

How Can We Spread the Word That College Matters Today?



SUE CUNNINGHAM is president and CEO of the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE), which supports over 3,700 schools, colleges and universities worldwide in developing their alumni relations, communications, fundraising, and marketing operations. CASE partnered with BVK, an advertising agency, in creating the Proud Sponsor campaign to promote the value of higher education.

How did the idea of the Proud Sponsor campaign begin and what are its goals?

Not a day goes by that we don't hear or read how higher education needs a new narrative to more effectively convey its immense impact and value, and that we need to speak with one collective voice. That's at the heart of the College, Proud Sponsor of America at Its Best Campaign, also known as the Proud Sponsor campaign.

I was introduced to the proposed approach at the final meeting of the Commissioners of the Council on Higher Education as a Strategic Asset (HESA), a group of leaders convened by AGB. Our work was to develop a reframed narrative for American higher education for the then-incoming administration. BVK, an agency that serves many higher education institutions and systems as clients, presented their concept for a campaign that framed the value of education in terms of its key role in driving economic competitiveness that results in prosperity and security.

Through the work in the sector, BVK noticed clients were frequently asking for help in addressing the narrative—what they saw as a lack of understanding about all the ways that higher education positively impacts members of their communities, states, regions, and beyond, in ways that benefit all, regardless of whether they have earned a degree. At CASE, we were impressed with the clear and effective approach to conveying value and impact and, in particular, the compelling market research results BVK had secured relating to the campaign. We believed that the strategy and purpose of presenting a clear and effective case. After endorsing the campaign,

alongside AGB and numerous other associations, we soon determined to partner with BVK in leading the effort nationally.

With this campaign, we aim to change the perceptions of Americans age 35–64. We want to remind them of all the ways—direct and indirect—that higher education touches them and makes their lives better.

Why is the awareness that college improves lives important today (perhaps more than ever)?

Perceptions of higher education's value, alongside trust in most public institutions, has experienced a drop over a number of years. Often the distrust is in relation to affordability, student debt, and free expression on campuses. These are legitimate concerns that the sector is addressing. Furthermore, these concerns are not unique to the United States. More recently, political tensions and damaging federal and state policies around research, international student visas, and alleged bias have exacerbated the decline in public trust.

All of these factors have culminated in a sector-wide reputational challenge. We can no longer rely on traditional talking points about the benefits of higher education for an individual graduate. The task now is to remind the public of the myriad ways that colleges and universities improve their livelihoods, enrich their communities, and strengthen the nation. Fortunately, such stories of impact are not in short supply; all institutions have them. The goal of the College Proud Sponsor Campaign is to make them known.

What have been the successes of the campaign so far?

We see in no uncertain terms that the College Proud Sponsor Campaign changes perceptions of higher ed with just one exposure. When surveying Americans' attitudes pre- and post-campaign, perceptions improved even among segments who tend to be more skeptical: rural Americans, those who have not earned a degree themselves, and those who identify as conservatives.

Momentum is building. We are raising awareness within the sector to encourage speaking with one voice and with a proven message about the value and impact of higher ed, with more than twenty higher education and business organizations already endorsing the campaign. There have been 14,000 page views on the site and 220 downloads of the toolkit since we launched publicly.

I am also grateful that the campaign's strategy and quality were professionally recognized with 10 Gold awards in the annual Education Advertising Awards.

How can organizations, colleges, and individuals get involved with the Proud Sponsor campaign?

Spread the word! The core of the campaign is sharing stories about the transformational impact of higher education. Colleges and universities can download a free messaging toolkit to help craft messages for their institutional channels. Organizations and individuals can endorse the campaign at no cost. To learn more, visit whycollegematters.org/get-involved/. ■

—Interview by **Elena Loveland**, editor-in-chief of *Trusteeship*