The Creative *Edge*

Resolving the Tension Between Meaningful Human Experience and Institutional Scale in Online Enrollment Strategies (OES)

Your Presenter

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Fountain Pen and Watch Aficionado

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CrossFitter, Cook, Dog Dad

Today's Agenda

The Human Factor in the Digital Equation

Understanding the Journey

What is Great Creative?

The Artificial Intelligence Enhancer

Where To, From Here?

The Carnegie Conference

When did you know?

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When did you know?

When did you know?

88% Chief Online Learning Officers (COLOs) anticipate growth in their online program portfolios over the next three years.

67% Institutions explicitly identify new revenue streams as a primary goal for their online learning initiatives.

25% Institutions report at least 20% enrollment in hybrid programs for undergraduates.

65% Institutions report investing in non-degree offerings, up significantly from just 29% in 2019.

84% Institutions declare increasing enrollment as a key goal for their online programs, with nearly half citing it as their *top* priority.

+ **Strategic Imperative**

+ **Financial Necessity**

+ **Lifelong Learning**

+ **Hybrid Demand**

+ **Market Saturation**

Then:

Brand was for bricks-and-mortar.

+

Online students made decisions pragmatically.

Their only concerns were speed to complete and cost.

+

Online was the "second-class" option.

It was often viewed as a compromise that students settled for only because they couldn't access the "real" campus experience.

+

Marketing was just lead generation.

Institutions relied on buying media clicks, assuming volume would follow visibility.

+

Availability was the only differentiator.

At one time, simply having an online option was enough to win.

If you build it, will they come?

Now:

Brand is essential for differentiation.

+

Distinct identity is the only remaining bulwark.

When everyone is online, your brand's unique ethos is the only thing that cannot be commoditized.

+

Creative is an efficiency engine, not a line item.

High-quality, empathetic creative creates the "trust bridge" that lowers your cost of acquisition.

+

Practicality opens. Belonging closes.

Speed and cost are table stakes. The decisive factor is often human considerations that students value but rarely know to ask for.

+

The "Brand Halo" drives the purchase.

Online is now a premium product. Students aren't just buying credits. They are buying the credibility and prestige of your name on their degree.

The Human Factor in the Digital Equation

"I expected eight to 10 hours of homework. What I didn't expect was friendship or community. If I had known that was part of the deal, I'd have jumped on the program sooner."

Online Program Student

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"I remember thinking 'oh wow, they're really white.' My student population within my cohort is actually far more diverse than is shown ... I wish there was greater representation, racially, ethnically, and otherwise on the website to better represent ... the mission and the vision of the university."

Online Program Student

"The level of care that I experience as a student is unparalleled... all of the teachers are very ... uplifting and encouraging. I always get the impression that they're invested in my academic success."

Online Program Student

"I don't feel the warmth and the spirit of my university on this website with what is on there right now..."

Online Program Student

Understanding the Journey

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Four Phases of the Prospective Student Journey

+

Understand
and Explore

+

Narrow Choices
and Apply

+

Decide
and Accept

+

Commit
and Transition

+

Understand and Explore

+

Narrow Choices and Apply

+

Decide and Accept

+

Commit & Transition

Thoughts & Feelings

+ "I need to make more money."
+ "How quickly can I complete this program?"
+ "I don't want to be the oldest student in the classroom, and I haven't written a term paper in 25 years."
+ "I'm doing this to make a better life for my family, but I'm terrified of taking time away from them."
+ "I have big dreams, but I have absolutely no idea where to start."
+ "I need a new career"

+

**Understand and
Explore**

+

**Narrow Choices
and Apply**

+

**Decide and
Accept**

+

**Commit &
Transition**

Thoughts & Feelings

+ "How quickly can I complete this program?"
+ "Why is it so hard to find the actual tuition cost on this website?"
+ "If I have to hunt down one more transcript from a college I attended for one semester in 2008, I'm quitting."
+ "I feel like an imposter just filling out this application. I don't belong in academia."
+ "Will my transfer credits actually count, or did I waste those two years?"
+ "I hope the admissions counselor acts like a guide, not a telemarketer."

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+
Understand and Explore

+
Narrow Choices and Apply

+
Decide and Accept

+
Commit & Transition

Thoughts & Feelings

+ "What name is going to impress my boss and my colleagues the most?"
+ "Did I just make a huge mistake with my savings?"
+ "I wish I had been brave enough to do this five years ago."
+ "I'm not doing this just for a job anymore. I'm doing this to prove to myself that I can."
+ "Now that I've decided, I'm impatient— I want to start yesterday."
+ "I need to know that a real human being will answer the phone if I crash and burn."

+

Understand and Explore

+

Narrow Choices and Apply

+

Decide and Accept

+

Commit & Transition

Thoughts & Feelings

+ "I'm staring at this syllabus and I already feel like I'm drowning."
+ "Where do I actually click to enter the classroom? The technology is intimidating."
+ "I hope my home WiFi holds up during the live sessions, or I'll be humiliated."
+ "Everyone posting in the discussion board sounds so much smarter than me."
+ "This isn't just school. This is a second full-time job I have to manage."
+ "What kind of understanding will my school have if I have to miss school for work or home?"

What is Great Creative?

Then:

Great creative was "nice to have."

+

"There's a typical online student."

We used to treat every online student as a single persona, ignoring the vast diversity of motivations and backgrounds that actually drive decisions.

+

Design was transactional, functional at best.

Creative strategy was reduced to efficient information delivery.

+

Imagery was generic and interchangeable.

Visuals relied heavily on stock photography of "smiling people looking at laptops."

+

We saw the journey as linear and timely.

We failed to account for the diverse experiences and non-linear decision-making of post-traditional students.

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Now:

Emotive storytelling drives decisions.

+

There's no typical online student.

The market has expanded into a variety of audiences. A generic message now connects with no one.

+

Experience-driven design converts.

Modern landing pages must function like infographics, not applications.

+

Authenticity builds the trust bridge.

In a skeptical market, "real" wins.

+

The "Shadow Funnel" dictates engagement.

In the age of AI-based search, your website is no longer an information engine — it's a validation engine.

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Great creative is based on empathy *and* steeped in your authentic brand.

Great creative respects and supports the journey.

Great creative makes an emotional connection.

The Upshot
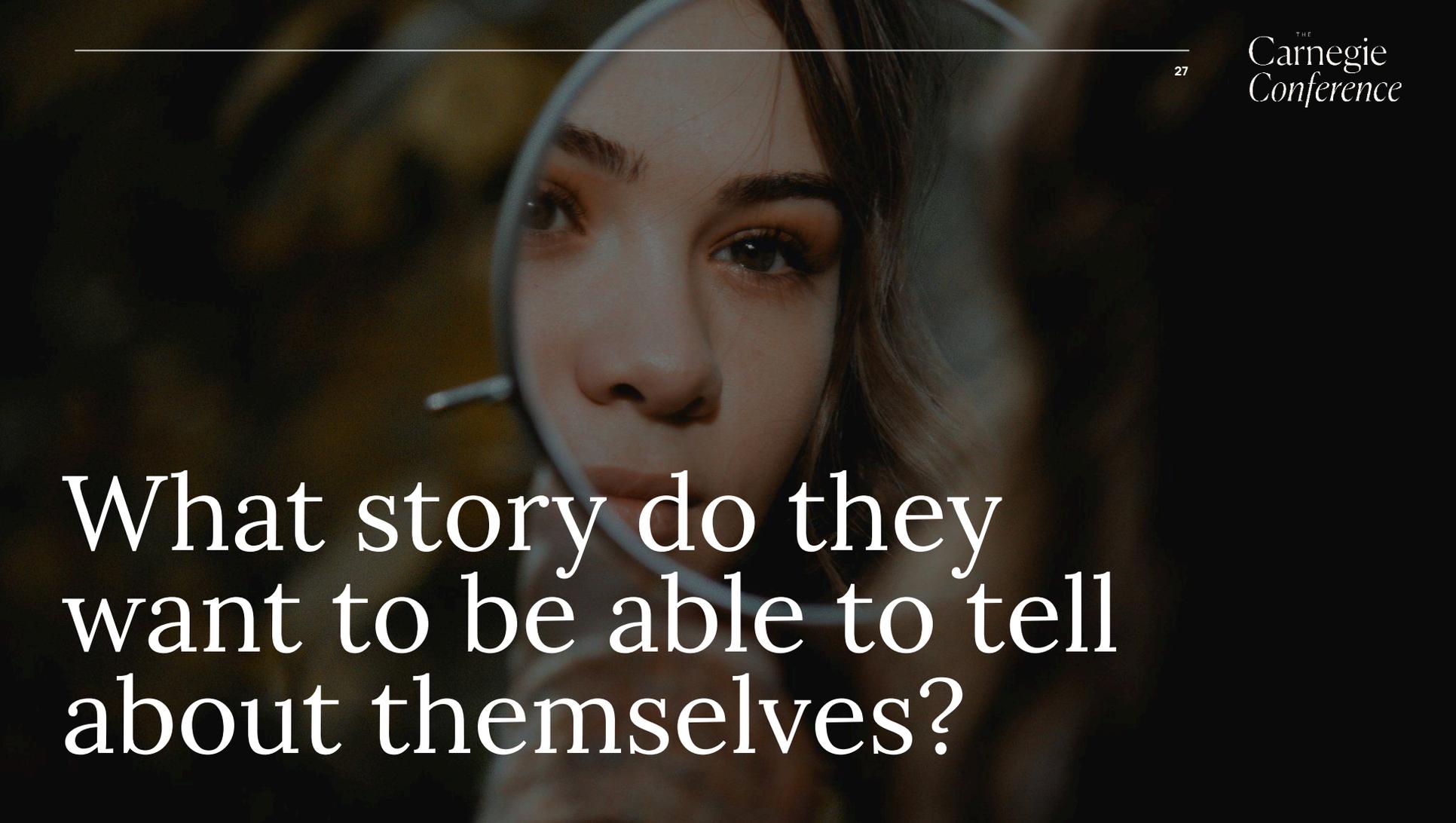
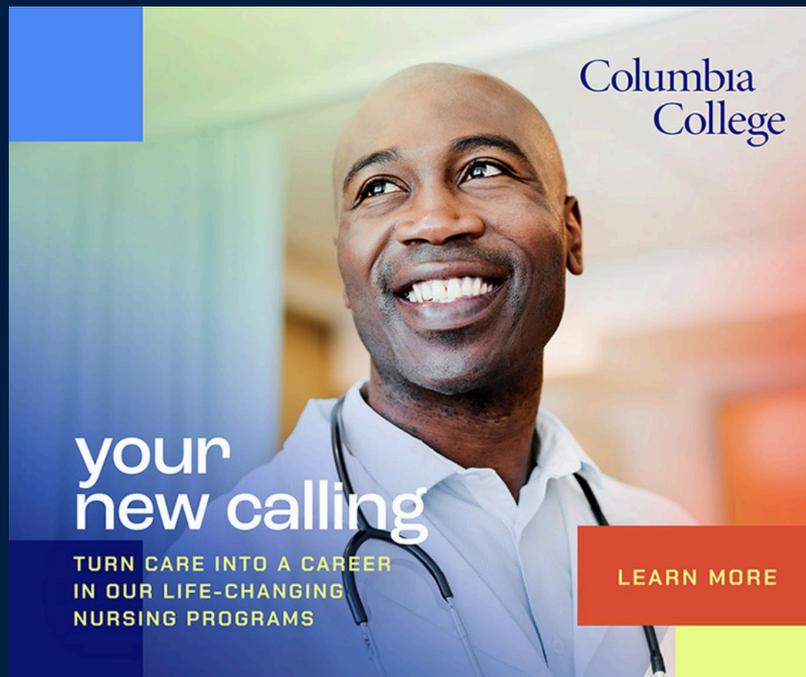# What story do they want to be able to tell about themselves?

The world needs
MOORE
OF YOU

MOORE
COLLEGE
OF ART
& DESIGN

APPLY NOW

Do MOORE of
WHAT
YOU
LOVE

MOORE
COLLEGE
OF ART
& DESIGN

APPLY NOW

The AI Enhancer

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AI shouldn't replace connection.
It should fuel connection.

+

Solve the creative fatigue issue.

AI helps create empathy-based communications at infinite scale, ensuring every person feels seen.

+

Adopt a "cyborg" model.

The algorithm can handle transactional. Your humans can focus entirely on important relational touchpoints.

+

Lean into hyper-relevance at scale.

Generic communication is the enemy of conversion. Communicating highly relevant content at the right time wins hearts.

+

Unleash your storytellers.

The winning strategy is to reinvest saved hours into capturing the human stories — the raw, authentic narratives — that AI cannot invent.

Where To, From Here?

Carnegie Report:
Understanding Today's Online Learners

Carnegie completed online learning research in late 2025.

Full thematic report with insights and recommendations is available for all conference attendees.

Reporting includes quantitative outcomes, qualitative themes and quotes, as well as extensive data tables.

Learner data is broken down across 43 demographic categories; leader data across 11 categories.

Includes 11 key audience profiles for targeted marketing or program adjustments.

"There is something about having a degree from a certain place that has *power* in the room. You don't get that same impact without it."
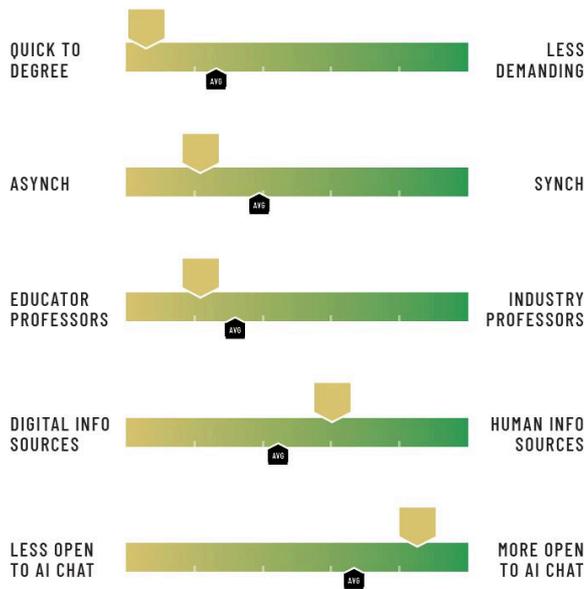
From Carnegie's Research Report

"I think the most frustrating thing for me has been that schools think I'm applying to be a normal undergrad, but when they find out I'm online they send me resources for old people. I just want to get a degree online, man. Doesn't mean I'm ancient."

From Carnegie's Research Report

Career Builder (4-year Degree) Learning Profile

Learning preferences and AI use for this segment.

PROGRAM INTEREST DICHOTOMIES

QUICK TO DEGREE — LESS DEMANDING

ASYNCH — SYNCH

EDUCATOR PROFESSORS — INDUSTRY PROFESSORS

DIGITAL INFO SOURCES — HUMAN INFO SOURCES

LESS OPEN TO AI CHAT — MORE OPEN TO AI CHAT

SUPPORT SERVICE NEEDS

INTEREST IN SUPPORT SERVICES

IMPORTANT SERVICES
ACCESS TO CAMPUS RESOURCES
COURSE TUTORING
LIBRARY SUPPORT
ALUMNI ENGAGEMENT

AI INTEREST PROFILE

CURRENT USE OF AI

TOP AI USE CASES
COMPARISON SHOP COLLEGES
HELP WITH ASSIGMENTS
COMMUNICATION ASSISTANCE

Career Builder (4-year Degree) Comms Profile

Outreach and communication details about this segment.

PROSPECTS IN THIS SEGMENT...

ARE *MORE* MOTIVATED BY
IMPROVING THEIR COMMUNITY
ADVANCING THEIR REPUTATION
DISCOVERING THEMSELVES
THE ENJOYMENT OF LEARNING

ARE *LESS* MOTIVATED BY
STARTING THEIR OWN BUSINESS
PIVOTING LIFE DIRECTION
LEARNING SPECIFIC JOB TOOLS
SITTING FOR LICENSURE

**CARE *MORE* ABOUT A PROGRAM'S**
BRAND REPUTATION
BUSINESS PARTNERSHIPS
INSTITUTIONAL REPUTATION
CREDIT TRANSFER

CARE *LESS* ABOUT A PROGRAM'S
NET COST
SCHEDULE FLEXIBILITY
RETURN ON INVESTMENT
QUALITY OF LEARNING PLATFORM

WORRY *MORE* ABOUT
BOSS NOT BEING SUPPORTIVE
HAVING NOTHING ELSE TO LEARN
EDUCATIONAL PAUSES
TECHNOLOGY ISSUES

WORRY *LESS* ABOUT
NOT FINDING THE RIGHT TIME
THE COST
THEIR OTHER RESPONSIBILITIES
THE TIME COMMITMENT

...THAN OTHER PROSPECTS SAMPLED.

INFORMATION-SEEKING

DIGITAL PLATFORM USE

AVG
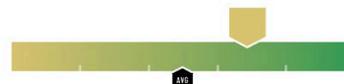
KEY INFORMATION SOURCES
RANKING SITES
PROFESSIONAL SOCIAL MEDIA
ONLINE LEARNING YOUTUBE
PROFESSIONAL JOURNALS

PLATFORMS TO CONSIDER
INSTAGRAM
AI TOOLS
X
FACEBOOK

INSTITUTIONAL BRAND IMPORTANCE

AVG

Four concrete steps:

+

Identify your core online audiences.

You cannot effectively serve all 11 learner personas. Select the specific audiences you are uniquely positioned to win.

+

Launch You, not just programs.

Stop chasing generic volume across every vertical. Focus your resources on the intersection of demand and your brand authority.

+

Put the real heroes at the heart of the story.

If your headlines focus on your institution, you are already losing the engagement battle. Flip the narrative to make the student the hero.

+

Centralize the guardrails.

Centralize your AI use strategy and policy so you can safely decentralize creative execution.

Thank you.

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