

Dayton Daily News

HIGHER EDUCATION

Colleges spending thousands of dollars to attract students

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BY MEAGAN PANT - STAFF WRITER

Colleges and universities across the nation are putting more money into marketing campaigns as competition stiffens for the shrinking pool of prospective students. Local schools invest hundreds of thousands of dollars a year to lure students to campus — and the changing environment has some searching for new ways to ensure students think of them. Cedarville University this month launched its first national advertising campaign, worth \$480,000. Wittenberg University took to television to air a new commercial. And others have revamped their messages or are trying new tactics.



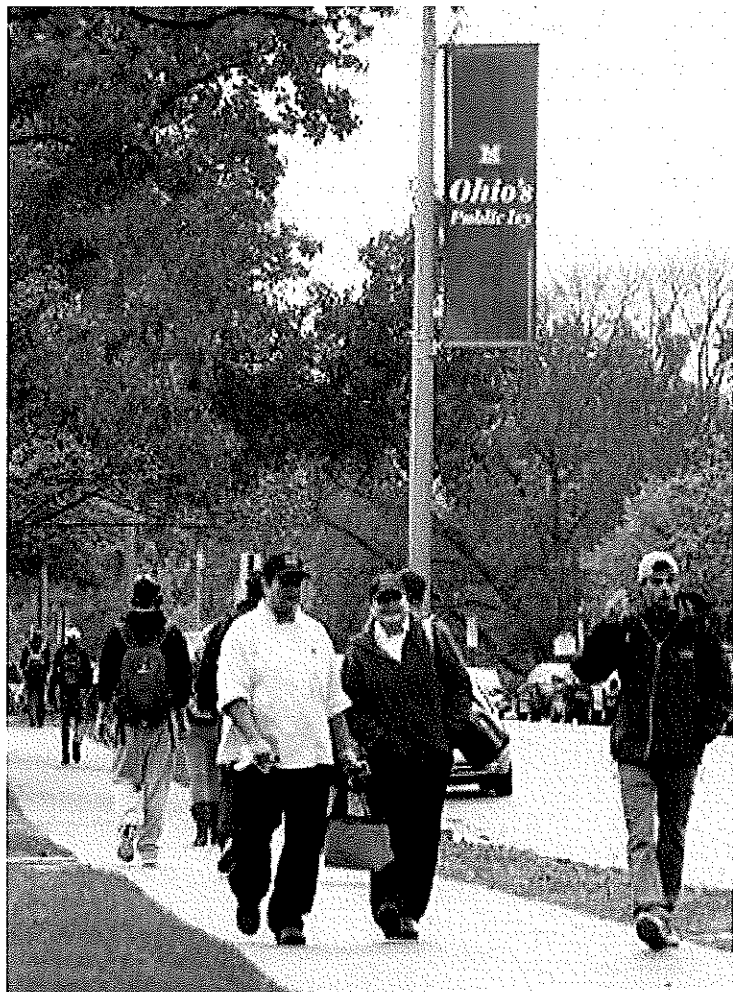
JIM WITMER

Cedarville University's Mark Weinstein and Janice Supplee look over new campaign materials called "Calling and Conviction" that will be on billboards and other marketing materials. Colleges are spending big money to lure students in a competitive environment with a shrinking pool of students. Cedarville, a Christian college with about 3,400 students, will invest about \$400K in a national ad campaign this year - money they say they have to spend so students will consider the school.

The marketing dollars are considered “mission critical” to colleges as the higher education industry faces declining demand for the first time in years, according to the national advertising firm Lipman Hearne.

“It’s becoming increasingly hard to stand out,” said Molly Wilson, the University of Dayton’s assistant vice president for marketing and strategies.

“It’s easy to put some marketing jargon on a slick brochure and try to capture people’s attention. But we have students who receive 160 pounds of promotional materials. We try to make sure we don’t get stuck in that pile by really doing something different,” she said.



GREG LYNCH

For the first time, Miami University has started a campus banner promotion. The goal of the banners, which have various positive slogans on them, are to build a sense of pride in staff, employees, and students, because they are the best ambassadors for Miami University. Colleges are spending big money to lure students in a competitive environment with a shrinking pool of students.

Spending up 100 percent

Although a sizable investment, Cedarville’s \$480,000 campaign is just half what a school of its size typically spends in a year to advertise, according to Lipman Hearne.

Marketing budgets ballooned 100 percent in the last decade. A midsized school spent a median \$800,000 on marketing in 2010, compared to \$259,400 a decade earlier (or \$321,900 adjusted for inflation), the group found in its latest survey.



CHRIS STEWART

Area colleges and universities spend heavily on advertising to recruit students. This Wright State University billboard is seen near Airway Road and Harshman Avenue.

Schools with 6,000 students or more that were surveyed spent a median \$1.4 million on marketing in 2010, according to the group.

In its own study, Cedarville found that its main competitors have spent 10 or 20 times as much on marketing for years, Janice Supplee, vice president for enrollment management and marketing.

The private, Baptist university's campaign, titled "Calling and Conviction," aims to build more name awareness.

- LISTEN: New Cedarville University advertising campaign

"If a student is not aware of Cedarville University, for example, by the time they're a sophomore in high school, research shows that no matter how many viewbooks or post cards we mail their way, they're never going to think about Cedarville or whatever institution," Supplee said.

"We feel like there is a wide market of people who just aren't familiar with Cedarville," she said. "You can go to Dayton — and go to church in Dayton — and say I'm from Cedarville University and they may or not be completely familiar with you."

For the first time, the 3,500-student school will target prospective students with online ads directed to those whose Internet search history and trends show they are interested in college or things that are Christian, Supplee said. The campaign also includes the traditional print, radio and billboards, as well as Internet radio.

"Think of all the people who drive by a billboard and they're not even looking at colleges period. In many ways you're wasting a lot of exposure," Supplee said.

Digital ads are "extremely targeted" in ways that were not possible even 10 years ago, she said.

The new campaign offers a clearer message that the university prepares students to "follow the calling that God has for them and make a difference in the world." It also conveys with "Conviction" that

Cedarville is “committed to the Bible,” Supplee said.

‘There is competition’

After two decades of colleges being able to count on an annual growth in the number of high school graduates, there will be a decline in the young population in the remainder of this decade — a change that promises to be disruptive to the higher education, according to the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education. Ohio will see a drop of 5 to 15 percent in the number of high school graduates, according to the group’s annual report, “Knocking at the College Door.”

Nationwide, college enrollment overall dropped 2 percent this spring compared to last, according to the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center.

The changing demographics make it “much harder” for colleges to recruit the students they typically have drawn, said Michael Kabbaz, associate vice president for enrollment management at Miami University.

“We want to find the best and the brightest students in Ohio, and so does every institution you talk to,” he said.

Kabbaz said Miami is more sophisticated now in the way it recruits students who are likely to attend the university, which is important with limited marketing resources. “I can’t double the number of viewbooks I print every year,” he said.

In recent years, Miami added regional recruiters around the country, including in California, Chicago and Atlanta. Budgets vary, but the recruiters typically get \$20,000 to \$25,000 for travel and are paid between \$40,000 and \$60,000, he said.

Other schools are going after Ohio students with new approaches.

Wittenberg concentrated on four Ohio cities with its new commercial worth \$700,000 that was donated by a member of its board of trustees. The ad, its first of this magnitude, showcases some of the university’s achievements, including its rating as “best classroom experience” by the Princeton Review. It airs in Dayton, Cincinnati, Columbus and Toledo during the next two months.

“We’re really highlighting the difference that Wittenberg provides the students,” said spokeswoman Karen Gerboth, who added that the ad is Wittenberg’s first commercial of this quality and magnitude. “It’s really showcasing our active, engaged learning environment in a way that is powerful and inspiring.”

Sinclair Community College revamped its marketing campaign last spring to ask students to think about what they can “Create” with an advanced education, said Anthony Cruz, vice president for enrollment management and student affairs. The campaign uses television, billboards, Pandora Internet radio and digital ads, he said. It is part of the college’s annual \$500,000 budget for marketing.

Cruz said colleges “always tell you about what they can do for you.” “We wanted to do something where it will be more on a personal level. With the education we provide, what will they do?” he said.

As a community college that enrolls a wide range of ages, Cruz said Sinclair tries to convey what the school means to the community. “We know that people know who we are and know the value we bring,” he said. “But we have to be constantly out there because the fact is, there is competition.”

UD works to stand out among the countless brochures sent to prospective students by sending their letters inviting families to campus through the logistics company DHL, Wilson said. Those who make an official campus visit by March 1 and fill out the Free Application for Federal Student Aid qualify for a textbook scholarship worth \$4,000 over four years.

The university also spreads its name with campaigns such as its recent bike giveaway to students who promised to leave their cars at home for two years. UD spent \$90,000 on the project, which was written about in Forbes Magazine, The New York Time and USA Today and carried on Fox News, CBS radio and others.

“It was beyond anything we would have anticipated,” Wilson said.

By the numbers

135,506: Number of high school graduates in Ohio peaked in 2008-09

124,700: Graduates will slip to this number by 2022-23

9 percent: Drop in white, non-Hispanic graduates, the largest decline among groups

Source: Knocking at the College Door 2012