



CHANGING THE NARRATIVE:

How Community Colleges Use Content Marketing to Transform Public Perception and Build Enrollment.

COMMUNITY COLLEGES FORM THE BACKBONE OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE U.S.

E*very day you will meet people in your community who were educated by a community college. This should come as no surprise. Almost every district in the United States has a community college¹, and together they represent half of all postsecondary education².*

Community colleges serve a vital function in higher education. They provide training for a wide range of technical and vocational skills, as well as language courses, enrichment courses, and computer proficiency courses. Taken together, community colleges provide a well-rounded education that serves many workers in their professional career and creates a springboard for entry into four-year colleges.

Not only do community colleges improve the economic prospects of graduates, they leave them less hindered by college debt. In fact, a recent report on student debt indicates that, for students who graduated in 2007–08, 62% of those who received associates degrees, and 70% of those who received certificates, graduated from community college without student debt.⁴



*31.5% of
community
college students
transfer to a 4-year
university within
six years.³*

DECLINING ENROLLMENT AND THE PERCEPTION CHALLENGE

Yet, despite the undisputed value community colleges bring to higher education, many of their virtues go unrecognized by their communities and by government. **Enrollment numbers have dropped across the board, and while some of this may be the result of a rising economy, it's possible that negative perceptions are also at play.**

These perceptions not only affect enrollment, they can impact state funding as well. Many legislators favor more prestigious four-year institutions with greater brand recognition. *Meanwhile, community colleges struggle to make their own case for funding in the face of common misperceptions, including that they offer a lower standard of education than four-year colleges, don't prepare graduates for jobs in the workforce, or are only for second-track students.*

It's possible that community colleges also suffer from misattributed (and sometimes conflicting) stereotypes that are often applied to other schools. Despite evidence to the contrary, some people believe they will lead to college debt, that they are only for vocational or technical training, or that degrees don't have the same legitimacy as more well-known institutions.

The ramifications of these beliefs lead us to the conclusion that perception is the number one issue for community colleges. But combating negative perceptions requires a thoroughly developed strategy—one that many community colleges have thus far underused.

96 % OF
COMMUNITY
COLLEGES
RECEIVE LESS
THAN 5% OF
THEIR BUDGET
FROM STATE
FUNDING.⁵





CHANGING PERCEPTIONS OF COMMUNITY COLLEGES THROUGH CONTENT MARKETING

To push back against negative perceptions, community colleges need to rethink their marketing strategy. Slogans, advertising, and rebrands will only go so far. Instead, community colleges must make the case for community college education as a first choice, from last resort.

Many students will move directly from high school to a four-year institution. *But many others will dual-enroll at their community college while still in high school, gaining transferrable credits that cut down the cost of their four-year degree.* Other students will turn to community college for valuable training in a new economic sector. And still others will return to community college as lifelong learners, looking to acquire a new skill or cultivate a long-held interest.

Helping these students consider all their educational options and make the choice best-suited to their talents and interest requires significant informative and educational materials.

This is exactly what content marketing aims to provide.

HOW CAN CONTENT MARKETING CHANGE THE CONVERSATION?

Content marketing consists of articles, infographics, videos, or other forms of “content” that provide value to the consumer. Instead of creating a billboard with a slogan and hoping it sticks, content marketing seeks to educate potential customers so that they can make a more informed and confident decision.

Well-made marketing pieces can establish a brand as an authoritative source of knowledge for users. By doing so, they encourage customers to come back for more information.

Customers may even share an especially useful piece of content among their friends and connections, helping it reach a wider audience.

This marketing method helps to shift customer perspectives through information, rather than outright persuasion. By helping customers draw their own conclusions, brands are more likely to gain the customer’s trust.

A HISTORICAL LOOK AT CONTENT MARKETING

As far-fetched as it may seem, content marketing is not a new concept. In 1895, John Deere began publishing a farming magazine called *The Furrow*, providing educational and informative articles to farmers. Deere established his company as a credible authority in agricultural circles, and created a farming equipment empire at the same time.

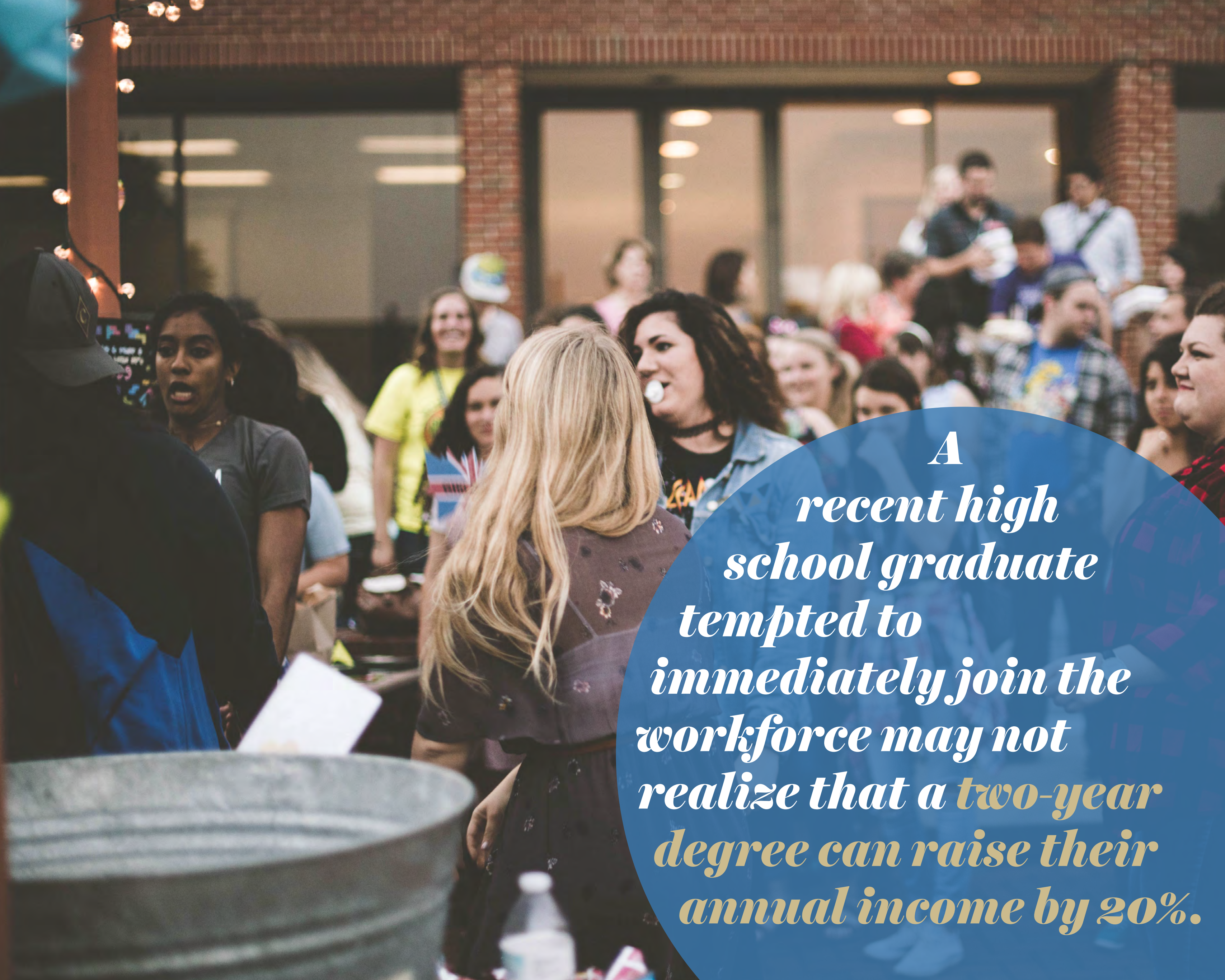
The French tire company Michelin had a similar idea when, in 1900, it published its first Michelin Guide for motorists. By building public interest in driving, Michelin increased demand for cars—and subsequently, tires.

CONTENT MARKETING FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGES

For community colleges, content marketing provides the platform to make a longer argument for the value of a well-rounded, two-year program. And in doing so, community colleges can build enrollment and attract more positive attention from donors and legislators.

Furthermore, content marketing can aid potential students by providing the answers to questions they have not thought to ask. *A recent high school graduate tempted to immediately join the workforce may not realize that a two-year degree can raise their annual income by twenty percent.* Meanwhile, an unemployed or underemployed worker can learn about the market demands and average income of professionals with the kind of training the community college provides.

An information-based marketing campaign allows community colleges to introduce these possibilities to prospective students. And, as the source of this new-found knowledge, the decision to enroll at the community college becomes a natural outcome.

A large crowd of people is gathered at an outdoor event at night. The scene is illuminated by warm lights, possibly from a building or streetlights, creating a festive atmosphere. In the foreground, a woman with long blonde hair is seen from behind, looking towards the crowd. To her left, a woman in a grey t-shirt is looking towards the camera. The background is filled with many other people, some wearing hats and casual clothing. A large blue circular overlay is positioned on the right side of the image, containing white and yellow text.

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HOW DOES APERTURE CONTENT MARKETING HELP COMMUNITY COLLEGES CHANGE THE NARRATIVE?

Community colleges have a unique opportunity to collaborate with each other to shift public perception about their value to the American educational system. Because community colleges are regionally based, they rarely draw upon the same pool of potential enrollees. Consequently, they don't often compete for students, but they do all benefit from a shift in public perception.

Aperture seeks to build this collaboration between community colleges by being a source for high-quality content for print and digital publications. By providing a library of articles, infographics, and other pieces of content, we help community colleges spread the word about their programs and services, raise awareness of the college's offerings, and transform the perception of their institution within the community.

COMMUNITY COLLEGES MUST MAKE THE CASE FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGE EDUCATION AS A FIRST CHOICE, RATHER THAN A LAST CHOICE



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HUMANS OF NEW YORK

Stephen King | On Writing |

A Memoir of the Craft
Tenth Anniversary Edition
The Acclaimed *New York Times* Bestseller

Jones &
Butman

MODERN
PSYCHOTHERAPIES

IT&USS

design and build websites



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HOW APERTURE WORKS

Aperture collaborates with community colleges, who can both contribute to and draw upon our library of material as a basis for their marketing campaigns. **They can then edit content to reflect their school's programs and ethos.**

Aperture's flagship publication, CareerFocus, has been used by community colleges around the country for 20 years to educate communities about the benefits of a two-year associate's degree or other professional certification. The content from this publication has been the foundation of its success, with community colleges supplementing our core articles on community college programs and the benefits of two-year degrees with their own content highlighting top students and featuring staff initiatives.

Meanwhile, our digital services make it easier for community colleges to share content online. **In doing so, community colleges can benefit from a full suite of online content marketing services—from a customizable website featuring articles for each semester, to a social media campaign that provides trackable analytics to help you measure the success of your program.**

Furthermore, Aperture provides the assistance to help community colleges create and edit the content they need to reach their communities. **Small and large communities alike face pressures in their marketing departments—small colleges because they don't have enough staff, large colleges because they have so many programs on their plate.** Aperture works directly with college staff to research, write, design, and print marketing materials that target their demographic audience and match their brand standards.

SUCCESS THROUGH COLLABORATION

Community colleges face a classic “rising tide lifts all boats” scenario. Fortunately, they don’t have to turn the tide of public perception on their own. By unifying their content strategy, they can share resources and build each other by spreading awareness together of the benefits community colleges bring to communities.

Aperture Content Marketing is here to provide that unified strategy. Through high-quality, well-researched content, we can bring your community college the recognition it deserves.

Contact us to learn more about the services we can provide your institution.

REFERENCES

¹American Association of Community Colleges: **What Are Community Colleges? Are They Vocational Schools?**

²The College Board: **Community Colleges and the College Board**

³National Student Clearinghouse Research Center: **Signature 13 Tracking Transfer: Measures of Effectiveness in Helping Community College Students to Complete Bachelor's Degrees**

⁴The College Board: **Trends in Community College Education: Enrollment, Prices, Student Aid, and Debt Levels**

⁵The Washington Post: **Community college students are filling the rolls at four-year institutions**

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(855) 572 - 2955

info@aperturecm.com

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