

# The Ultimate Guide to Inbound Marketing for Schools



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# 01 /

## INTRODUCTION

### What is inbound -- and how can it work for your school?

**Inbound marketing helps you talk to the students you want to reach, about the things they want to hear about.**

Once upon a time, students applying to colleges waited for relevant materials to arrive in their inboxes. Schools sent out viewbooks, pamphlets, and newsletters to prospective students to drive applications and enrollment—and it worked.

Today, it doesn't. Students are still applying to college, but the way they find them, research them, and choose one to attend has changed. Instead of waiting for answers to come to them, they're seeking information out themselves. Prospective applicants and students are turning to the internet for information regularly and predictably—it's your job to be their answer.

That's where inbound comes in. Outbound marketing tactics like print ads, billboards, radio spots, and direct mail are very common in higher education but, unfortunately, they're also very ineffective. There's no guarantee your marketing materials are reaching the right students, and even when they do, it's easy for them to ignore your ads and it's difficult to link these tactics to changes in applications or enrollment.

In short, outbound marketing is hard to correctly target, easy to tune out, and difficult to measure.

Fortunately for you, there's a better way.

Inbound marketing helps you talk to the students you want to reach about the things they want to hear about. Instead of hoping that 5% of your mailing list is a good fit for your institution, you can use inbound marketing to help the right students find you online, then nurture them from anonymous website visitors to applicants.

We know that all good arguments have supporting evidence, so here's some for you: Schools who use inbound marketing are seven times more likely to report higher ROI than schools using outbound marketing. And inbound leads and applicants are three times more qualified than leads acquired through outbound methods.

To help you understand how it works, we're going to take you through The Inbound Methodology.

### The Inbound Methodology



The Inbound Methodology for schools has four steps: **Attract, Convert, Close, and Delight**. The tools you'll need to use at each stage are listed above in this handy funnel graphic.

In this ebook, you'll learn how each of these four steps applies to your school, and how to use inbound techniques to convert prospective students from website visitors to applicants and enrollments.



# 02 /

## ATTRACT

### Getting the right prospective students to your website

Inbound marketing levels the playing field.

The first step of the Inbound Methodology is to attract the right people to your site. After all, you can't nurture and convert prospective students into applicants unless you have a base of visitors to work with. This seems like a daunting task. For smaller schools, specific programs within larger institutions, or trade and nontraditional institutions, it's difficult to build traffic and get found when you're competing with established schools that seem to dominate search engine traffic and have money to spend on paid ads.

Larger institutions, on the other hand, probably already have a certain volume of site traffic, but it's not always clear whether it's the right kind. Are the prospective students checking out your school finding the right information? Are they seriously interested in attending? Is there a specific school or program you're trying to help them find?

The bad news is that you can't click your heels and instantly shoot to the top of search rankings or quadruple your traffic. But there's good news too: *Inbound marketing levels the playing field.* Regardless of your budget, you can use inbound to own your search engine ranking instead of paying to maintain it, build your online presence, and attract the right visitors.

But before you get started, take a second to ask yourself a very important question. You're reading this ebook because you want to boost enrollment or increase the quality of your applications. Let's say you succeed—what does the perfect student or applicant look like?

To answer this question, you'll have to create **student personas**.

## What are Student Personas?

Simply put, **a student persona is a semi-fictional representation of your ideal student based on market research and real data about your existing students.** When creating your student persona(s), consider including demographics, behavior patterns, motivations, and goals. The more detailed you are, the better!

### WHY DO PERSONAS MATTER?

Personas are the foundation of your school's inbound strategy. Think of all the people who come to your site on a daily basis — be it high school students, their parents, college students, transfer students, guidance counselors, alumni, adults seeking new skills or an advanced degree ... the list goes on.

If any of those people walked onto campus or up to you in real life, you wouldn't send them to the same place, and you certainly

wouldn't have them meet with the same person. *You'd tailor your interactions* based on their background, needs, and wants. Your marketing should work the same way—different types of leads should receive different information and experiences.

Developing personas allows you to segment your marketing outreach so you can take a personalized, targeted approach.

### HOW DO I CREATE A PERSONA?

When you're putting together your personas, look at the characteristics of your most successful applicants. What do they have in common? How can you identify those characteristics? You can use the following questions to guide your persona creation:

- How old are they?
- What gender are they?
- Do they live in an urban or rural setting?
- How many years of education do they have? What kind?
- Do they have work experience? What kind?
- What do they want to achieve?
- Where do they want to be in five years?
- What can your institution do to help them achieve those goals?
- What would prevent them from attending your university (i.e. what are their obstacles)?



You can gather this information through a combination of market research and interviews or surveys of current students, faculty, and faculty. Depending on what your marketing goals are, you could have one or two personas, or as many as 10!

We recommend getting started with two or three personas that will be responsible for the majority of your traffic. Focus on these core personas should be your focus as you develop your inbound strategy so you don't spread yourself too thin. As you start to see results from your efforts, you can begin to attract your remaining personas, but they're icing on the cake!

Note: Not all of your personas have to be students -- you can set up separate outreach for parents, guidance counselors, alumni, and whoever else you'd like to interact with. And if you're new to personas, start with just your most important one. You can always create more personas later.

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## I HAVE MY PERSONAS! NOW WHAT?

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Now that you've created your personas and know what your ideal students look like, it's time to think about how to get your content to those students.

Not sure what a persona should look like? No worries—check out the following two examples.



## Getting Started: Two Persona Examples



### BUSINESS SCHOOL BRIAN

Brian is 24-28 years old, male, and lives with roommates in the city. He attended a large undergraduate institution (15,000+), and has been working full-time for more than three years. He's currently making \$30,000 - \$45,000 a year working in insurance sales, which isn't his intended career.

Brian is thinking about changing careers, since his current job doesn't utilize his undergraduate degree. He's career-motivated and wants to be financially stable. He's worried about the transition from a full-time job to being a full-time student, and wants to maintain his school-life balance.



### PRE-MED MICHELLE

Michelle is 21-23 years old, female, and lives with roommates in the city. She attended a small liberal arts school, and is planning on going to medical school after working in the healthcare field for a year or two after graduation. She's currently working in a research lab at a large medical center, and is excited to get clinical experience in medical school.

Michelle isn't sure what specialty she wants to practice, but knows that patient interaction is very important to her. She wants to attend a school in an urban area that's affiliated with a reputable hospital.



## SEO & Keywords

**SEO** stands for search engine optimization. Search engines “crawl” website content, file, and rank them. SEO determines how well your webpages can be found by search engines for a specific keyword query—or “organic search.” Content can help you improve this rank to be found more easily and often.

### HOW DO I GET STARTED?

#### Pick your keywords.

You’ve created your target personas. Now, think about your personas’ challenges. What content can you create that’s relevant to those concerns? What information will they be looking for that you can provide?

Once you have a list of topics, it’s time to create keywords. The more specific these keywords are, the better—it’s extremely difficult to differentiate yourself first for the search term “sales,” for example, but you can create specific content for the term “sales management training course.”

It’s essential to keep in mind that *keywords containing your school’s name or program name aren’t the right keywords to aim for.* The vast majority of students aren’t searching for your specific program! Inbound works because students looking for information related to their interests will find you if you’ve created great content around those topics.

#### Why does SEO matter?

Your website’s placement in search results is a fundamental determinant of whether you’ll get found online. Eighty percent of people never click past the first page of search results on Google. But the good news for inbound marketers is that 80% of people skip the sponsored results and click on organic search results only.

These long, specific keywords are called **long tail keywords**. You can use keywords to anchor each piece of content you write.

Some examples of long tail keywords:

- ‘Preparing for the GMAT’
- ‘How to study for the SAT’
- ‘How to get into vet school’
- ‘Careers in Mechanical Engineering’

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## HOW DO I GET STARTED?

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### **Conduct interviews.**

Nobody knows your current students' needs better than your current students and your admissions officers. Ask your students what information they were looking for and what content they would have found helpful when they were applying to colleges.

Your admissions officers wield another valuable perspective. They're the ones speaking to students and interviewers, and can tell you what students frequently ask about. You can also leverage resources that already exist—the FAQ section of your admissions website or collateral that's sent to students will give you insight into what students care about.

### **Use a keyword planning tool to get suggestions.**

Search engines own a mountain of data on what people are searching for. You can (and should!) use this data to your advantage. Once you have a list of long tail keywords, enter them into a keyword planning tool. Look at the average monthly search volume, as well as the difficulty of ranking for each term.

*Be strategic in choosing which keywords you're trying to rank for. You'll have to balance a keyword's search volume (the higher, the better) with how competitive it is to rank for.*

The competition referred to in keyword planning tools refers to how many advertisers are buying sponsored search results for that term, not an assessment of how difficult it is to rank for a given term. However, while organic results are more likely to be clicked than paid ones, a high competitiveness rating is still a signal that there's a lot of interest in this area.



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## WHERE DO I PLACE KEYWORDS?

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Everywhere. Search engines read everything on your website.

Maintaining a regular blog is a great way to scale an SEO strategy. You can continually add new blog posts, which refreshes and boosts your SEO rankings regularly. It also makes you seem more legitimate in students' eyes—they're more likely to trust a school that's published multiple blog posts around the same topic than one with one post from nine months ago (or one that only has pages advertising their own programs).

But you don't need to blog to build a keyword strategy. If they include great content that's relevant to students, *each page on your site is an opportunity to create content*. Ideally, each page should be optimized around only one keyword. This way, search engines know that each page serves a specific purpose and will rank the page for that keyword.

## Blogging

Hold on. You're a school, not a publication or news site. Plus, you already have a news and events section on your site. Why do you need a blog? As it turns out, there are three very good reasons why.

### 1 | **SEO**

It's simple—the more content you have on your website, the better chance you have of ranking high in search results. You can only include so many informational pages on your website, so blogging is the place to grow your online presence and give search engines more content to scan. As a best practice, each blog post should also be optimized for one keyword.

### 2 | **Tell your story**

It's not necessarily easy to differentiate your school through its major selection or dining hall options. But you can use your blog to answer prospective students' questions while showcasing unique student and faculty experiences. For example, a blog post series highlighting the extracurricular research projects done by pre-med students offers insights into the types of opportunities your students have access to.

### 3 Engage with visitors

The value of inbound marketing lies in getting your anonymous website visitors to convert into known entities that you can sort into personas and nurture. A blog is often the first place a visitor lands, and is your first opportunity to obtain information about them. Include calls-to-action (CTAs) in all blog posts that can lead to areas of your website where you're able to capture visitor information such as email, school information, and grade level.

## CONTENT CREATION TIPS

We won't lie. *Bloggng sounds daunting.* But schools of all types are uniquely positioned to knock it out of the park. Unlike other organizations that may have to do external hiring to build a pool of writers, educational institutions are full of writers, and the sheer breadth of your university's offerings and programs means it's easy to create rich, original content for every

## What do I blog about?

**Y**ou can tap almost any of the sources above to write original posts. When picking blog post topics, it's important to remember that picking a school to attend is a huge decision, and this is your chance to educate them. It's tempting to promote your school—after all, you're great! But visitors are actually more likely to see you as an objective (read: more trustworthy) source if you don't constantly plug yourself.

Of course, some topics are naturally specific to your school—for example, a student writing about her extracurricular experience will inherently have to discuss things specific to your program. The key is to include a mix of generally educational topics that

are related but not specific to your programs, along with content that's directly tied to your program. Be resource, not a sales pitch.

What does this general content look like?

Here are some examples:

- A current student could write about what she packed for her freshman year
- A professor could write about the career options for biology majors
- An admissions officer could write about how to get the most out of a campus tour, or provide general tips on writing admissions essays
- An alum could write about leveraging your college network to get a job

Of course, you'll want to include school-specific topics too, so that students can also learn about what it's like to attend your institution. Some ideas:

**Students**

- Why and how they chose your institution
- Classes or projects they enjoy
- Extracurriculars they're involved in
- Events or activities they participated in
- A "day in the life" at your school

**Admissions**

- How to prepare for college applications
- Deciding if a campus is right for you
- Tips for interviews and essays
- Dates for admissions events

**Alumni**

- The value of their education
- What they're doing now (and how the school helped them get there)

**Faculty**

- Their current research projects
- Involvement in student activities
- Opportunities for students to do research/work on faculty projects

## Using social media to increase your reach

Blogging helps build your online visibility, but it's also an easy way to amplify your social presence. You can re-purpose your content for social channels, or simply use social to share content.

Social media is also a lighter-touch way for students to interact with you. They may not want to subscribe to a blog, take a campus tour, or download an ebook right now, but if they "like" a Facebook page, they'll still see your updates. As with blogs, include CTAs in your social media copy to further engage and learn more about your followers.

## What's next?

You've created personas, researched keywords, and written blog posts. All of this work goes a long way toward your marketing goals. Now, you'll have to leverage this content to convert visitors into leads.

# 03 /

## CONVERT

Transforming your anonymous traffic into known visitors

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Conversion is the point at which the unknown turns into the known.

Your website content is up and running, and you're starting to gain more traffic. But who's visiting your site? How do you connect with your audience?

That's where conversion comes in—the moment at which the unknown turns into the known.

## Getting Started With Conversion

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### WHAT ARE CONVERSION POINTS?

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Any place on your website where a visitor has to fill out his or her name, email address, and other information to access content is known as a **conversion point**.

You probably already have conversion points on your website—forms website visitors fill out to sign up for an information session, register for a tour, or apply. But these are all late-stage conversion points. Students who aren't serious about applying yet most likely won't take the time to attend an info session or visit campus.

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### CONVERSION POINTS: THE EARLIER, THE BETTER

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You wouldn't buy a car or request a test drive after visiting a dealership's website once. So why should you expect students to apply just because they've found your school online?

Choosing a school is a big life decision, so don't expect that students will be ready to make the commitment to applying or visiting campus after their first visit to their website.

Instead, *capture their information as early as you can with smaller asks*. For example, you could include a CTA to download a sample freshman year schedule at the end of a blog post about a new student's day in the life, then nurture people who downloaded it with more information about your dorms, extra curriculars, and more!

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## USE OFFERS TO CREATE EARLY CONVERSION POINTS

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Think of a conversion point as an exchange of information. You get a prospective student's name, email address, school, and other contact information ... but what do they get?

Enter **offers**. The term "offer" is just another word for a piece of educational content. Offers can be anything—ebooks like this one, templates for a student designing their first-year schedule, webinars with admissions counselors, or even quizzes to help determine what kind of school is right for them, just to name a few. What's special about offers is that they are gated, and can only be accessed after students fill out a **landing page** -- the site page where you collect their contact information. Typically, a conversion follows these steps:

- 1 Student clicks a CTA.**

CTAs can be placed anywhere on your site. The CTA shown below was placed at the end of a post on the HubSpot Marketing Blog, but you can also include CTAs on regular site pages.



**FREE TEMPLATE: HOW TO CREATE PERSONAS FOR YOUR SCHOOL**

Learn how to create personas for your school - so you can segment your audience to drive more inquiries and applications.

[DOWNLOAD TEMPLATE](#)

## 2 Student fills out information on a landing page.

After the student clicks on your CTA, they'll be taken to a separate site page. This page should contain information about the offer and a form that will capture their contact information as well as any other information you need to segment your visitors into one persona or another.

## FREE TEMPLATE: CREATE PERSONAS FOR YOUR SCHOOL

Use student personas to organize your audience segments and make your marketing stronger.


It's important to establish personas for your school so you can segment your audience and create stronger marketing campaigns to drive inquiries and applications. But how do you start researching and creating these personas from scratch?

Our free, customizable persona template will let you easily organize your research to create your very own student personas.

With this template you can learn best practices for persona research and create beautiful, well-formatted student personas that you can share with your entire admissions department and school.

This offer includes tips and tricks for:

- ✓ Asking the right questions during your persona interviews and surveys
- ✓ Formatting your persona research in a compelling way
- ✓ Presenting your new, finalized student personas to your school
- ✓ Using your personas for segmentation, content mapping, and lead nurturing



### Get Your Free Template:

FIRST NAME\*

LAST NAME\*

EMAIL (PRIVACY POLICY)\*

PHONE NUMBER\*

ORGANIZATION NAME\*

WORKSTEP ID#\*

## 3 Student reaches a “thank you” page and the offer.

Thank you pages include a link to download your offer. You should also email a copy of the offer to visitors in case they're on their phones. You can also include secondary CTAs here, such as an inquiry for a campus visit.

Hi Leslie. Here's your free download!



Download File



Email to a Colleague





The process for creating offers is similar to creating blog posts. Offers may not live on your blog, but ultimately they're just another form of content that should reflect what prospective students are looking to learn more about. Source ideas and content from your existing blogger base, and ask them if they're willing to take a stab at something a little different.

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## WHAT KINDS OF OFFERS SHOULD I CREATE?

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Think outside the box! Ebooks are far from the only type of offer you can create. Whether it's making a template for helping students plan their major, or a checklist of admissions deadlines for applicants, offers can take any shape or form you can imagine. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- Sample freshman year schedule
- Curriculum from an introductory class
- Guide to choosing a college
- Sample study abroad programming
- Checklist of admissions deadlines
- Video tour of a classroom building
- Guide to picking a major
- Interview tips & tricks

**BOSTON COLLEGE**  
CARROLL SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT

# Choosing an MBA program?

Deciding to pursue an MBA is a big decision—but choosing where to apply is an even bigger one. Need help narrowing your list?

**Download our eBook to learn:**

- The three key factors you need to consider before applying
- What to ask of a business school's MBA program
- Who to contact for further advice

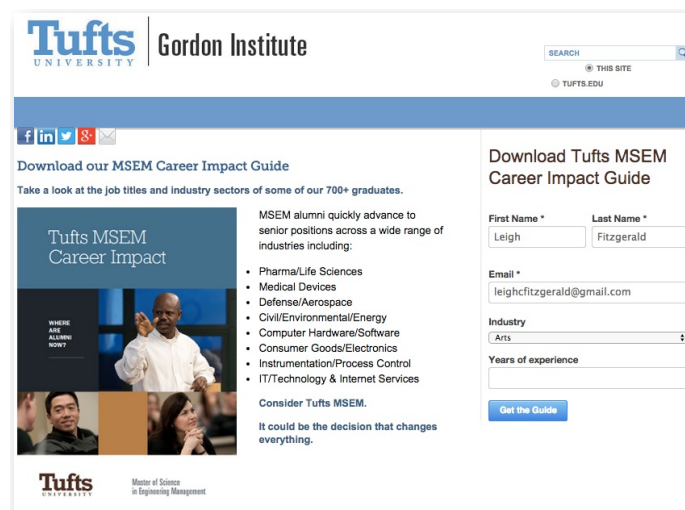
Feel confident that you're choosing the right MBA program for you.

Sample ebook created by Boston College  
Carroll School of Management

## Landing Page Best Practices

You've created a killer offer—now it's time to build a landing page that will entice students to convert. Any good landing page should have the following elements:

- 1 | Clear, action-oriented header
- 2 | 1-5 sentences explaining the offer and its value
- 3 | Numbers, bullets, and bolding in the copy so it's easy to scan
- 4 | Relevant image
- 5 | Relevant form fields
- 6 | Content above the fold to minimize students' need to scroll
- 7 | No links—you don't want visitors to get distracted



The image shows a sample landing page for Tufts University's Gordon Institute of Engineering. The page is titled "Download our MSEM Career Impact Guide" and features a form to request the guide. The form includes fields for First Name, Last Name, Email, Industry, and Years of experience, along with a "Get the Guide" button. The page also includes a list of industries where MSEM alumni advance to senior positions, such as Pharma/Life Sciences, Medical Devices, Defense/Aerospace, Civil/Environmental/Energy, Computer Hardware/Software, Consumer Goods/Electronics, Instrumentation/Process Control, and IT/Technology & Internet Services. The page is branded with the Tufts University logo and the text "Master of Science in Engineering Management".

Sample landing page from Tufts University's  
Gordon Institute of Engineering

# 04 /

## CLOSE

### Turning visitors into students

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Use email nurturing to turn visitors into applicants into students.

After a conversion, you have your visitors' contact information! But to turn them from a visitor into an applicant and eventual student, you'll need to do a little more work. It sounds like a gargantuan task to turn a random visitor into an enrolled student, but it's actually a process that can be broken down into simple steps. You'll have to use email lists to nurture students.

### Purchased Lists: The Ugly Truth

**Do you buy lists? If you do, stop!** I remember very well being bombarded with mail packets and emails from colleges I'd never heard of after I took the PSAT for the first time—and ultimately, my decisions on where to apply and where to attend weren't affected by a single one of the,.

That's because I was part of a list that these colleges purchased for outreach purposes, not an actual qualified lead. Lists are a bad investment for marketers at universities to make for a few reasons:

- They cost money with no guarantee of return.
- The information may not be accurate.
- Students that are part of lists don't necessarily want to hear from you.

Why waste money and effort reaching out to disengaged students when you can reallocate your time and resources toward attracting qualified leads to your school? Not only will those students want to hear from you, they're also more likely to be a better fit for your school.

## Workflows & Nurturing

Think back to the funnel you saw at the beginning of this ebook. Your goal is to get students from the left to the right—a process known as **nurturing**.

Marketers use pre-planned **workflows** to nurture leads. Each workflow should be tailored to a specific lead's needs, and are generally a series of email sends containing helpful content, offers, and CTAs.

For example, Business School Betty could have converted on a blog post about whether business school is the right place for her. She would be placed into a workflow that could follow up with more content relevant to choosing and evaluating business schools, and depending on her behavior, eventually ask her to visit campus or apply.

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### HOW DO I DESIGN A WORKFLOW?

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Before you launch an email campaign, ask yourself:

- What action will a student have to take to be placed into a workflow?
- What kind of actions will a student have to take to “complete” a workflow (i.e. a student is asked to apply)?
- What content are you going to send?

The key to an effective workflow is to *provide value at each stage of the enrollment cycle* (also known as a buyer's journey). The buyer's journey has three stages: Awareness, Consideration, and Decision. In the Awareness stage, students have just begun to research different colleges and often don't completely understand what they're looking for. In the Consideration stage, they've defined what type of programs or schools they hope to attend. In the Decision stage, they're comparing different schools' programs and making their final selection.

The content you send should always be reflective of the stage of the buyer's journey the prospective student is currently at. After all, you wouldn't send someone who just decided they want to go to medical school a list of your program's admissions deadlines.

Relevant content at each stage of the journey could look like this:

- Awareness: “Guide: Is Medical School Right for You?”
- Consideration: “What to Look for in a Medical School Program”
- Decision: “Sample First-Year Schedule and Syllabus”

The last thing to consider is who will enter each workflow. You wouldn't send Business School Betty and Pre-Med Paul the same information, so you'll have to segment the information you receive by persona. The fields you'll include on your landing pages will determine what persona and subsequent workflow each applicant will fall under.

Nurturing emails and the offers they contain can be a bit more self-promotional than your blog content. A student who's given you their email has signaled that they want to learn more about your specific school. That means that while they're not necessarily ready to pull the trigger on applying, they're certainly interested—provide targeted content that will help them move to the next stage of the buyer's journey.

So even if it's too early to send an email with a big “Apply Now” button, you can craft content around how your school can cater to a specific interest or type of student.

## THAT'S ALL, FOLKS!

Congratulations—you now have all the know-how you need to get started with inbound.

Getting started on a new marketing initiative designed to drive a metric as important as enrollment or application numbers can be daunting. But inbound can help.

Don't try to do everything at once: Take baby steps and tackle one piece of the funnel at a time—starting with just one of your personas can help you test out your efforts and determine best practices for the future.

In no time, you'll be an inbound pro!





# FOR THE LOVE OF MARKETING.

## HUBSPOT'S ALL-IN-ONE MARKETING SOFTWARE HELPS SCHOOLS:



### ATTRACT QUALIFIED PROSPECTIVE STUDENTS

Optimize new and existing content to attract site traffic and increase program awareness with blogging, microsites, social media, and your website.



### PERSONALIZE EMAIL AND ONLINE INTERACTIONS

Engage prospective students with customized content unique to their stage in the admission cycle, intended area of study, or website activity.



### SPEED UP THE ENROLLMENT CYCLE

Create multiple conversion points to tailor campaigns and shorten the length of time between a prospective student's first visit and their application submission.



### PASS OFF BETTER INFO TO ADMISSIONS

Automating the hand-off process between marketing and admissions to deliver timely and relevant information about perspective students.

## INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE?

[Request A Demo](#)

[Get a Free Assessment](#)