

A photograph of three young adults, two men and one woman, sitting outdoors and studying together. They are looking at a laptop screen. The woman on the right is smiling. The background is a blurred green landscape with trees.

# Key considerations for Higher education industry in the post-pandemic world





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## Executive Summary

How do we work around the predominant sense of uncertainty that the pandemic has induced into the higher education scene? What's going on in the minds of prospective applicants? How does on-campus education stand in comparison with online education? Are students keen on hybrid learning models? Knowing the answers to these questions is critical for schools in their efforts to attract the right kind of candidates.

We at Nabler conducted deep dive research into the topic by getting up-close with the pulse of the student community. We analyzed over 100,000 conversations that happened on social media during mid-2020. These conversations on social media are by prospective students who are applying for higher education courses in the US. The research brings out insights into the thoughts, concerns and decision-making processes of the candidates in these unpredictable times.

We identified four key themes across all the 10,000 topics of the 100,000 conversations collected. We found that the core intentions behind these conversations were to find out what are the higher education programs that offer career growth opportunities, which are the schools where the candidates have chances to get accepted, and how could they maximize their chance of acceptance.

The specific themes identified in this context are:

1. The current scenario of unemployment and its impact on the selection of the program
2. The search for definitive proof that higher education program would help in expected career growth
3. Dissatisfaction with the online experience of higher education and eagerness to go back to school
4. Efforts directed towards optimizing the number of programs that candidates can apply to, based on their assessment of the probability of application acceptance

The research intently evaluated the conversations around marketing promotions of a sample group of programs in the United States. We specifically looked for the presence of the identified themes in the marketing messages. Interestingly, only a handful of these campaigns addressed the above-found themes. This reflects the need for marketers in higher education to re-look at their messaging.



## Methodology

This research is focused on evaluating the top trends and discussion points on social media regarding higher education in a post-COVID scenario. This research is aimed to generate action items for the players in this domain. Conversations were gathered during the second quarter of the year 2020. The sources are Twitter, through its API and publicly available data in “talk.collegeconfidential.com”, and the Reddit.com section on higher education.

### **Please note:**

- Only English language conversations were taken for the analysis.
- Specific to this research, conversations were filtered down to 10,000 unique topics. Some conversations address multiple topics, and likewise, topics map to multiple themes.
- This analysis represents a sub-section of the current online conversations and should be used to understand qualitative insights rather than an exact, quantitative volume of the conversations.



# The Four Themes

## 1. Unemployment and Job market plays heavily on the minds of prospects and students

The current scenario of unemployment and what could be the job market at the time of graduation - this was the top theme among the prospects and the students. This theme stood out in almost 5,000 topics and 35% of the conversations. The conversations were around finding the answers to a range of questions; from what courses can help them get employment quickly to how to leverage higher education to get a promotion.

These discussions can be segregated into three dominant categories:

### Getting a new job

People are looking at further education to upskill themselves to be ready for the drastically changed job market. Considering the current situation as the new norm, some companies are also looking to identify online courses for their employees. Their aim is to ease the transition into working-from-home and upskilling of the employees to match the changed marketing and sales strategies. They are suggesting the same for new candidates.

### Switching jobs

The tweet analysis reveals that there is a high volume of discussion around switching to other roles. These discussions are fueled by the current job descriptions of the users that do not allow work-from-home options. These users are worried that they might lose their jobs and hence think that reskilling themselves for a role that allows work-from-home is the only way to a steady income.

### Aiming for higher roles (promotions)

The volume of discussions around people looking for courses to help with promotions or higher roles is comparably lower than the previous two categories. This indicates that the need for getting a new job or switching to a better role are the activities mainly focused on by students as a whole.

### Some examples of the discussions below

*"Any suggestions for a course in nursing during #lockdown if I am keen to find a new role as a paramedic?"*

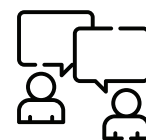
*"Pursuing continued education is slowly becoming popular. #Employment, remain informed and highly skilled to remain #employed."*

### Recommendations for the marketer in higher education Based on these conversations, Nabler's two main recommendations are:

1. The course details provided on the website and the campaign contents should be contextualized to the current job status of the students.
2. Highlighting and addressing the specific needs of the right target audience would motivate the users to sign up. Personalization of course recommendations would help make a difference as well.



5000 topics



35% of the conversations



## 2. Definitive proof that courses help with jobs

The prospects and students were very keen on social media-based validation of the claims made by different programs about post-completion-employability. Almost 30% of the conversations and about 1500 topics identified centered around these themes.



1500 topics



30% of the conversations

### Need for a community validation

The words coming from the schools only go so far in convincing the potential students that they would be eligible for better job opportunities. From the topics analyzed, it was very evident that these students and prospects expected this information in the form of testimonials, forums and words of alumni. This need for validation also had students and prospects responding to what influencers were saying.

### Setting the employability expectation

A big chunk of the research time spent by students go into confirming the impact of completing a specific online course. At the bare minimum, students expect the online courses to land them in internships that give them real-world experience.

### Key decision factors

It was also very evident from the topics that employability validation had a major role to play in the decision on which schools to apply for.

### Some examples of these discussions below

*"If this course is that good, how come no one is talking about it?"*

*"A school cannot say how good their job placements are! Ask the alumni and final year students. Then, you'll get the right picture"*

*"I based my certification decisions on industry experts and ideas from colleagues. That way, you can never go wrong."*

### Recommendations for the marketer in higher education

1. Create infographics around statistics of students getting placed in jobs and internships and promote the same on social platforms.
2. Create a strong network of alumni in social platforms who can answer questions around job placements and internships.
3. Promote testimonials from current students.





### 3. The need to go back to school

20% of the discussions and about identified centered around people thinking of going back to a school campus versus looking at online avenues for higher education. The topics covered highlighted the factors or issues that could be identified as the key reasons for the prospects looking to switch from or pause the online courses.

#### Some examples of these tweets:



*"Is there one place which gives details on financial aid for students during these times? #tryingtogobackschool"*

*"Class, eat, sleep, repeat! this is getting serious. An entire nation like this is an incident waiting to happen. #backtoschool"*

*"Teachers be like it's an online class you have all the time in the world !!!! then give you an hour to finish 6 assignments"*

#### Financial constraints of online courses

One section of these users is not applying for an online course due to the cost it entails. Some of them discussed researching financial aid or waivers, the conditions that would apply and the eligibility criteria to avail of it. Discussions centered around how one or more of these aspects is a disadvantage of online courses as against on-campus courses. Conversations also indicated that some of these students and prospects are worried that there might be hidden costs and are not ready to rely on the information available online. These users are primarily reliant on social media groups, influencers and forums to get unbiased information validation, as, it's not easily available online for the online versus on-campus comparison.

#### Bad experience with online courses

Another section of these users either have bad experiences from prior online courses or have certain expectations that are not answered by the course/school forums. In general, the concept of online courses generates mixed reviews because:

- i. Some users are not ready for the study-from-home culture. They feel that being cooped up in their homes deprives them of a campus experience. They feel that going to a college would be useful for their resumes and will also help in showing extra-curricular abilities like leadership, coordination, etc. among other things.
- ii. Users feel that it deprives them of a sense of community and togetherness. Most of these courses do not talk about the non-course-based features and activities that users are looking for. They include but are not limited to:
  - Socializing with other students
  - Strong forum groups for struggling students
  - Virtual graduation
  - Online community events
- iii. Some users have voiced that these online courses are unnecessarily stressful. These users have either failed to get information on what pre-course knowledge requirements or feel that the timelines for a course are too taxing to be able to complete while holding a job.

#### Recommendations for the marketer in higher education:

1. Improve ease of access to the tuition cost and financial aid information. Getting this information benchmarked and sharing it on public platforms would bolster trust in the information shared
2. Invest in a self-run community or participate in an independent online community. Leverage the presence of influencers to corroborate the information provided on tuition cost and financial aid
3. Provide easy access to information on expected pre-course knowledge and the granularities of effort required
4. Showcase student testimonials of how the course features/forums/community helped them complete the course irrespective of their work schedules. Use these testimonials in social promotions
5. Some students are interested in hybrid options where most of the course work happens online and there are once a quarter campus visits for socializing, sports and graduation



1000 topics



20% of the discussions



## 4. Probability of the application acceptance:

Around 10% of the conversations and 300 topics identified were around the probability of acceptance to the schools/programs. The anxiety was primarily around getting accepted based on their GPA and AP scores. The discussions also centered around the lack of information on the holistic criteria they needed to meet. There is ambiguity regarding how items like work experience will influence their acceptance probability.

### Some sample tweets:



*"Applying to schools is a strategy. Choose wisely. There is more to the decision than your scores. You may have unexpectedly higher chance of acceptance in the school you think is tough."*

*"Applying to 21 schools is no joke. It takes lots of time and money. But how to find out which ones to select, so that I get at least one or two admits"*

### Rejected students in social communities:

There are social communities with a strong presence of applicants rejected. Post rejection, these applicants have discussed and responded to conversations around admission processes and acceptance criteria of those schools. 60% of the overall conversations in this overarching theme, were captured from sub-forums of these sorts. About 70% of these conversations were by prospects who felt the lack of access to exact details on acceptance criteria from the schools or programs.

For these schools and programs, the above-mentioned situation has created an impression of being harder to get into. Almost all these discussion threads converge towards the need to look for alternatives.

### Fear of rejection:

Application rejection probabilities have resulted in lesser applications for the fear of wasting money. Most students are looking for definitive admissions. Students are wary of applying to 25 – 30 colleges and wasting money on application fees.

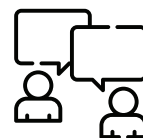
There is a new trend wherein students apply to a limited number of schools, between 5 – 10, to save costs and to focus on schools that are sure to provide them with admissions.

### Recommendations for the marketer in higher education:

1. Make acceptance/eligibility criteria public through authorized sources such as the university website
2. Effective social media presence is needed to counter the perception created by rejected students about the acceptance criteria
3. Innovation in application pricing might be an opportunity; like dynamic pricing or stage based progressive pricing. This could result in a significant competitive advantage.



**300 topics**



**10% of the conversations**





## Validating the current social media strategy of various competing programs

We also evaluated the social media conversations for indicators on how schools and programs are handling the four identified themes. Besides, we looked if there are any best practices to be considered and how well our recommendations align with these best practices.

Around 25,000 to 30,000 social media posts from different schools and programs were analyzed. Out of the distinctly identified 600-700 schools and programs, only 20% had a good idea of the themes discussed, and what the students and prospects are looking for, the questions the students have asked and the anxieties they carry.

### Here are some of the best practices deployed by these schools and programs:

- A. Reliance on influencers to provide unbiased validations
- B. Clear linkage between the skills that the programs deliver and career prospects enabled, supported by testimonial like content that validate the credentials.
- C. Well-targeted messaging aligned towards typically sought-after outcomes like promotions in the jobs

- D. Regular updates on different platforms regarding tuition fees and financial waiver information, with clear links to the dedicated sections in their online assets
- E. Multiple sources at multiple locations promoting the clearly articulated acceptance criteria at regular intervals
- F. On average, schools published 125 tweets per day. These tweets were designed as the answers to the questions from potential students
- G. A new strategy of offering free courses that cater to crisis resolution due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Example: free contact tracing course.

### Some examples of these posts are:

*"Find online courses. . . as well as Harvard Courses, as a way to learn relevant skills that link to your future career. What skills are you looking for in the job description for your dream role?"*

*"Whether you're looking to improve your chances to get that promotion, land your dream job, start a new hobby, or upskill you"*



## Conclusion:

The overarching sentiment that emanates from conversations that we analyzed for the research is that schools need to reach out to students more than ever before. The pandemic has put pressure on the financial considerations that decide on the number of schools to apply for. As the fear of rejection and possible loss of money is creating a trend of students applying to only a selected number of schools, the need for appealing to students becomes all the more imperative. Targeted marketing messages that address the pain points of the students, allay fears and instill confidence will do the magic.