VOL 5 • ISSUE #1 • 2026

GradMag

THE HIGHER ED MARKETING MAGAZINE



THE NEW TOOLS OF THE TRADE

HOW TO MARKET FASTER & SMARTER IN 2026

Intro

Tools of the Trade

and the Heart Behind Them



If there's one thing every community college marketer knows, it's this: the work never stops. Whether you're juggling campaigns, redesigning class schedules, launching rebrands, or just trying to keep up with your inbox (and your inbox's inbox), this job requires grit, creativity, and a whole lot of coffee.

But here's the good news: You don't have to do it alone.

This year's issue of GradMag is all about the tools that make our wild marketing dreams a little more manageable. From AI-powered writing assistants to Canva hacks and secret shopping revelations, we're diving into the resources that can make your work smarter, not harder.

These aren't just shiny new toys (though we love a good gadget). They're the means to something bigger: telling better stories, connecting with students in more meaningful ways, and building campaigns that make an impact.

Because with the right tools, the right strategy, and the right dose of caffeine-fueled creativity, anything is possible.

You'll also find expert insights, inspiring case studies, and practical how-tos—all designed to meet you where you are, whether you're a team of ten or a one-person powerhouse.

We hope this issue leaves you feeling a little more equipped, a little more inspired, and a whole lot prouder of the work you do.

Let's get to it.

Cheryl Broom

CEO, GradComm

In This Issue

Letter from GradComm CEO, Cheryl Broom ... 02

Secret Shopper: From Click To Class ... 03

AI @ AU ... 04

Staying Visible in the Age of AI Search ... 06

Canva for Marketing ... 08

Inside the Numbers ... 10



Join 2,000+ college marketers by subscribing to our e-newsletter!

Photo by GradComm, courtesy of Cerritos College.

From Click to Class

What Secret Shopping Reveals About Student Roadblocks

When Jordan clicks "Become a Sentinel" on North Florida College's website, they are buzzing with that mix of excitement and anxiety first-gen students know all too well. The college website makes it easy to dream: vibrant student stories, career stats, and bold calls to action. But a few weeks later, that spark begins to fizzle.

Jordan's emails to admissions, financial aid, and disability services go unanswered. Phone calls ring into the void. After they get accepted, they can't register due to confusing account holds and a total lack of follow-up. Winter break comes and goes, and Jordan still isn't enrolled.

But here's the twist: Jordan isn't a real student. They're a secret shopper from GradComm.

As part of our Student Experience Secret Shopper Project, our secret shoppers take on the role of real students—working parents, multilingual learners, recent high school grads, etc.—and walk through the entire enrollment journey. The goal? Uncover what it takes to become a community college student.

Spoiler alert: it's a lot more difficult than you think.

At GradComm, we believe the best way to build a student-centered experience is to experience it firsthand. That's where secret shopping comes in. Our team creates custom student personas and follows the same path your applicants do navigating websites, calling departments, sending emails, applying, registering, and enrolling in a class. We document everything: what works, what's broken, and where students are getting stuck.

Here's what we've learned.

► **Small problems can feel huge to students.** A broken link or a missed email might not seem like a big deal. But for a student juggling work, family, and doubt, it can easily be the thing that makes them give up.

► **Responsiveness matters.** A lot. We often uncover friction points like inconsistent messaging and hard-to-navigate phone trees. But we also find bright spots such as staff who reply quickly and help students feel seen. That balance helps colleges expand on what works and fix what doesn't.

► **Empathy is data, too.** Our reports combine hard data with student emotion. Why? Because success isn't just about which boxes got checked, it's about how students feel along the way.

Secret shopping isn't about placing blame. It's about exposing the hidden friction points that students face and equipping colleges to fix them.

For institutions that are serious about equity, enrollment, and student success, this kind of feedback isn't a luxury. It's essential.

NFC NORTH FLORIDA COLLEGE

North Florida College leaned into our secret shopper process big time. After completing five secret shopper journeys with GradComm, the college overhauled multiple student-facing systems and saw immediate results:

"Our secret shopper results were a wake-up call," said Alison Finley, Director of Communications and Marketing. "It wasn't always easy to hear, but it gave us the outside perspective we needed. We've raised the bar for responsiveness and student-centered service across the board."

SWC SOUTHWESTERN COLLEGE

Southwestern College in Southern California leveraged our insights to enhance the experience for adult ESL learners and first-time applicants. The feedback wasn't always easy to hear, but it sparked change. As Dean Jennifer Lewis put it:

"The results were enlightening—and at times uncomfortable—but gave us essential feedback to guide service improvements. GradComm was our catalyst for better student success."

AI @AU



What Happens When a University Doesn't Just Adopt AI, but Bakes It into Its DNA?

In episode 63 of our award-winning podcast, Higher Ed Conversations, GradComm's CEO Cheryl Broom sat down with Washington University Dean of Kogod School of Business David Marchick and Associate Director of the Institute for Applied Artificial Intelligence Angela Virtu to explore how AI is reshaping everything from curriculum design to campus marketing and student support.

Note: The following are highlights from the original podcast. For the full conversation, scan the QR code below.

Q: How did AI integration begin at American University?

David Marchick:

It started by listening. A student once asked a visiting venture capitalist, "Am I going to be replaced by AI?" He answered, "You probably won't be replaced by AI, but you could be replaced by someone who knows AI." That moment sparked a light bulb for me. We decided to incorporate AI throughout our curriculum: every subject, every level.

We now have more than **45 classes that use AI,** and every incoming student is told on day one: "You'll use AI every day." It's in our DNA.

Q: How have faculty adapted to this shift?

Angela Virtu:

We're still learning, but balance is key. In my programming courses, for example, I'll have students use AI at home to write code, but in class they have to explain what that code is doing. That ensures real understanding.

We're also building an **AI-powered writing tutor** that critiques clarity and organization but doesn't rewrite students' work: It guides them to improve it. The goal is not to make learning easier, but to make it better.

Q: How are students responding?

David Marchick:

They love it. One MBA student used AI to prep for a CEO interview researching the company, anticipating questions, and even generating thoughtful ones to ask back.

We teach students to use AI across disciplines: to underwrite investments, analyze financial risk, conduct market research, and design marketing campaigns. Right now, AI is a collaborator. **Soon, it will be an agent doing entire tasks on your behalf.** We want our students to be fluent before they enter that world.

Q: How is Kogod using AI in marketing and enrollment?

David Marchick:

We're all in. Our AI Institute's work was featured in *The Wall Street Journal* and *Axios*, and *Poets & Quants* called ours "the most consequential AI transformation in business education."

We even used that quote in full-page *Wall Street Journal* ads and it worked. Applications rose 22 percent last year and 40 percent this year.

AI now supports every marketing workflow. For example, when admitted students are deciding where to enroll, our team used **AI to build a 50-message campaign** across email, Instagram, and TikTok. It drafted 70–80 percent of the final content in minutes; work that normally takes weeks. Humans refined it, but AI gave us a huge head start.

We've also **launched a chatbot for admitted students** that answers common questions about aid, internships, and curriculum, freeing staff to focus on more complex issues.

Q: Angela, what's driving your success in scaling this so fast?

Angela Virtu:

We took a top-down and bottom-up approach. Leadership set the vision, but faculty curiosity drove momentum. That dual energy helped us move fast while navigating university bureaucracy.

This fall we're launching AI badges to certify student proficiency—quick wins that employers understand—while also developing a full AI undergraduate major.

Q: For leaders who want to begin this journey, where should they start?

David Marchick:

Two things: **incentives and culture.**

First, reward faculty who adopt and experiment with AI: send them to conferences, fund training, celebrate early wins.

Second, build a culture where it's okay to fail. We tell our faculty: try, learn, iterate. Some things will flop, and that's fine.

We also train our teams to think of AI as an audience, not just a tool. In the past, marketing meant SEO for Google. Now it's AI optimization—ensuring that when someone asks ChatGPT which schools lead in AI—American University is in that answer.

Q: What's next for AU's AI journey?

Angela Virtu:

Deeper integration everywhere from student services to research. The more we use AI to enhance human potential, the more equitable and accessible learning becomes.

David Marchick:

Exactly. We're in the third inning of a long game, but **we're playing to win** and helping our students do the same.



For the full conversation, scan the QR code.



Staying Visible in the Age of AI Search

At GradComm, great partnerships don't end when a campaign launches, they grow through shared learning, collaboration, and community. One way we give back is through exclusive webinars for GradComm clients that help higher ed marketers navigate new frontiers together.

A recent session featuring Katia Hausman, Vice President of Strategic Transformation at Gannett | LocaliQ, explored one of the most important shifts in marketing today: how AI is transforming search.

"Google itself says that the shift that AI brings is even more seismic than what we experienced with the Google mobile ads," says Hausman. "Now, it's a completely new game from simple keyword searches to a deep understanding of user intent."

That shift means AI interprets what users mean, not just what they type. "It understands the intent behind the user searches, and that's a significant evolution."

AI can also interpret images. By analyzing features like color, shape, and texture, it can recognize, label, and categorize what's depicted making not only Alt Tags essential for SEO, but the image content itself crucial for Generative Engine Optimization (GEO).

To AI, your web content, images, videos, and even third-party references all matter. The challenge is managing your brand in an ecosystem that pulls from an ever-expanding network of signals, including outdated content buried on college websites. But the opportunity is that colleges maintaining accurate, structured, and high-quality information across their footprint can strongly influence how they appear in AI-driven results.

Hausman emphasized that while tools are evolving, the core principles remain the same.

"AI just doesn't happen out of thin air. It needs data to operate. Everything you've used in the past in terms of SEO stays true so that you have the right content that AI can feed off. All the tried-and-true ways of optimization still matter a lot… your content, your images, directories and listings, and Google My Business pages."

To stay visible, she recommends keeping content fresh, structuring information clearly, and using authentic multimedia that algorithms can interpret accurately. Rather than chasing quick wins, colleges should focus on maintaining a trustworthy digital footprint and removing outdated information.

Shaping how your institution appears in AI search results requires an integrated approach—PR, content marketing, structured web pages, and credible third-party placements—all of which contribute to how AI perceives and presents your institution.

"It's almost like every piece of information, any footprint of your college, becomes fuel for the AI-powered search."

As Hausman suggests, visibility in the age of AI isn't about gaming the algorithm but about clarity, credibility, and connection. The fundamentals of good marketing—authentic storytelling, accurate data, and consistent branding—matter more than ever.

Contact us to learn about how we can help your college with AI Search Optimization.



Canva for Marketing

When It Works — and When to Use Something Better

From college marketers to college departments juggling design without a designer, Canva can be a great tool. But is it the right tool? Here's our take on where Canva works best for college marketing and where it falls short.

When to Use Canva for Marketing

If you've got a small team, tight deadlines, and no Adobe license, Canva can be an effective, easy-to-use solution for solid designs and non-designers.

Canva is a great solution for:

- **Marketing teams without in-house designers**
- **Departments that need quick, easy-to-edit design templates**
- **Social media graphics, flyers, digital signage, and other web-first content**
- **Collaborative editing across non-designers (think: ASB clubs, faculty-led outreach, or student ambassadors)**

Where Canva Falls Short

While Canva can work wonders for basic content, it's not a professional design platform and isn't ideal for more advanced marketing needs, especially if it's going to a printer.

Avoid Canva when:

- **You have an internal creative team using Adobe Creative Cloud (professional designers should be using professional design software**
- **Your campaign includes print marketing materials with color-matching or bleed/trim specs**
- **You're designing long-term brand assets (logos, templates, publications)**
- **You need advanced layout, design, or file export features**

Canva Design Limitations

Canva's simplicity is part of its charm, but also its constraint. For marketers who need flexibility, polish, and precision, here's where Canva falls short.

1. Limited Layout & Typography Control

- No advanced grid systems, kerning, or tracking tools
- No support for OpenType features (like ligatures or alternate characters)

2. Unreliable Print Output

- Canva's CMYK support is rudimentary at best
- Color accuracy and print prep features are limited

3. No Advanced Image Editing

- Raster editing (Photoshop-style work) is not supported
- Only basic image filters and effects are available

4. No True Vector Export

- Canva designs using vector shapes can't be exported as editable .AI or .EPS files
- While it can export SVG files, they lose editable structure, limiting utility for logos, signage, and large-scale print work



The Final Word on Canva for Marketing Teams

Canva can be a powerful part of your marketing toolkit as long as you know what it is and what it's not built for. Whether you're using it to empower non-designers or just trying to keep your visuals clean and consistent, understanding its strengths and limitations can save your team a lot of time and headaches.

And don't forget, whether you need Canva templates that look sharp or are ready to ditch Canva for more pro-level designs, GradComm can help you do both.



This article was based off our top blog of 2025!
To read the full version and explore more great marketing content, visit gradcomm.com/blog or scan for more.

In 2024, GradComm facilitated over $4 million in digital marketing for community colleges across the nation and then performed a platform-by-platform analysis of the results.

In 2025, we compiled and published this data in an in-depth white paper titled, *Clicks, Conversions, and Campaign Wins: A Complete Guide to Platforms and Channels Driving Success in Community College Digital Marketing.*

Inside the Numbers

What $4 Million in Digital Campaigns Reveals About Community College Marketing

Is your search campaign performing?

Compare against these higher ed benchmarks.

Average CPC:	Average CTR:
$4.39	**6.21%**

Average cost per lead: **$55**

Search Engine Marketing (SEM), also known as Pay-Per-Click (PPC) or "paid search", remains one of the most reliable and powerful tools for reaching students who are actively searching for programs, colleges, or career pathways. Unlike paid social media, which captures attention passively, SEM meets students exactly where they are in the moment they're looking for information and ready to act.

That's what makes SEM so critical for community colleges. When someone types "evening welding classes near me" or "how to go back to college at 35," search ads are often the gateway to enrollment.

GradComm's 2024 campaign data reveals something important: SEM done right still delivers outsized value.

Search ads can be remarkably efficient when campaigns are highly targeted and locally relevant.

- GradComm's clients paid an average of $1.78 cost per click (CPC), far below the $4.39 industry average for education. This low CPC reflects strong alignment between the audience and the message, as well as effective bidding strategies that minimize waste.

Students respond to clear, goal-oriented messaging.

- GradComm's text ads averaged a 20.56% click-through rate (CTR), more than triple the education benchmark of 6.21%. This level of engagemen shows how well-optimized search copy can cut through clutter if it directly addresses prospect needs.

SEM drives immediate action, not just awareness.

- More than 41,000 phone calls were generated directly from search ads managed by GradComm in 2024. This volume of direct contact illustrates SEM's power to prompt real-time student engagement at critical decision points.

Campaigns convert interest into enrollment behavior.

- Over 19% of those who clicked on a SEM ad (representing 254,000 clicks) demonstrated clear enrollment intent by independently navigating to apply or register pages. These outcomes demonstrate that when SEM is executed strategically, it becomes a direct pipeline to conversion and not just more web traffic.

Search provides both visibility and engagement at scale.

- Our campaigns, cumulatively, delivered 7.2 million impressions and 1.3 million total clicks. The combination of reach and high intent proves SEM's unique ability to build awareness while still capturing ready-to-act students.

Top-Performing Search Terms for Community College Campaigns

Curious what keywords consistently generate the highest click-through rates in paid search campaigns? These reflect genuine student intent and are key indicators of what prospective learners are actively seeking online.

student financial aid for community college

good community colleges near me

financial aid

city college programs

2 year colleges

community colleges in [city]

financial aid city college

community college programs

city college online courses

city college online

find community colleges near me

city college classes

top associate degrees

community college near me

community colleges near me

community college certificate programs

associates degrees

summer community college courses

how to apply community college

job training

online community college degrees

Calling all community college marketers! Grab the full white paper to learn:

- Top-performing keywords & creative trends
- Student click data from real campaigns
- Social benchmarks across 5 major platforms
- Insights to build your next high-performing ad

Scan Now!

Meet Amy.

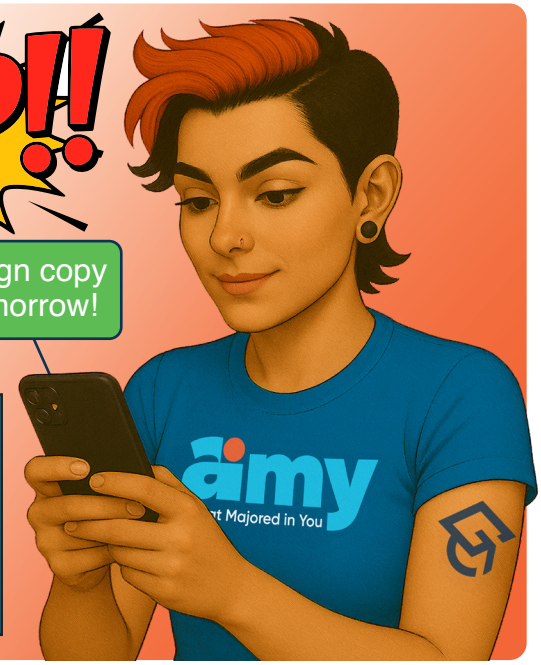
AI that majored in you.



HELP!!

Campaign copy due tomorrow!

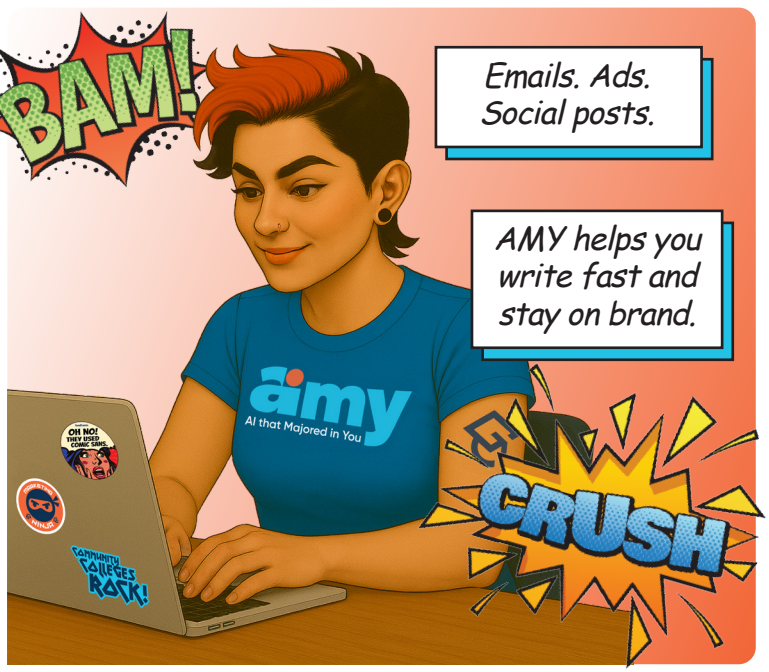
Your to-do list just exploded. AMY's already on it.

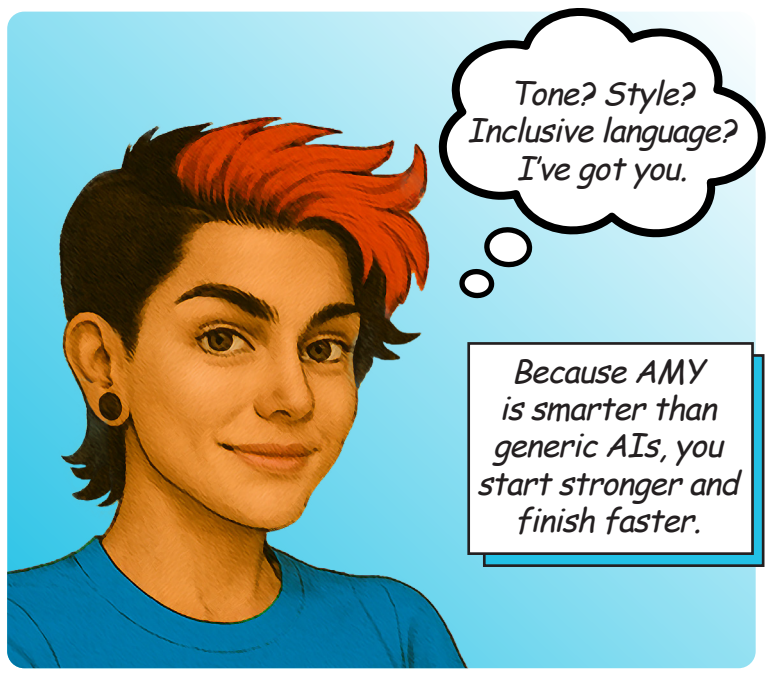


BAM!

Emails. Ads. Social posts.

AMY helps you write fast and stay on brand.





Tone? Style? Inclusive language? I've got you.

Because AMY is smarter than generic AIs, you start stronger and finish faster.

But don't take our word for it...



Larry Womack, Contra Costa College

Unlike other out-of-the-box AIs, AMY is trained specifically on our college's brand, values, and voice. As a result, she's able to take us from "Where do I start?" to "Let's make this better" with greater impact and in a lot less time.

Your brand-savvy side-kick is standing by.

Scan to meet AMY.



GradComm