portion of the career pathways initiatives detailed in this article being implemented.

Since then, the school has launched a new CRM and will be unveiling a new innovative career focused website in early fall 2023. Several screenshots of this new website were displayed throughout the article. Initial student interviews and student focus groups have provided support on the effectiveness of the career pathways approach for marketing ads and the new website design. There has been overwhelming support and excitement from adult learners as well as traditional aged students with one student stating that the new website design "definitely has more to offer like what you can do with the degree you earn, and what kind of money you should expect."

Given the enrollment crisis that higher education is facing and will continue to endure, there is no better time to flip the script on community college marketing to more effectively appeal to potential adult learners as well as prospective students overall.

### *Special Acknowledgments*

The insights and recommendations in this article are the result of over twenty years of community college enrollment and research experience, a commitment to professional development and incorporation of best practices, prioritization of data analysis and student research, creativity, and a willingness to take risks and experiment with new approaches. Special thanks to various people from AACRAO, CAEL, Enrollment Fuel, RNL, News Channel 13 WNYT, RMB Marketing LLC, Spiral Design Studio LLC, Victore Productions, as well as from the community colleges of Alamo Colleges District, Dutchess Community College, Edgecombe Community College, McLennan Community College, Mohave Community College, Morgan Community College, North Carolina Community Colleges, Pine Technical & Community College, SUNY Adirondack, SUNY Fulton-Montgomery, and Community College Daily (<https://www.ccdaily.com/>).

### *Work Cited*

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<https://www.census.gov/data/tables/2021/demo/educational-attainment/cps-detailed-tables.html>

