

NASH
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF
HIGHER EDUCATION SYSTEMS



COLLEGE IS WORTH IT

CASE STUDY

A FIRST-OF-ITS-KIND NATIONAL
MARKETING CAMPAIGN



TABLE OF CONTENTS

- 1 EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**
- 2 BACKGROUND**
- 3 STRATEGY**
- 4 STRATEGIC CORE TACTICS**
- 5 RESULTS**
- 6 PERFORMANCE SNAPSHOT**
- 7 LESSONS LEARNED**
- 8 RECOMMENDATIONS**
- 9 CONCLUSION**



Gabi Butler – Collegiate cheerleader featured on *Cheer* (Netflix); known for her youth fanbase and advocacy for education.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The National Association of Higher Education Systems (NASH) and Good Rebellion expanded their partnership in 2023 to launch a first-of-its-kind national marketing initiative to improve the perceived value of a college degree. The second phase of the College Is Worth It (CIWI 2) campaign, launched in the fall of 2024, reaffirmed a simple yet powerful idea: when it comes to reaching students and families, storytelling works. This proved to be particularly true when the stories told were peer-driven, authentic, and delivered on the platforms where young people spend their time.

CIWI 2 was designed to shift the narrative around public higher education and drive action through completion of the FAFSA (Free Application for Federal Student Aid). The campaign strategically avoided traditional, data-driven outreach in favor of an agile, influencer-led model powered by Meta ads and organic video content across Instagram and TikTok.

The campaign achieved strong national reach and engagement. Influencer content across organic and paid channels delivered:



The results validate the pivot toward grassroots digital marketing, especially influencer storytelling focused on personal college journeys and financial aid tips. CIWI 2 also highlights an opportunity: with system engagement and localized content layered into this model, the next phase could go even further.



BACKGROUND

The College Is Worth It campaign was created in direct response to a clear message from higher education leaders: the narrative about college is broken.

At the first meeting of NASH's Communications & Government Relations Council in 2023, members were asked what support they needed most. The top answer? Help change the way people talk about and perceive college. Rising skepticism about the cost and value of higher education had become a critical concern.

CIWI launched to address that — not with slogans or statistics, but with a fresh approach. The campaign frames public higher education as a worthwhile, future-focused investment. Rather than relying on traditional, top-down messaging from systems and institutions, CIWI takes a grassroots approach centered on personal storytelling.

The first campaign (CIWI 1) served as a pilot, testing how digital messaging could shift sentiment. It centered on conveying the personal value of a college degree — using paid social ads grounded in key data points.

This pilot provided essential early insights:

- **Static content had limited resonance** with younger audiences, who preferred more personal or visual formats.
- **Broad targeting made message focus harder to maintain**, especially when speaking to both students and parents.
- **Older demographics engaged most with the content**, indicating a gap in student relevance.
- **System participation exceeded expectations** for a first-time campaign, laying the groundwork for deeper collaboration in future rounds.

These early insights didn't just inform the next phase — they shaped it. In consultation with members and partners, we applied what we learned to build a refreshed, more targeted approach for CIWI 2. The result: a strategic pivot toward real voices, clear calls to action, and platforms that meet students and families where they already are.



STRATEGY

CIWI 2 was intentionally streamlined and focused. The 2024-25 campaign centered on national reach and direct-to-audience storytelling powered by influencers and strategic paid media.

KEY GOALS

CIWI 2 was designed to do more than just raise awareness — it aimed to inspire action. Guided by lessons from the first campaign and grounded in insights from student and parent behavior online, the strategy focused on clear, measurable objectives. These goals shaped every piece of content, every ad placement, and every creator brief throughout the campaign.

- **Reaffirm the personal and professional value of a college degree.**

Content focused on relatable success stories and long-term benefits of higher education.

- **Drive FAFSA completion among high school students and recent grads.**

Messaging was built around urgency, simplicity, and real-life outcomes of completing the form.

- **Reach parents with relatable, trustworthy FAFSA messaging.**

Parent influencers shared their own experiences navigating financial aid, making college feel more accessible.

- **Increase awareness through content people actually watch and share.**

Short-form video, delivered on TikTok and Instagram, ensured the campaign met its audience where they already spend their time.



Mario Lopez – Actor, host, and parent; trusted public figure with broad appeal and a personal message on affordability.



STRATEGIC CORE TACTICS

1. INFLUENCER MARKETING (ORGANIC & PAID)

CIWI 2 introduced influencer storytelling as the campaign's core tactic. A diverse set of creators — including current college students, soon-to-be high school graduates, and parents — shared personal experiences about college, FAFSA, and affordability. Content was distributed via Instagram Reels and TikTok posts, leveraging both creators' native audiences and CIWI-branded channels.

To amplify reach, selected videos were repurposed and promoted through Meta Ads, extending their lifespan and maximizing visibility.

2. PAID SOCIAL ADS (META)

High-performing influencer videos were used in a paid Meta campaign targeting high school students, recent grads, and parents. Targeting was informed by previous campaign data and platform best practices to ensure relevance and cost efficiency.

3. LANDING EXPERIENCE

All paid and organic content directed users to a centralized CIWI landing page hosted on the NASH website. The page

featured a clear, action-oriented layout focused on FAFSA completion, including:

- Direct links to the official FAFSA form
- Simple, step-by-step FAFSA guidance
- Answers to common questions around aid and eligibility
- Key messages about the personal and professional value of a college degree

The landing page reinforced the campaign's message and served as a trusted, action-ready space for users to take their next step.

4. TARGETING & MESSAGING

All content — organic and paid — was tailored to resonate with:

- High school students considering next steps
- Recent grads unsure about college
- Parents looking for guidance on FAFSA and affordability

Messaging focused on two simple ideas: a college degree is worth it and completing the FAFSA opens doors to getting one.



RESULTS

CIWI 2 demonstrated that a focused, influencer-led approach can drive meaningful engagement at scale — and at a fraction of the cost of traditional campaigns. Compared to the first CIWI pilot, which used static ads and broad data points, CIWI 2 delivered more relevance, better reach, and deeper interaction, particularly among students and recent grads.

COST EFFICIENCY

- **Cost per Link Click (CPLC): as low as \$0.13**, with all placements falling below \$0.24.
- This makes the campaign more than **5x more cost-effective** than industry benchmarks for education campaigns on Meta platforms (\$1.00–\$1.85).
- Strong ROI confirmed that authentic, **influencer-led content can outperform traditional ad creative** at scale.

ENGAGEMENT QUALITY

- Influencer videos drove **meaningful engagement**, including shares, saves, and comments, not just views.
- Most traction came from **students, recent grads, and parents** — a major shift from CIWI 1, where older demographics dominated engagement.
- **Short-form and personal storytelling** about FAFSA and college access consistently performed best.

PLATFORM IMPACT

- **Instagram and TikTok** were the dominant channels, with Reels and short-form videos generating the highest return.
- **Meta Ads** amplified the best content, driving high-volume traffic to FAFSA-related resources and the CIWI campaign site.

OVERALL PERFORMANCE SNAPSHOT

Across both organic and paid channels, the campaign achieved:

METRIC	TOTAL
Total Video Plays	972,214
Total Engagements	769,222
Total Link Clicks	98,123
Unique Reach (Est.)	1,255,105
Average Cost per Click	\$0.18

This level of performance reinforces the effectiveness of CIWI 2's peer-led, action-focused model in reaching and engaging students and families.



LESSONS LEARNED

CIWI 2 proved that influencer-driven, digital-first outreach is not only viable — it's effective. It succeeded in ways the original CIWI beta could not, thanks to clear messaging, better targeting, and a delivery method that met the audience where they already are.

WHAT WORKED

- **Influencer content outperformed static ads** – Authentic storytelling consistently led to higher engagement, better watch time, and more link clicks.
- **Platform fit was strong** – TikTok and Instagram proved ideal for campaign messaging – short, visually engaging, peer-to-peer narratives drove the best results.
- **Cost-effective reach and engagement** – The campaign achieved a cost per link click as low as \$0.13, all placements falling below \$0.24 — well below typical industry benchmarks for education campaigns. This demonstrates that strategic investment in influencer-led content can deliver both scale and value.

- **Paid amplification boosted results without diluting authenticity** – Promoting influencer videos on Meta extended reach and improved cost efficiency without compromising trust.
- **Tight focus on FAFSA resonated** – Anchoring the campaign in a clear, specific action item helped make the content more useful and shareable.

WHAT COULD BE IMPROVED

- **System participation could unlock more localized impact** – While the campaign succeeded nationally, integrating system voices (e.g., student testimonials, faculty stories) would add credibility and relevance in future phases.
- **Deeper engagement tracking** – Link clicks were high, but future efforts could integrate more robust tracking on FAFSA completions or site behavior to gauge conversion more accurately.
- **Content diversity** – Expanding the range of voices — including more first-gen students, nontraditional learners, and bilingual creators — could strengthen relatability.



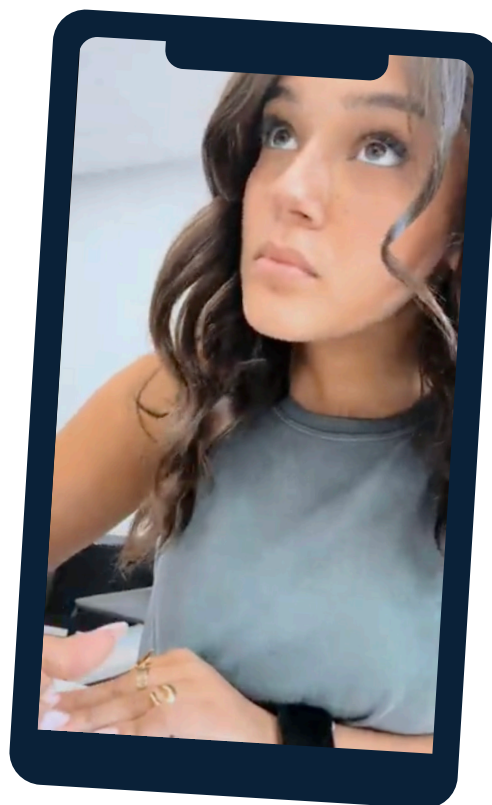
RECOMMENDATIONS

CIWI 2 didn't just prove that a different approach can work — it laid the groundwork for a more modern, student-centered model of higher ed outreach. These recommendations reflect not only what worked, but what can be scaled, refined, or added to increase future impact.

- **Double down on influencer storytelling — it works.** The campaign showed that authentic, creator-led content reaches and moves the right audience. Future campaigns should continue investing in influencers who can speak from lived experience and connect with their followers in meaningful ways. It's not just cost-effective — it's culture-relevant.
- **Layer in system participation for localized depth.** While CIWI 2 succeeded without system input, adding student and faculty voices from participating systems would bring a powerful layer of local trust and relatability. Whether through student media departments or pre-packaged clips, systems can become valuable partners in expanding reach and credibility.
- **Focus messaging on clear, actionable goals.** The emphasis on FAFSA worked because it was tangible and time-sensitive. Future content should maintain that clarity — whether the goal is FAFSA, application deadlines, or debunking common myths about college. The more focused the message, the more effective the content.
- **Broaden representation to strengthen relevance.** To connect with a wider cross-section of potential students, the campaign should include more first-generation students, community college voices, nontraditional learners, and

creators from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Representation drives resonance.

- **Deepen impact measurement.** Clicks and views are a great start, but future efforts should invest in tracking how engagement translates into FAFSA submissions, campus visits, or other enrollment-related behaviors. Stronger data loops will help prove ROI and guide future strategy.



Corinne Joy — Gen Z creator and high school senior; popular for her relatable, high-energy social media presence.



CONCLUSION

CIWI 2 delivered. With no system participation and a streamlined structure, the campaign still achieved significant reach, strong engagement, and clear action-driving results. It validated the shift away from static, top-down messaging and toward a model rooted in real voices, real stories, and real platforms.

Most importantly, CIWI 2 showed that when we respect our audience — by speaking their language, showing up where they are, and sharing content that feels relevant — they respond.

This campaign offers a blueprint: combine influencer storytelling with targeted paid media, keep messaging focused and actionable, and integrate systems where possible to add depth and local connection.

The opportunity ahead is not just to repeat CIWI 2's success, but to build on it — scaling what worked, closing feedback loops, and continuing to reshape the narrative around the value of public higher education.

PERFORMANCE SNAPSHOT

LINK CLICKS
CIWI 1 - 14,192
CIWI 2 - 98,123

6.9x
INCREASE

COST PER CLICK
CIWI 1 - \$5.55
CIWI 2 - \$.18

30.8x
MORE EFFICIENT

ENGAGEMENT
CIWI 1 - 16,605
CIWI 2 - 769,222

46.3x
INCREASE

NUMBER OF ADS
CIWI 1 - 108
CIWI 2 - 9

12x
FEWER ADS