

# HIGHER EDUCATION DIGITAL ADVERTISING TRENDS IN THE AGE OF COVID-19

*June 2020*

**kivvit**

KIVVIT.COM | BOSTON | CHICAGO | MIAMI | NEW JERSEY | NEW YORK | WASHINGTON, D.C.

## SUMMARY

COVID-19 is upending the traditional higher education model. Institutions have been forced to rapidly adopt online learning, redefine their campus experience, and address enrollment and expenses amid declines in state aid and increased calls for lower tuition.

To understand how institutions are adapting their marketing to the current environment, Kivvit analyzed the Facebook advertising of 416 U.S. higher education institutions between March 12 and May 19. Advertising data was obtained from Pathmatics, a company that tracks digital advertising. We reviewed spending data, content from the largest campaigns, as well as Kivvit's own internal ad performance to identify the major themes shaping higher education advertising in the age of COVID-19.

*Against this backdrop, Kivvit has discovered both an opportunity—and an imperative—for institutions to actively market and differentiate themselves during this time.*

## KEY FINDINGS

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- Higher education advertising on Facebook increased 7% during the pandemic compared to the same period one year ago.
- Private and for-profit online entities are among the largest education advertisers and drove the increase in spending, seeking to capitalize on the uncertainty that currently surrounds on-campus learning.
- Traditional campus institutions, such as Purdue University and the University of Florida, are investing heavily in promoting their online offerings.
- Public institutions are being outspent by private entities, comprising just 17% of spending among the 100 largest advertisers.
- The majority of recent ads promote online degrees, with several institutions explicitly referencing COVID-19 to build brand awareness or motivate enrollment in public health and nursing programs.
- Career advancement and convenience are the most common messages used in ads, followed by affordability.
- The most common ad visual features people conforming to social distancing, although 45% of ads with people showed groups in proximity to one another. Visuals depicting campus environments are featured the least.
- Kivvit's own internal advertising data shows that campaign effectiveness, measured by click-through rate (CTR), has been higher since mid-March compared to pre-pandemic levels, demonstrating a market for higher education ads.
- Education advertising is one of the most-preferred type of ads among U.S. internet users, according to a survey conducted by Integral Ad Science (IAS), a New York-based company that analyzes digital ad placements.

# FACING COVID-19 UNCERTAINTIES & ENROLLMENT CHALLENGES, HIGHER ED DIGITAL SPENDING INCREASES 7%, PUSHING ONLINE PROGRAMS

Higher education ad spending increased 7% between March 12 and May 19 relative to the same period in 2019, according to a Kivvit analysis of Facebook data across 416 public and private universities and colleges, and for-profit organizations.

Institutions collectively spent just under \$55 million on ads during the 10-week period analyzed, \$3.65 million more than last year. Approximately the same number of institutions increased or maintained ad spending as those that decreased. Private online universities drove the largest increases in spending, seeking to capitalize on the moment as COVID-19 creates uncertainty about the future of campus learning and upends the traditional higher education model. The average Facebook advertising spend was \$131,402 per institution during this timeframe, equating to approximately \$54,000 per month.

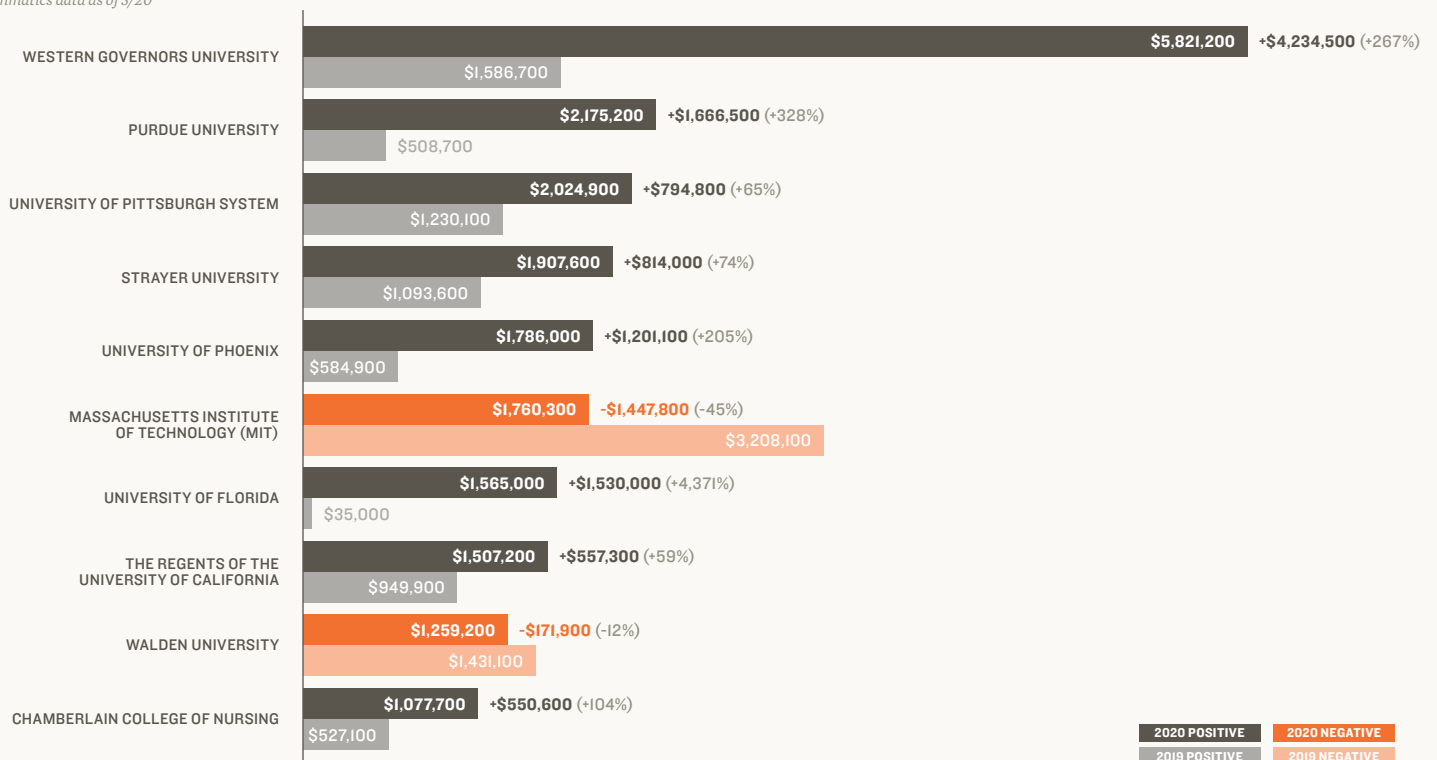
## PRIVATE ONLINE ENTITIES DRIVE AD SPENDING

Online entity Western Governors University has been the largest higher education advertiser on Facebook during the pandemic, spending \$5.82 million, a 267% increase over its 2019 spending. Private online universities comprise 51% of ad spending among the 10 largest higher education advertisers, up from 38% at the same time last year. This underscores a concerted marketing effort to capitalize on the industry-wide shift to remote and online learning during the pandemic and campus shutdowns.

Beyond strictly online entities, Purdue and the University of Florida ramped up advertising to promote their respective online initiatives. Both MIT and the University of California, Berkeley heavily promoted online technology courses.

### TOP INSTITUTIONS BY AD SPENDING

All Pathmatics data as of 5/20

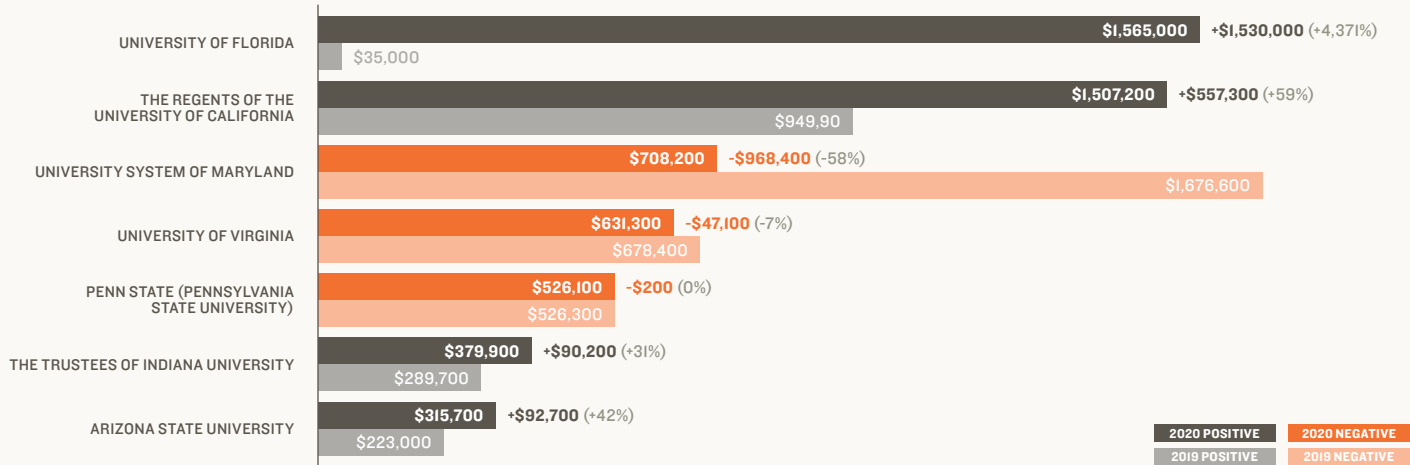


Note: University of Pittsburgh System includes advertising by UP medical center.

## PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS OUTSPENT BY PRIVATE UNIVERSITIES, BUT BOTH INCREASE SPENDING DURING COVID-19

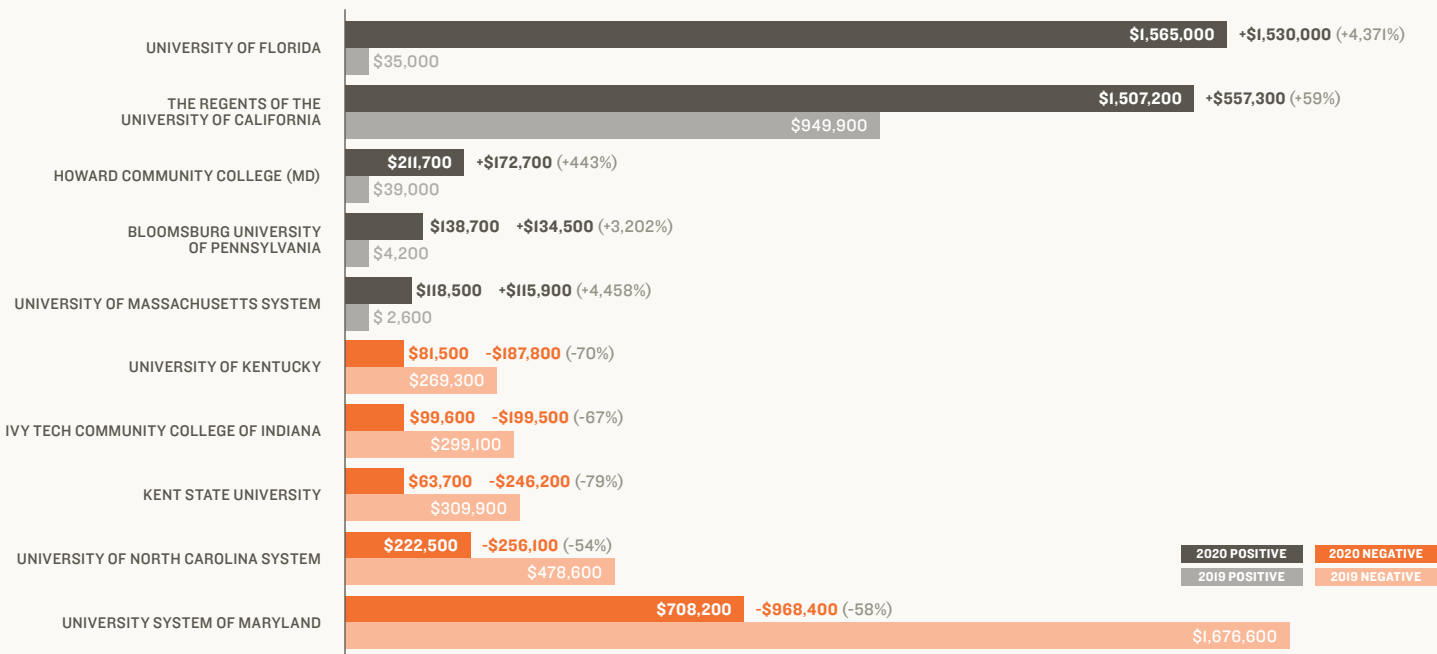
Public institutions represented just 25% of the top 100 advertisers and comprised just 17% of ad spending among that group. However, public and private institutions in this group both increased ad spending at the same rate during the pandemic, by approximately 21%.

### TOP PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS BY AD SPENDING



The University of Florida ramped up ad spending the most of any public institution (4,371%) to promote its UF Online offering. UC Berkeley’s online data science program was the focus of advertising that drove the UC system’s 59% increase in spending. By contrast, the largest decrease in spending came from the University System of Maryland. This decline was driven largely by reductions in Facebook ad spending from the system’s online University of Maryland Global Campus arm.

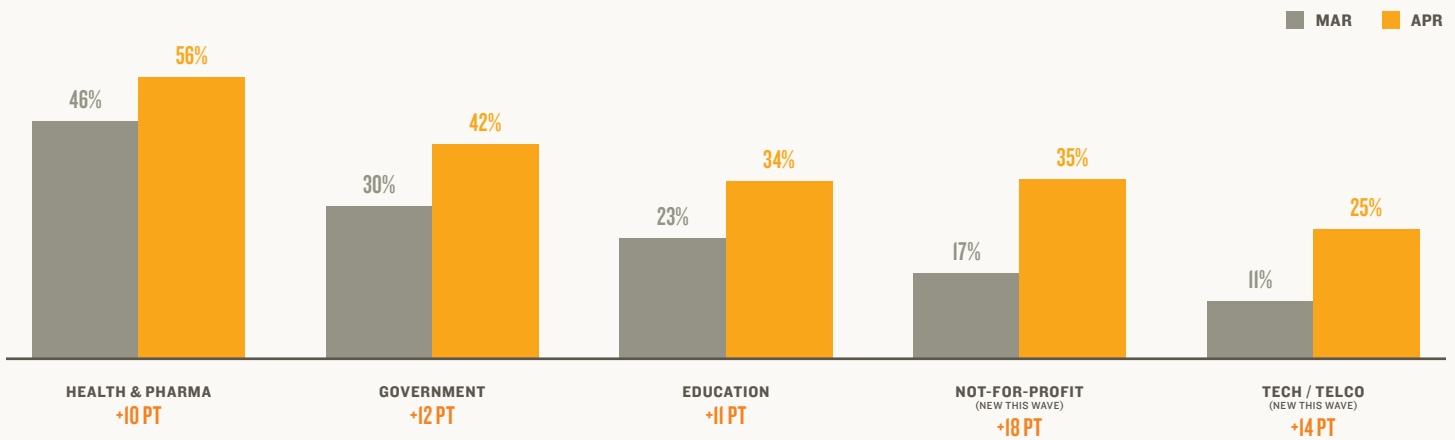
### LARGEST CHANGE IN PUBLIC INSTITUTION AD SPENDING



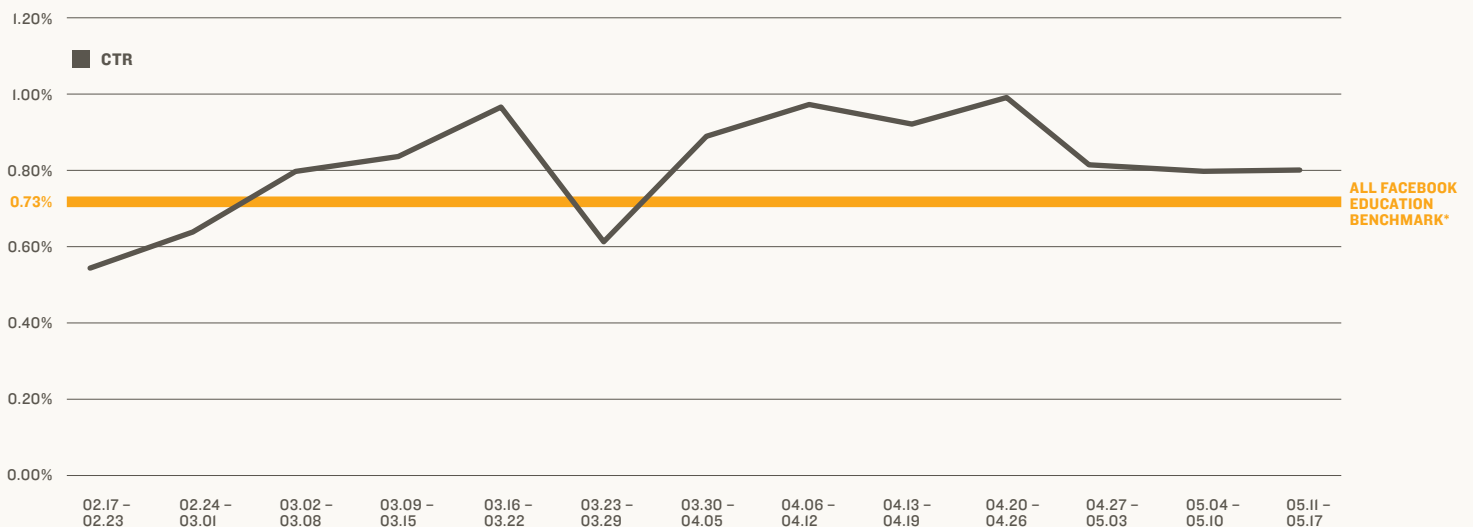
# ADVERTISING PERFORMANCE

Two-thirds of U.S. internet users are seeking out coronavirus content online, according to a April study by IAS. Amid this surge in online attention, education brands were identified as one of the types of advertising that consumers want to see most. The study showed that consumer preference for education advertising increased 11% between March and April, making it the third-most preferred type of advertising.

Q: WHAT TYPES OF BRANDS DO YOU \*WANT\* TO SEE NEXT TO CORONAVIRUS CONTENT?



When evaluating Kivvit’s own internal higher education advertising data—spanning millions of impressions delivered to **over 870,000 prospective applicants between February 17 and May 17**—we found campaigns are performing better than pre-COVID levels and above the standard Facebook benchmark for education advertising. This finding was based on analysis of each campaign’s click-through rate (CTR), which measures a campaign’s effectiveness, over the course of the pandemic. This means education advertisers can expect improved performance from their campaigns with the right content and messaging.



\*Wordstream

# CONTENT THAT REFLECTS THE MOMENT

Several institutions have used advertising to reflect the moment, mentioning COVID-19 specifically or alluding to the magnitude of change taking place around us and framing the pandemic as a call to action—particularly for nursing and public health programs. It is notable that the call to action for many of these ads is “Learn More,” which means these campaigns have an awareness goal versus a conversion objective, such as “Apply Now.”

**ASU** Arizona State University  
Sponsored  
April 8 at 5:14 PM · 🌐

#COVID19 changes how we learn, but it doesn't change our desire to learn.

**ASU**  
for You

ASUFORYOU.ASU.EDU  
**ASU for You**  
Keep your learning on track. We've laun...

[LEARN MORE](#)

**Chamberlain University College of Nursing**  
Sponsored

More than ever, our communities need those who have a calling to step forward. Learn how you can make an impact with your MSN

CHAMBERLAIN.EDUMSN  
Thank you for caring for our communities  
You Can Make a Difference.

[Learn More](#)

**University of Phoenix**  
Sponsored

“We are here to save the world with our hearts and our hands”  
-Anamay A.

Currently serving in a COVID-19 Unit, alumna Anamay is a Stroke Unit Manager who is prepared to continue giving her very best in direct patient care. To all the dedicated nurses bravely serving on the frontlines and helping however they can, we thank you! Let's show this #FrontlinePhoenix extra gratitude during Nurses Week with an encouraging message below! #StayHomeStaySafe

👤: Anamay A. (MSN, '16)

**University of Pittsburgh**  
Sponsored

In a time of crisis, Pitt answers the call. Like our page to see our work improving the world.

University of Pittsburgh  
University  
90,445 people like this

[Like Page](#)

**Penn State**  
May 11 at 9:37 PM · 🌐

“If there was ever a “We Are” moment, this is it. We need to come together in the full spirit of the phrase, support one another and stand up for what we believe: The importance of community.” - Penn State President, Eric Barron

PSU.EDU  
**We are all Penn State.**  
Today. Tomorrow. Together.

[LEARN MORE](#)

**Syracuse University**  
Sponsored

The field of public health will never be the same. Learn how you can make a difference with a Master's from Falk College.

**M.S. IN PUBLIC HEALTH**

**FALK** | Director  
College

Explore Falk College  
Get an M.S. in Public Health

[Apply Now](#)

**Michigan State University**  
May 13 at 4:20 PM · 🌐

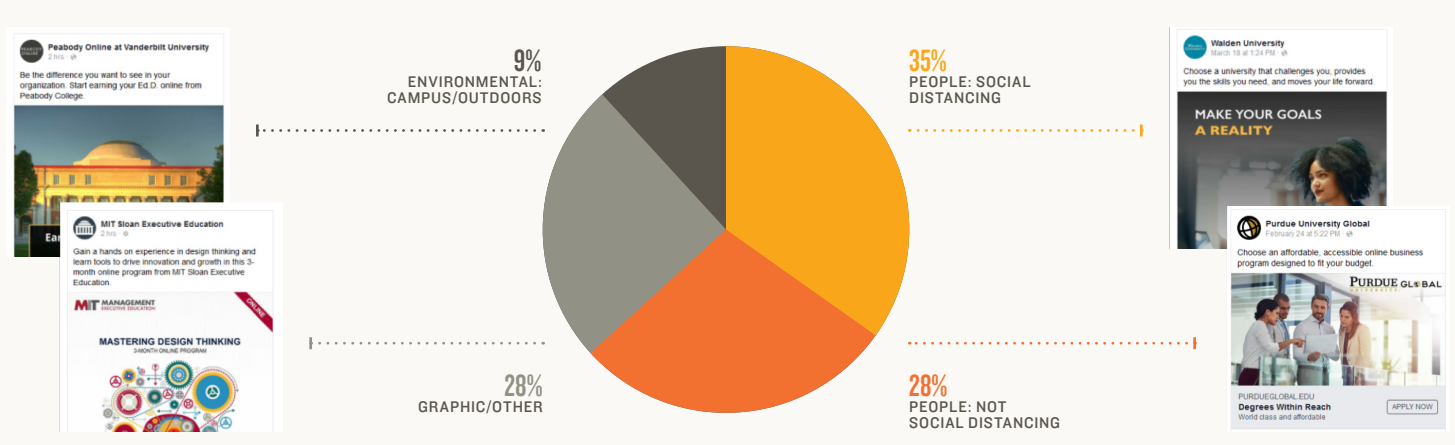
MSU nursing students and alumni across the country are stepping up to provide care during the COVID-19 pandemic.

MSUTODAYMSU.EDU  
**Spartan Nurses Care**

[LEARN MORE](#)

# CONTENT TRENDS

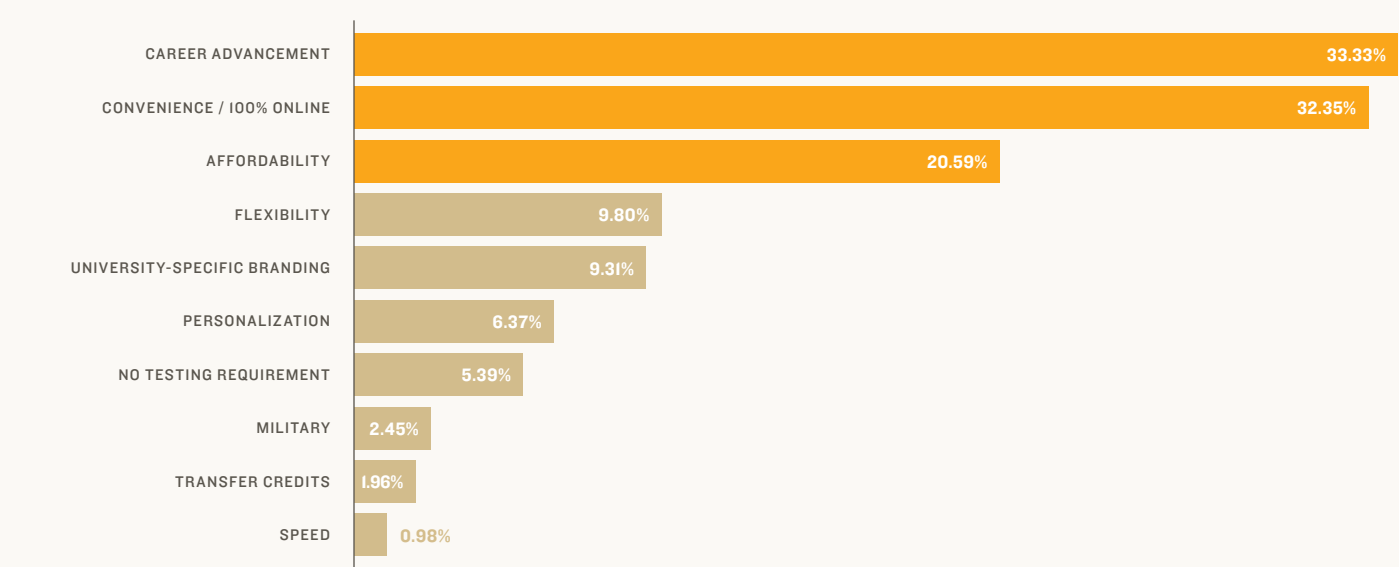
Over 60% of ads explicitly promote online degree programs, underscoring the significance of online education in the COVID-19 era, according to a review of over 200 ads that have run since the start of the pandemic. With uncertainty around the role of in-person learning, visuals of campus environments feature in just 9% of ad creative. In contrast, visuals of people comprised over half of ad visuals, with a plurality featuring a person conforming to social distancing, often studying by themselves. However, among ad creative featuring people, 45% feature groups of people in close proximity—even in ads for online programs.



Based on a review of the top 10 ads by impressions for each of the 25 largest campaigns running between 3/12 to 4/30.

With the economic toll of the pandemic still unfolding, the most common messaging used in ads emphasizes career advancement. Convenience—particularly highlighting 100% online programs—and affordability are other major themes featured in ads.

## TYPES OF MESSAGES USED IN AD COPY



## CONCLUSION

With campuses currently shuttered across the nation and a patchwork of solutions emerging for the fall academic semester, one consistent trend among both public and private institutions has been an increased focus on advertising—with a specific emphasis on online learning.

The market shows increased traction and a preference for education advertising, according to surveys as well as actual campaign data. A review of the most-delivered ads during the pandemic indicate that messaging focused on career advancement and convenience is the current trend, with visuals featuring people, particularly individuals conforming with social distancing. Several institutions have also used the moment to adapt advertising to rally action based on the current environment. These campaigns are primarily enrollment-driven but also include efforts to increase followers and build reputation.

Of course, content and context matters, and institutions should evaluate their individual campaign data to determine their specific strategy. However, current trends indicate there is a market—and a competitive imperative—for institutions to be visible and communicate with prospects amid the still-evolving COVID-19 higher education landscape.

## WORK WITH KIVVIT

Kivvit is one of the nation’s largest and fastest-growing strategic communications firms. Our teams have extensive experience working with institutions of higher education to execute advertising, public relations, crisis mitigation, and outreach initiatives. We have a deep understanding of the unique digital landscape surrounding education — and the different pressures and stakeholders that a communications strategy needs to address.

 <p><b>DIGITAL AGENCY OF THE YEAR</b> PROVOKE SABRE AWARDS 2020</p>	 <p><b>MOST INNOVATIVE AGENCY</b> GOLD, BULLDOG PR AWARDS 2020</p>	 <p><b>PUBLIC AFFAIRS FIRM OF THE YEAR</b> REED AWARDS 2020</p>	 <p><b>BEST EDUCATION CAMPAIGN</b> PROVOKE SABRE AWARDS 2020</p>	 <p><b>TOP 5 EDUCATION PR FIRM</b> O'DWYERS RANKINGS 2020</p>
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*This report was co-authored by members of Kivvit’s higher education team. Contact us to arrange a custom briefing for your institution.*

**SHEA SAVARIA**  
PRINCIPAL  
ssavaria@kivvit.com

**CLAUDIA DODGE**  
DIGITAL PRINCIPAL  
cdodge@kivvit.com

**ZACH SILBER**  
CHIEF INNOVATION OFFICER  
zsilber@kivvit.com