

Storytelling Tools to Help Your College or University Attract Right-Fit Students.

By Attention Spans

Introduction: Why Storytelling Wins in Student Recruitment

In a time of declining enrollment and increasing competition, colleges and universities can no longer rely on prestige, programs, or even outcomes alone. To connect with today's students, you must tell a story—one that makes them the hero and helps them imagine a future that's uniquely possible with you.

That means:

1. Centering the student journey (The Hero Shift)
2. Expressing your institution's personality and point of view
3. Clearly communicating educational opportunities and pathways

This toolkit guides you through that storytelling process with strategic tools, frameworks, and examples.

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Part 1: The Hero Shift in Higher Ed

Most colleges position themselves as the hero—smart, successful, and top-ranked. But prospective students don't want a savior. They want a guide. Someone to help them navigate the transition into adulthood and become their best selves.

The Hero Shift reframes your school as a mentor, not a main character.

In this story:

- The student is the hero.
- Your college is the mentor, the opportunity, the journey.

Traditional Message:

"Our faculty includes three Nobel Prize winners."

Hero Shift Message:

"Here, you'll learn from world-changing thinkers—and become one yourself."

Traditional Message:

"We offer over 100 majors."

Hero Shift Message:

"Whether you're exploring or focused, you'll find the path that fits—and the people who help you grow."

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Part 2: Define Your School's Unique Personality

Every school can reframe the message around the student. But to stand out, you need more than a student-first lens—you need a clear, distinct institutional personality.

This includes:

- Physical environment – Urban? Rural? Near coastlines, mountains, or cultural hubs?
- Atmosphere and vibe – Laid-back or rigorous? Activist or traditional? Creative or competitive?
- Educational philosophy – Experiential? Liberal arts? Industry-aligned? Project-based?
- Community experience – Tight-knit or sprawling? Diverse or specialized?

Example 1: Urban Research University

- Student experience: “Immerse yourself in the energy of a major city, surrounded by innovation, culture, and career opportunity.”
- Tone: Bold, driven, progressive.
- Vibe: Fast-paced, connected.

Example 2: Mountain Liberal Arts College

- Student experience: “Are you artsy? A nature lover? An adrenaline junkie? Experience breathtaking scenery and a laid back atmosphere, as you form deep connections in our close-knit academic community. Here you can find daily inspiration to learn and grow.”
- Tone: Reflective, personal, values-driven.
- Vibe: Intimate, grounded, curious.

Example 3: Major Mid-Atlantic State University

- Student experience: “Here you can be anything you’ve ever dreamed of – artist, scientist, business tycoon. And our crab cakes are the best in the world.”
 - Tone: Aspirational, supportive.
 - Vibe: Major league with charm.
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Part 3: Content Journey Mapping for Recruitment

A content journey map is a framework for aligning your message to the decision-making stages of your prospective students.

Stage	Student Question	Goal	Example Content
Awareness	"What kind of schools should I consider?"	Spark interest and emotional connection	Short videos, student testimonials, TikToks showing campus life
Exploration	"Is this school a good fit for me?"	Highlight distinctiveness and relevance	Website pages, viewbooks, virtual tours, blog articles
Decision	"Can I see myself there?"	Reinforce fit and clarity	Application reminders, 1:1 emails, admitted student guides

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Part 4: Social Media Planning for Recruitment

Social media is where students test-fit your school. The vibe, the people, the life.

What to Share:

- Day-in-the-life content from real students
- Behind-the-scenes campus moments
- Faculty stories (mentor moments)
- Live Q&As with students, admissions, or career services
- Interactive polls or questions
- Student takeovers
- Micro-stories that illustrate transformation (“When I got here, I was...”)

Weekly Planning Grid

Day	Content Type	Platform
Monday	Student Story Reel	Instagram
Tuesday	Faculty “mentor moment” quote	LinkedIn, Facebook
Wednesday	Ask Me Anything (Stories)	Instagram, TikTok
Thursday	Short blog: “3 Ways Students Find Their Path Here”	Website, promoted via email
Friday	Campus mood photo or video	Instagram
Saturday	Student takeover or campus event	Instagram Live, YouTube

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Part 5: Email Sequence Example

Email 1: Welcome + Vibe

Subject: Can you see yourself here?

Welcome to [School Name]. We're not here to impress you. We're here to show you what's possible—for you.

Email 2: Student Story

Subject: From Nervous to Confident: Olivia's Journey

Olivia wasn't sure what to expect. Now she's presenting research and mentoring freshmen. Hear her story.

Email 3: Unique Academic Path

Subject: Build a degree that fits you

Explore 70+ majors and design a path that grows with you. And don't worry—you're never doing it alone.

Email 4: Life Outside Class

Subject: This isn't four years. It's a whole experience.

From service trips to student-run film festivals, your story here won't just be about grades.

Email 5: Invitation to Act

Subject: Let's take the next step together

See how your story begins. Visit, apply, or reach out—we're here to help.

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Conclusion: Can They See Themselves in Your Story?

Recruitment today isn't about listing features. It's about helping students imagine a meaningful, transformational future with you.

With this toolkit, you can:

- Recast your school as a mentor
- Showcase your unique personality and student experience
- Map a content journey that builds trust and clarity
- Create messages that resonate, inspire, and convert

Your school has a story. But so does every student.
When the two align, enrollment happens.

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