

MORE LIKE ME

A Strategic Communications Campaign for Pennsylvania's Independent Colleges and Universities

RECONSTRUCTED CAMPAIGN PLAN

Originally developed as a final-round candidate exercise for an AICUP communications position in 2023. Substantially revised in 2026 to reflect a more rigorous strategic-communications planning framework.

PLAN ELEMENT	DESCRIPTION
Communications challenge	Counter the perception that Pennsylvania's independent nonprofit colleges primarily serve affluent and privileged students.
Primary audience	Pennsylvania legislators and legislative staff.
Creative platform	MORE LIKE ME - individual stories connected to statewide evidence.
Campaign horizon	12-month phased campaign following formative research.
Strategic purpose	Strengthen the communications environment for AICUP advocacy by demonstrating access, opportunity, and statewide impact.

One student tells a story. Evidence shows there are more. Pennsylvania sees what those students contribute. Public policy can help create opportunities for even more.

1 Communications challenge

Pennsylvania's independent nonprofit colleges and universities face a persistent perception problem: that private higher education primarily serves affluent students whose families can afford high tuition and who benefit from selective admissions and substantial institutional resources.

That perception can undermine AICUP's ability to make the case for public policies that support students attending independent institutions. If policymakers and other influential stakeholders regard independent higher education principally as a private benefit for privileged families, public investment can appear unnecessary or inequitable.

The communications challenge is therefore larger than correcting an inaccurate impression. AICUP must help priority audiences understand who attends Pennsylvania's independent colleges, why students choose them, what forms of support make attendance possible, and what Pennsylvania gains when those students succeed.

The campaign should make that case through a deliberate combination of credible data and human stories.

2 Communications goal

Strengthen understanding among Pennsylvania policymakers and other influential stakeholders that independent nonprofit colleges and universities expand educational opportunity for students from varied economic, demographic, and life circumstances and contribute substantially to the Commonwealth's communities, workforce, and economy.

Ultimately, that understanding should strengthen the environment in which AICUP advocates for policies and public investment benefiting students at member institutions.

3 Research before launch

The campaign should begin by testing its assumptions. AICUP already possesses useful evidence about the students its institutions serve. Before campaign launch, the strongest defensible evidence should be identified and any claims requiring additional research should remain clearly provisional.

Data audit. Review AICUP's current research and identify the strongest defensible evidence concerning student income, financial aid, first-generation status, race and ethnicity, adult enrollment, geographic access, completion, workforce outcomes, and economic contribution.

Perception baseline. Determine what priority stakeholders actually believe about independent higher education. A brief survey or structured interviews with a representative group of legislators and legislative staff could identify which misconceptions are most prevalent and which arguments they find credible.

Media and message audit. Review recent Pennsylvania news coverage, legislative discussion, and competing higher-education messages to identify recurring language and assumptions about private colleges.

Story audit. Ask member institutions to identify students, alumni, programs, and community partnerships that illustrate the statewide data. The purpose is not to find exceptional success stories, but people whose experiences make larger patterns visible.

4 Priority audiences

The campaign should retain the original constituencies - lawmakers, alumni, employers, civic leaders, member institutions, students, and families - while giving them different strategic roles.

AUDIENCE	ROLE IN CAMPAIGN	DESIRED MOVEMENT
PA legislators & legislative staff	Primary decision-makers	From seeing independent colleges as primarily serving affluent families to recognizing their role in access, workforce development, and regional prosperity.
Employers & civic leaders	Third-party validators	From appreciating individual institutions to publicly articulating their statewide economic and workforce value.
Alumni	Credible personal advocates	From institutional affinity to informed advocacy.
Member institutions	Evidence and distribution network	From separate institutional storytelling to coordinated statewide message amplification.
Students & families	Authentic voices and grassroots participants	From recipients of communication to participants in telling the story.

5 Communications objectives

Because baseline research and an approved campaign budget are not available, numerical targets should not be invented simply to make the objectives appear measurable. Final targets should be established after the baseline and resource assessment. For a 12-month campaign, objectives would measure four kinds of movement:

Understanding. Increase among targeted policymakers the percentage who recognize that Pennsylvania independent colleges serve substantial populations of financially disadvantaged, first-generation, racially diverse, and adult students.

Message penetration. Ensure that priority audiences encounter and recall the campaign's three principal messages: access, opportunity, and Pennsylvania impact.

Third-party advocacy. Increase the number of employers, civic leaders, and alumni willing to communicate publicly or directly with policymakers about the value of independent higher education.

Member participation. Build a statewide network of participating AICUP institutions supplying usable data, stories, spokespeople, and distribution channels.

6 Message architecture

Pell recipients, minority students, first-generation students, adult learners, veterans, parents, and other groups should function as proof points and story streams beneath one larger argument rather than as competing campaign themes.

CORE MESSAGE: Pennsylvania's independent colleges serve students like me.

MESSAGE PILLAR	ARGUMENT	POSSIBLE PROOF
ACCESS	Independent higher education is part of Pennsylvania's educational access system.	Financial need, Pell and PHEAA participation, first-generation enrollment, geographic access, transfer pathways, dual enrollment, adult learners.
OPPORTUNITY	Access matters because students need a realistic path from enrollment to achievement.	Financial assistance, academic support, mentoring, career preparation, flexible programs, completion pathways.
IMPACT	When these students succeed, Pennsylvania benefits.	Graduates in the workforce, community leadership, employer needs, regional economic contribution, family and civic impact.

7 Creative platform: MORE LIKE ME

More Like Me becomes the narrative device connecting individual experience to statewide evidence. Each campaign story should follow a repeatable structure:

ELEMENT	FUNCTION
ME	A student or graduate tells a concise, specific story.
MORE	A statewide data point establishes that this person is representative of a larger population.
WHY IT MATTERS	The story connects educational opportunity with degree completion, career preparation, family mobility, community contribution, or workforce need.
EVEN MORE	The campaign connects appropriate public policy and investment with the opportunity to extend that pathway to additional Pennsylvania students.

Illustrative story openings

I work while earning my degree. There are more like me.

[Student story] + [statewide evidence about adult or working students at AICUP institutions] + a concise explanation of how independent colleges create educational pathways for students whose lives do not fit a single definition of the traditional college student.

I'm the first in my family to go to college. There are more like me.

I stayed close to home because my family needs me. There are more like me.

The individual is the doorway into the evidence - not a substitute for it.

8 Campaign strategies and tactics

STRATEGY	RATIONALE	REPRESENTATIVE TACTICS
Humanize statewide evidence	Give statistics human meaning and individual stories statewide significance.	Story bank; student/alumni profiles; short-form video; web features; social content.
Use trusted voices to validate the message	Move key claims beyond AICUP's institutional voice.	Employer testimonials; civic-leader statements; alumni advocacy; op-eds; earned-media sources.
Create coordinated statewide repetition	Help policymakers encounter variations of the same argument across institutions and regions.	Member toolkits; shared editorial calendar; email/social templates; coordinated campaign landing pages.
Bring the message into policymakers' communities	Connect the statewide case to people and institutions within legislative districts.	District-specific briefs; campus visits; legislative briefings; Day on the Hill; local media; constituent stories.

Story acquisition infrastructure

AICUP should create a simple story-acquisition toolkit for member institutions: interview questions, consent and release procedures, photography guidance, required data fields, verification expectations, and a straightforward submission process. This turns the member network into a scalable reporting operation.

9 Implementation plan

A statewide campaign involving many independent institutions should be built in phases. Establish the evidence and infrastructure first, pilot the approach with willing member institutions, then expand once AICUP knows which messages and tactics are gaining traction.

Phase 1: Research and campaign development | Months 1-3

- Audit AICUP's current research and identify data gaps.
- Establish baseline perceptions among priority policymaker audiences.
- Review recent media and legislative narratives about independent higher education.
- Recruit a representative pilot group of member institutions.
- Conduct a story audit and begin building the More Like Me story bank.
- Finalize message architecture and supporting proof points.
- Establish campaign visual identity and editorial standards.
- Develop consent, privacy, photography, and story-approval procedures.
- Create the initial member-institution communications toolkit.
- Establish baseline metrics and the campaign dashboard.

The research phase should also test the More Like Me language with representative audiences before full launch to determine whether the intended message is understood and whether the concept resonates across different student populations.

Phase 2: Pilot and refine | Months 4-6

Launch More Like Me with a smaller group of participating institutions representing different regions, institution types, student populations, and legislative districts.

- Test student and alumni profiles, short-form video, district-specific data briefs, employer testimonials, earned-media pitches, social content, and direct policymaker communications.
- Track which stories generate engagement and which proof points audiences remember.
- Document what member institutions find easy or difficult to implement.
- Capture questions or objections emerging from policymakers and media.
- Revise messages, materials, submission processes, and tactics before statewide expansion.

Phase 3: Statewide campaign | Months 7-12

- Expand participation across AICUP member institutions.
- Publish a regular cadence of More Like Me stories across owned and shared channels.
- Coordinate earned-media opportunities around campaign themes and relevant policy moments.
- Provide legislators with district-specific evidence and constituent stories.
- Recruit employers, alumni, mayors, and other civic leaders as third-party validators.
- Integrate More Like Me into AICUP's existing advocacy calendar and Day on the Hill.
- Create opportunities for policymakers to meet students, alumni, employers, and institutional leaders in their districts.
- Refresh the story bank continuously so the campaign does not depend on a small number of repeatedly featured individuals.

The campaign should culminate in an evaluation against the Phase 1 baseline, followed by recommendations for continuation, modification, or integration into AICUP's ongoing communications program.

10 Campaign governance and responsibilities

AICUP's communications staff should own the statewide strategy, message architecture, quality control, campaign calendar, central content, measurement, and relationships with statewide media and advocacy partners.

Member institutions would function as both story sources and distribution partners. Each participating institution should designate a communications contact responsible for identifying potential stories, verifying institutional information, securing appropriate permissions, coordinating interviews, and distributing campaign materials through local channels.

Member toolkit

- Campaign overview and message guide
- Current approved statewide data and citations
- Story-identification criteria and interview guide
- Photography/video specifications and consent procedures
- Social-media, newsletter, and alumni templates
- Media-pitch templates and legislative talking points
- Guidance for adapting statewide messages to local institutional stories

This structure allows AICUP to coordinate the campaign without attempting to centralize every piece of communications work. Member institutions already possess communications staffs, alumni networks, faculty expertise, community relationships, and direct access to students.

11 Editorial principles

People are participants, not illustrations. Students and alumni should understand why their stories are being collected, where they may appear, and how their experiences connect with the campaign.

Stories illuminate evidence; they do not replace it. A compelling individual example does not establish a statewide trend. Data and personal experience should perform different functions and reinforce one another.

Avoid deficit framing. Students receiving financial assistance, supporting children, attending college as first-generation students, or balancing employment with education should not be portrayed as people an institution rescued. Emphasize agency, aspiration, opportunity, and achievement.

Represent complexity. The story bank should eventually include different regions, institution types, fields of study, ages, economic circumstances, races and ethnicities, family structures, and educational pathways.

Verify every claim. Statewide statistics should come from current documented sources. Institutional claims should be verified before publication.

12 Risk management

RISK	RESPONSE
Campaign appears to cherry-pick unusually compelling students	Pair stories with statewide data demonstrating the larger pattern.
Critics challenge statistics	Maintain documented sources, dates, definitions, and methodology for every campaign data point.
Too many messages dilute the campaign	Require content to connect with Access, Opportunity, or Impact.

RISK	RESPONSE
Member institutions use inconsistent language	Provide message guide, templates, and current approved proof points.
Students feel exploited for advocacy purposes	Use informed participation and transparent consent procedures.
Campaign becomes partisan	Ground communications in students, evidence, workforce/community outcomes, and AICUP's policy objectives rather than party identity.
A negative institutional story threatens campaign credibility	Maintain issue-monitoring and crisis-response procedures separate from planned campaign content.
Content production overwhelms AICUP staff	Use standardized member submission tools and a shared editorial calendar.

13 Measurement framework

Evaluation should begin when the campaign begins, not after it ends. The dashboard should combine communications metrics with evidence of movement among the audiences the campaign is intended to influence.

OBJECTIVE	INDICATORS	POSSIBLE METHODS
Increase policymaker understanding	Recognition of AICUP student demographics; message recall; changes in stated perceptions	Baseline/follow-up survey; interviews; legislative staff feedback
Achieve message penetration	Recall of Access, Opportunity, Impact messages; engagement with campaign content	Survey; web analytics; email engagement; social analytics
Increase third-party advocacy	Employers, alumni, and civic leaders participating; letters, op-eds, testimonials, public statements	Participation records; media monitoring; advocacy tracking
Build member participation	Institutions contributing stories/data and distributing campaign materials	Campaign CRM or participation dashboard
Strengthen earned-media narrative	Relevant coverage; message inclusion; quality and tone; use of third-party voices	Media analysis

OBJECTIVE	INDICATORS	POSSIBLE METHODS
Increase policymaker engagement	Briefing participation, campus visits, information requests, staff interactions, campaign-material use	Government-relations tracking
Support organizational advocacy	Evidence that campaign messages and validators contribute to policy conversations and relationships	Integrated communications/government-relations review

Numeric targets should be established after baseline research and after AICUP determines the staff time and budget available for the campaign.

What not to count as success by itself

A campaign can generate large numbers of impressions, social views, media mentions, or website visits without changing anyone's understanding or behavior. Those measures help determine whether content is reaching people, but they are not sufficient evidence that the campaign has accomplished its purpose.

- Do priority stakeholders understand something they did not understand before?
- Can they recall the central message?
- Has their perception of independent higher education changed?
- Are credible third parties repeating the message?
- Are policymakers engaging differently with AICUP and its members?
- Has communications work strengthened the environment for AICUP's advocacy?

14 Continuous improvement

More Like Me should be managed as a learning campaign rather than a fixed annual communications calendar. AICUP should review campaign data quarterly with communications, government-relations, research, and participating member-institution representatives.

What are we learning? Which stories, messengers, messages, and channels are producing meaningful engagement?

Where are we encountering resistance or misunderstanding? Are audiences questioning the evidence, interpreting messages differently than intended, or raising concerns the campaign has not addressed?

Who are we failing to reach? Do the story bank and distribution network adequately represent the institutions, regions, communities, and stakeholders AICUP needs to engage?

What should change? Resources should move toward effective strategies and away from tactics that produce activity without meaningful results.

Research -> strategy -> implementation -> measurement -> revision

Conclusion

The perception that Pennsylvania's independent colleges primarily educate wealthy and privileged students cannot be changed by simply asserting that the stereotype is wrong.

AICUP has a stronger case available. It can show who attends its institutions. It can explain what makes those educational pathways possible. It can introduce Pennsylvanians to students and graduates whose experiences make statewide evidence tangible. And it can invite employers, alumni, civic leaders, families, and member institutions to help tell that story.

MORE LIKE ME provides a simple organizing idea: One student tells a story. Evidence shows there are more. Pennsylvania sees what those students contribute. Public policy can help create opportunities for even more.

PORTFOLIO DEVELOPMENT NOTE

This document is a substantial 2026 reconstruction of a communications plan originally prepared by Dianne Creagh as a final-round candidate exercise for AICUP in 2023. The central More Like Me concept, the use of data plus individual stories, differentiated stakeholder audiences, third-party validators, and member-institution collaboration originated in the 2023 response. The strategic architecture, implementation framework, governance, risk management, and measurement structure were substantially developed for this revised version.