INCREASING GRADUATE YIELD
WITH A TRANSMEDIA CAMPAIGN

A CREATIVE PROJECT
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Abstract

CREATIVE PROJECT: Increasing Graduate Yield with a Transmedia Campaign

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In higher education admissions, *yield* is the percentage of students that enroll in the university once they have been admitted, and many universities, including Ball State, struggle to increase their yield each year. Due to a lack of connection, information, and guidance, students often never enroll with a university after they are admitted. This creative project aims to connect prospective students with current students at Ball State University, leading to an increase in yield among graduate programs. This project used competitive analysis and empathy research to better understand national trends related to yield in higher education. Then, design thinking was implemented to generate ideas for the development of a transmedia campaign meant to build affinity among prospective students by allowing them to build relationships with current students. The transmedia storyworld consists of a website, social media campaign, and Cardinal ambassador program that together strive to build deeper connections between a university and its potential students.
Introduction

Jackson Smith walks into the house and drops his keys and mail on the table, as he does each day after work. He moves on to making dinner. Hours later, he hears his wife say, “Jackson, you got an email from Ball State University.” He quickly checks the message, which informs him that a decision has been made regarding his application. He checks his account and finds he has been accepted. “Wow, I got in,” he tells his wife. “Congratulations! Do you think this is the right time with your promotion and the baby on the way, though?” his wife questions.

This short scenario is just one example of the types of issues that might cause a newly admitted graduate student to reconsider following through with enrollment in a program. Some students may not be prepared for the costs, while some may have applied and been admitted to multiple schools. Likewise, students considering graduate school can be busy adults with other priorities in their lives. These are all possible reasons a student may not enroll in a university even after they have been accepted.

In higher education admissions, yield is the percentage of students that enroll in the university once they have been admitted (illustrated in Figure 1). Yield is important because it results in lost tuition dollars when a prospective admitted student does not transition into an enrolled student. At a higher level, yield can affect the tuition pricing of a university. For example, more selective universities that have higher yield percentages can increase their tuition rates (Grove, 2019). While yield can have monetary effects on a university, students are more than just numbers. If a student applies, the student must have at least some interest in eventually enrolling. Thus, it is important to foster an experience in which potential students believe the university supports them and wants them to join the university community.
Encoura, an educational research platform, conducted a survey that asked admitted students at a university to indicate the final factors in their enrollment decisions. More than 70% of the students named one of six factors: affordability, availability of desired program, reputation of academic quality, career outcomes for graduates, value of education for cost of attending, and the feeling of fit. These students chose a university based on these factors; however, what about the schools they did not pick or the students that chose schools and then ultimately did not attend?

This enrollment issue is not unique to Ball State University, or even the Midwest. Colleges and universities across the country have faced declining enrollment numbers in recent years. As a result, administrators have been charged with thinking beyond what has been done in the past, which has often generated an increase in out-of-the-box tactics. For classes entering between 2014 and 2016, the average number of colleges willing to consider post-deadline applications was 436; however, in the past three years, there has been a 27% increase to 554 schools (Gardner, 2019).

At Ball State, 3,244 students applied for Fall 2018 admission, and 2,049 were admitted. However, only 1,618 actually matriculated into students. A matriculated student is one that actually attends class or actively logs in and participates in the assignments in an online class. The numbers show that the
university yielded 50% of those that applied and 79% of those that were admitted. Some might consider 79% yield a success. Although it is a success to yield any number of students, we must still be concerned about those that did not yield. What made these students choose to put their education on hold? Or, why did a student not choose to attend Ball State and instead seek an alternative college or university? These questions present an opportunity to explore ways to improve yield. Focusing on the 21% that were admitted but did not enroll will allow Ball State to target students in ways that perhaps other schools may not, as well as better support these students in their educational journeys by breaking down barriers they may be facing.

Associate Dean of the Graduate School at Ball State, Dr. Stephanie Simon-Dack interacts with incoming students regularly and often receives messages from students who decide to cancel their admission to the university. According to Simon-Dack (personal communication, January 27, 2020), those who cancelled “almost always got admitted somewhere else. But especially for online students, something happened in their life, life crisis, money issues, or their career got in the way.” To address these concerns, this creative project is driven by a single guiding question: How might design thinking and transmedia storytelling be used to increase graduate student yield? Design thinking can expand on this question and generate ideas for solutions, while transmedia storytelling can be implemented to tell compelling stories about Ball State Graduate school across multiple platforms.

Design thinking is a five-step iterative process used to solve unclear problems. The five stages of Design Thinking are: empathize, define, ideate, prototype, and test. In regard to a graduate enrollment yield campaign, design thinking can assist in generating a target audience for the campaign while keeping users (students) the main focus. The design thinking process helps experience and campaign designers gain a deeper understanding of the audience. Empathy research is an important step in the design thinking process, which can help identify the reasons why or why not students choose to enroll with Ball State University. Interviews with stakeholders will drive the transmedia campaign to tell the stories that students want and need to hear. While empathy research is the foundation of understanding and defining an audience, it is also important for helping define a problem space.
Transmedia campaigns are vital for creating connections between users and products, or in this case, students and a university. Thus, once the audience is identified and appropriately characterized, it is imperative to create a customized multichannel marketing campaign that reaches students where they are. “A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole. In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels and comics…. Each franchise entry needs to be self-contained, so you don’t need to have seen the film to enjoy the game or vice versa” (Jenkins, 2006, p. 95). What could set Ball State University apart when students face the final decision to confirm their admission?

By combining design thinking and transmedia storytelling, this project is intended to contribute a clearer understanding of the motivations and needs of admitted graduate students at Ball State, as well as provide them with a deeper affinity for the university and a more welcoming atmosphere. By implementing a transmedia campaign in the yield stage of the student lifecycle, the hope is that prospective students will be more connected to the university and more likely to enroll at Ball State. Also, the benefits of increasing graduate yield go beyond the university by increasing the number of qualified workers in the state. Sixty-five percent of jobs in 2020 will require education beyond high school, and about one in six will require a master’s degree or higher (Carnevale, Smith & Strohl, 2013).

Literature Review

The solution to the growing enrollment crisis is not clear, and many schools have had to get creative with recruitment and marketing efforts to simply maintain enrollments. For example, in 2017, Butler University developed a creative campaign to include its mascot in a unique way. Specifically, designed to expand student data, the then new campaign included prospective students’ pet information. To do so, in 2018, Butler started collecting students’ pet data on student applications. This out-of-the-box approach allowed the university to personalize communication with applicants by sending a postcard (illustrated in Figure 2) from Butler’s live bulldog mascot Trip, addressed to prospective students’ pets. The postcard was also accompanied by a pet bandana for the applicants to dress their pets in.
That year, Butler received a total of 15,620 pet records. After sending the bandanas and postcards, students were active on social media, tagging the #ButlerBound hashtag and posting photos of their pets wearing the merchandise and posing with the postcards. This was just the first step in the university’s effort to build more affinity with applicants. Next, Butler wanted to expand on the students’ profiles and foster more engagement with admits. The university created an admitted student portal, where students could answer questions and expand their profiles. This allowed the university to ask questions like *What social media channels are you active on?* that were less traditional than the usual biographical information schools seek. This also allowed the university to better gauge students’ interest in enrolling. Butler invited students to expand their student profiles by sending them a text message to login to their portals and to tell the school more about themselves.

When students logged in to the portals, they were greeted with a personalized homepage. Then, they were prompted to ask questions like:

- **What is the best way for your admission counselor to get in touch?**
- **You go to your mailbox tomorrow and find mail from us, what is your reaction?**
• You and your family are probably weighing a lot of different factors in your college decision right now, pick the most important two.

The answers to questions like these were made accessible to school administrators and admission counselors so they could reference these answers when communicating with students and so they could report on these answers for future campaigns. To make the experience even more customized, the school built in a self-withdraw process for students who answered these questions negatively, so they could withdraw their admittance. However, only 31% of admits completed profiles. The lower engagement could be due to the fact that answering these questions was a separate step outside of the application process. Interestingly, 27% of respondents indicated that Butler was their top choice, and 27% of respondents ultimately yielded. Through this process, the university also discovered that students had additional preferences regarding communication, as 82% of respondents requested email-only contact.

Butler did not stop here. The school also continued to expand on personalization with admits through the Bulldog Breed campaign. For this effort, the university designed a Bulldog Breed personality quiz (illustrated in Figure 3) and invited admitted students to complete the quiz to find out “what kind of dog they are,” as well as communicate with and meet other admits. Based on responses to the quiz, a prospective student was placed in one of five different breeds, each of which paired with a current student profile. For example, one breed group was called Pace Setter, and students who identified as such
Figure 3. Example of Butler University’s Bulldog Breed personality quiz

received the following message: *For you, every day is an active choice - and a fresh chance to push yourself just a little further than the day before.* The Pace Setter group was then paired with a current student in the political science major, as well as a photo and Q&A with the current student. Prospective students were invited to complete this personality quiz via a text message, and the follow-up to the quiz included email communications and a microsite for the chosen breed. Post-quiz, prospective students also received customized content based on the chosen breed, including related alumni profiles and more.

Ultimately, 27% of admits took the personality quiz, and 42% of respondents yielded. As a result, Butler received specific data about each applicant that would allow the university to better meet their needs and engage them on a more personal level. Butler is not alone in their creative recruitment efforts, as many schools are looking to unique solutions to the decreasing enrollments.

Butler University’s approach may seem out of the ordinary at first glance, but the tactics the university used follow what research has proven to increase the effectiveness of recruitment and yield efforts. According to Education Advisory Board (EAB), “More than any other piece of your communications infrastructure, [an admitted-students website] serves as a go-to resource for students
throughout yield season—the one place that aggregates information they might need from you as decision day approaches” (Arnim, 2019, para. 14). Along with specific webpages for admitted students, social media is another tactic that has proven effective for increasing yield. Gathering social media “proof” is an important part of the marketing and recruitment efforts and includes prompting prospective students to post on their own social media accounts their excitement for a college/university, as well as share information/content the school has sent them. When purchasing a product, especially in education, students value the opinions of their peers significantly (Arnim, 2019). This is where user-generated content is key.

Indiana University (IU) represents a great example of this on its IU Admissions Instagram account. IU has created the #MyDayatIU hashtag campaign that follows current and prospective students around campus. This campaign gives viewers insight into a day in the life of current students through photos and videos posted on social media. This is a peer-to-peer interaction and is intended to provide information for those who may wonder what a normal day is like for the average IU student. IU also has a campaign that promotes the hashtag #IUsaidYes. When students are admitted to the university, they receive an IU flag and are encouraged to share their decision to attend IU on social media with the #IUsaidYes hashtag. Then, the university shares these posts on its own accounts as well.

Another key tactic in ensuring the effectiveness of a recruitment campaign to yield more students is making the experience more mobile-friendly. There has been a 61% increase in the number of students who actively engaged in the college search — and applied — with their mobile device between 2011 and 2017 (Arnim, 2019). The design of a mobile experience includes every aspect of the student journey, including accessing school’s website, the ability to contact, interact, and request information, the application process, the emails that are sent, and even the digital advertisements that are created. When possible, it is important to pre-fill a student’s information and to be quick, as this type of technology has become expected with the Gen Z population (Olsen, 2019). Research has also found that prospective students want to see how they fit into a university, not what makes the university unique. Thus, it is important to fill a recruitment plan with student-first content and messaging as opposed to focusing solely
on the school and its outstanding qualities (Olsen, 2019). The campaigns created by Butler University are adequate examples of putting students first. The personality quiz, pet profiles, and student profiles all center on getting to know more about prospective students, instead of simply telling them more about the university.

More schools are taking these types of approaches now that enrollments are declining. For example, Austin College created a campaign to combat the increase in competition and to increase its yield for its biology program by partnering with the company Ruffalo Noel Levitz. Through the campaign, Austin College sought to create a personalized journey for students to draw them into the school’s biology program. This approach included integrated communications through a landing page, emails, texts, and digital advertisements. Next, it implemented real-time behavioral engagement scoring to base the level of a student’s interest on how much they engaged with the college. Austin College also implemented an interactive exploratory hub that curated relevant content dynamically based on student choices. Finally, the campaign included an academic fit finder quiz to guide the content of the student’s journey based on the students determined passions from the quiz. The main focus of this campaign is the student and personalized content that does not solely push out information about the college. The campaign resulted in a 17% increase in incoming students into the biology program (Enrollment, n.d.).

It is clear that most schools face a common challenge when it comes to increasing yield, and relationship building is one primary way to address it. For Ball State University to simply keep pace with competitors, an intentional effort is necessary that is intended to find creative, out-of-the-box solutions to increasing yield in graduate programs.
Project Design

This project began with design thinking as a means for validating the problem space and better understanding the identified audience. The first stage included empathy research to fully understand the opportunities associated with the defined problem space. Next, ideation with stakeholders was implemented to produce creative solutions. Empathy research and ideation sessions occurred during three separate virtual meetings with stakeholders. The complete design thinking protocol can be found in Appendix A.

Empathy research is used to define audiences, to better understand the user experience and to expand upon a problem space. Empathy research can be gathered through interviews with stakeholders, observation of behaviors, surveys, and a variety of other methods. “The stories that people tell and the things that people say they do—even if they are different from what they actually do—are strong indicators of their deeply held beliefs about the way the world is. Good designs are built on a solid understanding of these kinds of beliefs and values” (Stanford, 2011, para. 3).

During the ideation process, a point of view or problem statement was used to guide the process of generating viable and/or innovative solutions. Participants were encouraged to identify “out-of-the-box” solutions and alternative ways to explore the problem space. There are numerous ideation techniques to choose from when planning a design thinking session. When it comes to ideation, designers are responsible for choosing the technique that will best address the problem statement and then develop prototypes that bring ideas to life.

Design Thinking Sessions

Both the empathy research and ideation occurred simultaneously during design thinking sessions. Three groups of participants, a total of 27 individuals, engaged in design thinking to inform the direction of this creative project. One group included Ball State stakeholders, including admission professionals and administrators of the Graduate School. A second group of participants included current or recent graduate students at Ball State. The 10 current or recent graduate students that participated were made up of three male and seven women, seven of them were current or recent Emerging Media Design &
Development students, one student recently studied Sociology, one student is currently studying Business Essentials for Professionals and one student is studying in two programs, Sport and Exercise Psychology and Clinical Mental Health Counseling.

A third group consisted of potential Ball State graduate students. Each session was hosted virtually through a WebEx video conference. Each of the three sessions began with an explanation of the defined problem space. This allowed for all participants to be on the same level of understanding before beginning the session. Introductions took place in each session as a way to help everyone feel more comfortable with one another and to encourage open communication throughout the session. Two to three questions were asked in each session that aimed to further define the problem space and narrow the windows of opportunities for ideating solutions. After the empathy interview questions, a brainstorming tactic using post-it notes and dot-voting was implemented. Due to the virtual nature of this session, Google Jamboard was used to gather participant’s ideas and votes for each prompt.

For example, when given the prompt, *Without the restraint of cost, time, or space, what ways can the university engage with potential students?*, participants provided one digital post-it note per idea. At the end of the three minutes allotted, everyone was asked to share their ideas with the group. After sharing, participants were asked to vote on their favorite three ideas by using a digital pen to mark each digital post-it. In the end, this method allowed for the most popular ideas to emerge.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Empathy Questions</th>
<th>Questions are worded differently based on stakeholder group in the following order:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Potential graduate students&lt;br&gt;• Admissions professionals&lt;br&gt;• Current graduate students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 1</td>
<td>• What has stopped you from beginning graduate school?&lt;br&gt;• What barriers do students face when beginning graduate school?&lt;br&gt;• What hesitations did you have about beginning graduate school?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question 2</td>
<td>• What would help you make your decision to attend graduate school easier?&lt;br&gt;• What questions do potential students ask the most?&lt;br&gt;• What information did you feel was missing before you began graduate school?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1. Questions asked of participants during empathy interviews.

| Question 3 | • What interests you about graduate school?  
|            | • What do students say they are looking for from graduate school?  
|            | • What made you interested in graduate school? |

**PROMPT: How to build affinity with a student who has never been to campus or a student at Ball State.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Relationship Building</th>
<th>Program/ Faculty Driven</th>
<th>Misc. Marketing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recent Grads/ Current Students</td>
<td>Build relationship with current student and prospective</td>
<td>Welcome Kit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Student led recruitment</td>
<td>Show prospective students the similarities between them and current students</td>
<td>Use Digital Ads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stories that go deep into a current student experience</td>
<td>Personalized messages from current students to prospectives</td>
<td>Communicate cost options more clearly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Program Informational Videos</td>
<td>Recruiting toolkit for faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Personal contact from faculty to prospective</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Showcase faculty support for students</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 4. Example of post-it ideation activity; ideas listed were voted on as favorites**

**Design Thinking Results**

Throughout the three design thinking sessions, a deeper understanding of the opportunities available was reached, and a wide variety of ideas from stakeholders were shared. While the ideas were plentiful, there were very consistent themes that appeared throughout each session. When it comes to the problem space of admitted students never enrolling in or attending classes, three themes emerged: 1) admitted students face personal and financial barriers that prevent them from attending graduate school; 2) students do not feel connected personally to the university or program, which can lead to indecision to enroll; and 3) admitted students lack information about the end results of programs, which leads to declining confidence and motivation to enroll. These three themes represent areas of opportunity.
Personal and financial barriers stood out as the most common reason students ultimately choose to not enroll in graduate school. Graduate students are typically older than 23, which often means that adult responsibilities that pose an obstacle to going back to school are more prevalent than for traditional undergraduate students. When students are parents, full-time employees, or both, they often have a priority list full of items well above their own educational needs. The overall cost of the program and the time commitment were the two most common answers to questions about what had stopped potential graduate students from taking the leap and applying. A majority of the potential graduate students that participated in a session still have debt from their undergraduate degrees and do not feel it is wise to take on more to complete a graduate degree. Along with the financial barriers that potential graduate students face is the lack of financial aid available to graduate students or the lack of information surrounding ways to seek out financial aid assistance or scholarships associated with graduate education.

Beyond the personal and financial barriers facing students, potential graduate students also feel disconnected from the university or the program in which they are interested. For traditional undergraduate experiences, there are often visits to the campus, including visits with academic departments, and other admissions recruiting events that over time build a connection between a student and a school. These types of events and visits aren’t as feasible or available for potential graduate students, which often leaves students to build a connection with a school based on a website or electronic communication. One potential graduate student said, “the largest barrier is understanding how the particular program and research interests in that program align to my personal/professional goals.” This student’s statement speaks to the need for more personalized information and one-on-one connection that potential graduate students are seeking.

The third theme that emerged was that when deciding to enroll, potential graduate students often lack information regarding the program and the opportunities that the program will provide. When potential graduate students lack this information, they also often doubt whether they have what it takes to complete graduate school. This lack of understanding about of the courses, workload, general expectations for students in a program, and the potential benefits of the degree often decreases their
confidence, which can lead them to abandon enrolling altogether. In the stakeholder session that included employees that work in various admissions roles at Ball State, more than half said that a commonly asked question is, “What are the potential outcomes of this degree or program?” Potential students need to know the market demand for their field of study, the average income, or the potential career opportunities, to help them justify their decision to prioritize their education.

Ideation sessions resulted in more than 50 potential solutions to the problem spaces outlined above. Through these ideas, the following platforms for a transmedia storytelling campaign were identified: a blog site, a student ambassador program, and a social media campaign. Having a way to talk to current students or a way to learn more about the university and programs through an outlet besides faculty was suggested by 19 of the 27 participants.

A blog website was identified as a platform to host the main anchor of the transmedia storyworld. A storyworld refers to a shared “world” in which the shared characters and stories are told. In this case, the storyworld encompasses Ball State University, its students, faculty, programs, and values, with related stories told across multiple channels and in various media formats. Websites are versatile and effective in offering an on-demand experience for users and can host a large amount of content to reach a wide audience. Although Ball State has a website strong presence already, to effectively communicate the transmedia storyworld, a separate layout and design are necessary. The existing Ball State website is built to be more informational and is not set up to manage a blog. When posting stories, there are certain category and tag features that make filtering the stories easier for users, which is why a separate webpage is necessary. The choice to format the webpage as a blog is the best way to display the visual and written content behind the storyworld. Blogs are also quite popular, as 77% of Internet users read them regularly (99Firms, 2020).

A student ambassador program was also identified as a platform to expand the transmedia storyworld. Through empathy interviews and ideation activities, many stakeholders mentioned the importance of a one-on-one connection to the university, and a large majority of the ideas presented mentioned current student involvement in recruitment. Titled, the Cardinal Ambassador program, this
aspect of the storyworld is intended to allow potential students to engage with current students. Ambassadors will also have their stories featured on the blog and on social media, as they will be part of the larger overarching campaign. This extension of the storyworld is a way to foster a connection between students and the university by allowing them to hear firsthand what it is like to be a graduate student.

A social media campaign was also created as part of this transmedia storyworld. Social media is an effective and free outlet for storytelling and is used often in student recruitment. Forty-one percent of school officials “believe they can directly attribute an increase in enrollments to their social media efforts” (Turner, N.D. para. 4). Posts to expand on the storyworld were created for Facebook and Instagram, as both social media channels cover the demographics of potential graduate students. With 67% of 18- to 29-year-old adults using Instagram, this covers the upcoming age group that are current undergraduates or recent graduates with a bachelor's degree (Tran, 2020). Where Instagram covers the younger demographic of potential graduate students, Facebook covers an even wider range of the storyworld audience. Seventy-nine percent of 30- to 49-year-old adults use Facebook according to Sprout Social (Chen, 2020).

*Cardinals of Ball State: A Transmedia Storytelling Campaign*

The Cardinals of Ball State transmedia campaign was created using the existing Ball State brand terminology and mascot to connect the campaign back to the university. The cardinal is the Ball State mascot and a symbol easily recognizable to those familiar with the school. The campaign features “Ball State students (‘Cardinals’) and tells their stories through images, texts, quotes, and one-on-one interactions. The logo design (illustrated in Figure 5) for The Cardinals of Ball State follows existing university brand guidelines, making use of Helvetica Neue and Cardinal Red. The winged design behind the text represents the university tagline *We Fly* and incorporates the Cardinal mascot. Prospective students will be made aware of this campaign through email marketing communication, text messaging, and through organic search of university social media accounts.
A blog website was created to be the central touchpoint of the transmedia storyworld. The blog will consist of a homepage, story pages, cardinal ambassador page, and about Ball State page. The homepage serves as a navigational element for the stories, a place to showcase the most recent story, and a place to promote the Chat with a Cardinal program. There will be four other main webpages on the site: All Stories, Stories by College, Cardinal Ambassador, and Chat with a Cardinal. All of the web pages will have the same navigational header and footer to make the website easy to navigate and the experience on all pages consistent. The homepage design is illustrated in Figure 6 and an example of the layout and design for a Cardinal story is illustrated in Figure 7.
Figure 6. Homepage layout of Cardinals of Ball State website
Sharing the Cardinals of Ball State stories on social media is a vital part of expanding the
storyworld beyond the blog. While campaign specific social media accounts could be created, the
campaign will begin by being featured on various existing Ball State social media channels. Ball State
University, Ball State Graduate School, Ball State Online, and Ball State Admissions all have existing
accounts on social media, as well as each college and some programs themselves. By creating posts for
Facebook and Instagram and sharing these with already established accounts, the content will be seen by
potential graduate students, no matter which accounts they have chosen to view or follow as part of their
research and exploration of graduate schools. Instagram posts (Figure 8) posts were created using both
images and graphics showcasing strong pull quotes from the stories.
Figure 8. Instagram graphics to promote the Cardinals of Ball State stories

Figure 9. Graphics for Instagram stories to promote the Instagram Takeovers
Along with posts for the Instagram news feed, graphics were created for these accounts to introduce Cardinals of Ball State for Instagram story takeovers (Figure 9). This is a technique that allows a student to post day-in-the-life content throughout a given day, providing insight into what it’s like to be a current Ball State graduate student. During the takeover, potential students can interact and engage with current students, and the student managing the account on a given day can also promote their story on the blog. A link to the full story for each blog post will be shared on Facebook, including a summary and image for each story (Figure 10).

A Cardinal Ambassador program was also created to be a part of this transmedia campaign. The Cardinal Ambassador Program is a leadership opportunity for students who are dedicated to representing Ball State University. Student Ambassadors provide information and mentorship to potential cardinals, serve as a Ball State representative during recruitment and networking events, and are a shining example of a Ball State Cardinal. Student ambassadors will be responsible for sharing their Ball State stories online and on social media, developing a deep understanding of the enduring values of Ball State University, participating in social media takeovers on various Ball State accounts, interacting with potential graduate students one-on-one or in group recruitment and networking settings, and attending a once a semester training and development workshop. When a potential student requests to “Chat with a Cardinal” they will be paired with an appropriate ambassador of the same program to help answer their questions. To be eligible to be a Cardinal Ambassador, a student must be enrolled in a Ball State graduate program, maintain a 3.0 GPA, be a responsible leader, and commit to a minimum of two semesters. Each semester, ambassadors will be responsible for managing an incoming cohort virtual networking event to
connect with the incoming group of students, current students, and even faculty before the semester begins. These events will be grouped by the ambassador program or college, depending on the volume of

Figure 11. Cardinal Ambassador webpage example

incoming students. To become an ambassador, students are able to self-apply or may be nominated by a faculty member. The Cardinal Ambassador website is illustrated in Figure 11. The complete social media campaign can be found in Appendix B.
Discussion

This project concluded with the creation of a transmedia campaign that strives to build connections between potential students and Ball State University with the goal of increasing yield in graduate school programs. To create this campaign, research was conducted to prove that yield in higher education is a common challenge for schools and to discover what other colleges and universities do to combat this challenge. Empathy research and ideation with groups of key stakeholders helped illuminate this problem space. Group brainstorming sessions and insights from stakeholders guided the transmedia campaign’s creation and direction. Through the use of storytelling, the campaign serves as a place for potential students to get their questions answered and for them to see themselves as graduate students, by building a connection between them and the current student’s story.

This creative project offers many contributions to higher education, design thinking, and the Ball State University Strategic Plan. The ultimate contribution of increasing yield among graduate programs at Ball State goes beyond tuition revenue and enrollment numbers for the university. Rather, increasing the number of educated adults among the workforce and in the community creates opportunities for broader innovation and a more well-rounded population to emerge. This creative project also was an example of the targeted positive impact that design thinking can have when it comes to generated creative solutions to complex problems. Additionally, the second goal of Ball State University’s Strategic Plan’s is focused on graduate education and lifetime learning. This creative project directly contributes to solutions for the success of goal two by striving to increase enrollments in the university’s graduate programs.

Additionally, part of this goal is that eventually every graduate student will have access to a coach or mentor that will help that student with their lifelong learning plan. The Cardinal Ambassador program is a starting point to provide potential students with the help they need to guide them through the decision to attend graduate school. This program could be expanded upon to eventually include a mentorship option for current students as well.

However, there were limitations associated with the creation of this project, particularly as they relate to the impact of the worldwide COVID-19 crisis. Social distancing mandates eliminated the
possibility for in-person meetings with design thinking participants and empathy research subjects. The ideation sessions were to originally take place in person with larger groups of participants instead of virtually. Although the online sessions were successful, replicating the often social, collaborative nature of design thinking was challenging in the virtual environment. Additionally, the sudden change of research procedures made it more difficult to recruit participants, making the design thinking sessions a bit smaller than originally intended. With the difficulty of recruiting participants and the short time frame given to do so, the sample size and diversity of the design thinking sessions were limited. Given the opportunity of in-person research and recruiting, sessions would include a larger number of participants from more diverse backgrounds to gain an even deeper understanding of the intended audience for this project. Another limitation facing this project is that of university buy-in to make it successful and to continue the project in the future.

With support and investment from the university, there is great potential for this project to grow and expand through implementation at Ball State. Approval from many departments on campus will be necessary for this campaign to become a reality, and then university employees would need to maintain content and evolve approaches to storytelling and audience engagement. For example, to ensure that all prospective students have a story to connect with, each program Ball State would have to be represented in the storytelling, and faculty buy-in would be necessary to help recruit current students to tell their stories. Likewise, the ambassador campaign will require a regulated process to choose applicants, and a training guide for each semester would need to be created to benefit both the university and students. However, once implemented, the Cardinals of Ball State campaign could provide a return on investment that would provide prospective students with more ways to engage and better information for decision making, as well as ultimately increase yield.
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Appendix A: Design Thinking Protocol

**Audiences**

Potential Graduate Students
A group of 10 prospective graduate students that fit the demographic of our applicants.

A group of 10 campus stakeholders, examples:
- Member of the Graduate School
- Graduate Student from Admissions/Grad Director
- Advisor Recruiter for Graduate Program
- Marketing Professional from Online and or Marketing Communications
- Communications Manager for Undergraduate Admissions
- Graduate Operations Manager
- CRM Manager

Current Graduate Students
A group of 10 current graduate students with varying majors and demographics.

**Introduction to Problem Space**

What is yield? Yield in admissions is the percent of students who choose to enroll in a college or university after having been offered admission. Show examples of current efforts being done: system emails, orientation emails after confirmation, on campus orientation, and department driven outreach and communications.

**Activity**

Empathy Questions:
Q 1: Channels in which to engage prospective graduate students
   Ex: Facebook, LinkedIn, Google Ads, Direct Mail, Email
Q 2: Content that will encourage a graduate student to continue their journey and attend.
Q 3: Without the restraint of cost, time, or space, what ways can the university engage with potential students?

Q 4: How can Ball State build affinity with a student who has never been to campus?

Q 5: What content would be useful on an app or website for newly admitted students?

Q 6: Why have you chosen to not attend graduate school?

Q 7: If you were to attend graduate school, what would be a deciding factor on the school you choose?
   a. The program
   b. The campus
   c. The time commitment
   d. The cost
   e. More than one of the above
   f. Please list all that apply in priority order

Q 8: What would motivate you to go to graduate school?
   a. Career advancement
   b. Higher salary opportunities
   c. Career change
   d. To extend your education

Ice Breaker Activity - Superhero Exercise

Time Allotment: 10-15 minutes

Instructions:
Each person will do this warm-up individually.
Have each participant invent a superhero to represent their team/company/department etc.
Have them capture their ideas on a flipchart to present out. Here are some ideas to consider:
• Name
• Special powers
• Hobbies
• Weaknesses
• Strengths
Have participants share their superhero characteristics and explain how it relates to their team/company/department etc.

Activity
Post-It Note Brainstorming with Dot Voting

What is made possible? During the ideation brain dump session, individuals will be engaged in solo brainstorming and will come up with as many ideas as possible based on a provided prompt and within a specified time. This will allow those participating the ability to ideate without the influence of others around them and will produce a large number of possible solutions to a problem space.

1. Structuring Invitation
   a. How might we encourage students to enroll in classes and then ultimately come to campus after they are admitted?
b. How might we continue to keep students engaged after they are admitted before they get to campus?

2. **How Space Is Arranged and Materials Needed**
   a. Space will be arranged virtually through WebEx so that each participant can see or hear the other during this session.
   b. Chairs, Pens, Post-It Notes, Sharpies or Large Markers

3. **How Participation Is Distributed**
   a. To begin, everyone will participate individually.
   b. As a group, everyone will share their ideas.
   c. Individuals will vote on their favorite three ideas.

4. **How Groups Are Configured**
   a. Individuals
   b. Whole Group

5. **Sequence of Steps and Time Allocation**
   a. Introduce the concept of ideation through brain dump with dot voting. Begin with a few example prompts and visually show how the session will work. Next, start the session with the first prompt. Give everyone 3-5 min to complete their first prompt. Once the time is up, have everyone share their ideas on a common Google Doc. Finish this prompt with dot voting and allow individuals to vote on the top 3 ideas generated for that prompt. Follow the same steps for all 5 prompts.

Prompt 1: Channels in which to engage prospective graduate students
Prompt 2: Content that will encourage a graduate student to continue their journey and attend.
Prompt 3: Without the restraint of cost, time, or space, what ways can the university engage with potential students?
Prompt 4: How can Ball State build affinity with a student who has never been to campus?
Prompt 5: What content would be useful on an app or website for newly admitted student

6. **Why? Purposes**
   a. Generate a large number of ideas for content that can be used on multiple platforms
   b. Develop new strategies to take forward
   c. Gain validation in existing strategies
   d. Evaluate our current tactics

7. **Tips and Traps**
   a. Some individuals may need time to warm up and generate new ideas. Possibly include a warm-up prompt or two for practice.
   b. If some individuals are struggling or coming up short on number of ideas, pair them with stronger idea generators to help them.
   c. Avoid overly specific prompts that limit idea generation.
   d. Limit the time spent on each prompt so that each prompt gets consistent attention.

8. **Riffs and Variations**
   a. Instead of dot voting, post-its can be categorized by easily implemented, medium/high need implementation, and pie in the sky ideas.

9. **Collateral Material**
   a. None
Appendix B: Social Media Content

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Post #1 - Campaign Announcement</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introducing, The Cardinals of Ball State. Thousands of students pursue their dreams of completing a graduate degree every day at Ball State. Follow along each week for inspiring stories of current or recent Ball State graduate students. cardinalsofballstate.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post #2 - Campaign Promotion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At Ball State, our graduate students all have their own unique journeys. Some students study full-time, while others work full-time and take courses as they can. While some may live on campus, many of them live at home, across the world and study online. Learn more about the Cardinals of Ball State at cardinalsofballstate.com.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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<tr>
<th>Post #3 - Story 1 - Elijah Yarde</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Meet Elijah, a current graduate student in the Emerging Media Design &amp; Development program. Elijah hopes to one day be his own boss. Learn more about Elijah’s graduate school journey. cardinalsofballstate.com</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Brian Tremml is currently studying in two programs; Sport & Exercise Psychology and Clinical Mental Health Counseling. His decision to attend Ball State was guided by the relationships he built with the professors before he became a student. Read more of Brian’s story at cardinalsforballstate.com

Every student walking around campus or logging into their courses from home has a story to tell. Learn more about Ball State’s graduate students at cardinalsforballstate.com
Post #6 - Cardinal Chat Promotion

Deciding to go to graduate school is a tough decision, let alone choosing a school and picking a program. Our current students have been where you are, chat with a Cardinal today and they can answer questions about the course load and share their experience. Visit cardinalsfballstate.com to get started.

Post #7 - Story 3 - Casey Schultz

Casey loves anything Disney almost as much as she loves advising online students at Ball State. As a full-time employee, Casey has managed to complete a master’s degree and is currently pursuing a graduate certificate. Read more about Casey’s story on cardinalsfballstate.com
Post #8 - Campaign Promotion

What is holding you back from pursuing your dreams of a graduate degree? Odds are that our current students faced the same uncertainty and questions that you are. Read stories of current students and they may inspire you to take the next step.
cardinalsofballstate.com

Post #9 - Brian’s Story Post 2

Brian is working towards a dual master’s degree and is using a combination of savings and a graduate assistantship to help fund his education. Read more stories like Brian’s and see the different ways students pay to pursue their dreams.
cardinalsofballstate.com
Post #10 - Story 4 - Erin Drennan-Bonner

Erin is a full-time employee and is pursuing her master’s degree in Emerging Media Design & Development on a part-time basis. The flexibility of the programs at Ball State allow for a more manageable work life balance. Read more about Erin’s journey at cardinalsofballstate.com

"To prioritize your own education is hard, but we all deserve to learn, grow, and reach our goals."

Erin Drennan-Bonner

Post #11 - Cardinal Chat Promotion

Want to know what a day in the life of a Ball State graduate student is like? Chat with a Cardinal and they can answer your questions. cardinalsofballstate.com
### Post #12 - Casey’s Story Post 2

Ball State graduate programs are offered on campus, online, full-time, or part-time. Casey’s favorite thing about graduate school is the ease at which she could complete her degree, while still working full-time. Read more about Casey’s journey at cardinalsofballstate.com.

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### Post #13 - Campaign Promotion

Stories of real students. Read about how current Ball State graduate students fund their education, how they manage their course load, how they chose their program, and even more. Cardinalsofballstate.com.
Appendix C: Cardinal Stories

Story 1: CASEY SCHULTZ, 31
CITY: Muncie, IN
CURRENT PROGRAM: Business Essentials for Professionals graduate certificate
CASEY’S STORY: Although Casey is currently pursuing a graduate certificate in Business Essentials for Professionals, she already has completed a master’s degree in Executive Development for Public Service. Casey works full-time at Ball State, advising online students as a Lead Student Success Specialist and teaching a capstone course for students majoring in General Studies. At home, Casey enjoys spending time at home with her pet cat, watching movies, listening to true crime podcasts and learning to crochet. Casey pursued graduate school because she wanted to be able to teach at the college level and wanted to pursue coursework that would build up her leadership skills to assist in a promotion. When asked about her favorite part of graduate school, Casey said, “I love how easy it has been to complete graduate work while working full-time. Being a full-time student was not an option for me, and I needed a program that would be flexible with my schedule and wouldn’t require me to be logged in for specific course times.” Casey is a Cardinal Ambassador and available to chat with potential students about her experience.

Story 2: Leilani Pearce, 39
CITY: Muncie, IN
CURRENT PROGRAM: Master’s in Sociology and graduate certificate in University Teaching
LEILANI’S STORY: A mother of two, a wife, and a full-time employee at Ball State University, Leilani has spent her last two years pursuing a master’s in Sociology and a graduate certificate in University Teaching. Leilani’s goal is to become a contract adjunct sociology professor
alongside her current role as a State Authorization Administrator. Patiently waiting for her daughters graduate high school, Leilani hopes to then pursue a doctoral degree due to her love of research in the field of sociology. When asked what advice she would give to a prospective student, Leilani said, “I would definitely recommend getting to know the faculty and utilizing their advice. Overall, I believe that BSU’s graduate school offers wonderful student support.” When Leilani isn’t studying or working, you can find her hanging with her kids, her husband of almost 17 years, and their two Chihuahuas. She also enjoys crafting, baking, and training for 5ks.

**Story 3: Brian Tremml, 30**

**CITY:** Fishers, IN

**CURRENT PROGRAM:** Master’s in Sport & Exercise Psychology and Clinical Mental Health Counseling

**BRIAN’S STORY:** Brian, a newlywed, is an avid exercise enthusiast and enjoys swimming, lifting weights, and running. Outside of athletics, he also enjoys playing guitar, landscape nature photography, reading, and filmmaking. One might wonder how Brian has time to invest in his hobbies or to spend with his wife as he pursues two master’s programs in both Sport & Exercise Psychology and Clinical Mental Health Counseling. Brian hopes to find the balance between a personally “exciting” career for himself and providing a beneficial service to his community. His goal is to work with athletes to improve their on-field performance through the use of mental skills, but Brian also recognizes that ultimately sports do not provide very much value to society as a whole. In order to also make a difference, he will work to volunteer his time to those in need or provide clinical mental health counseling to the general population. Brian was motivated to attend graduate school and says, “I feel that working with athletes in a sport-psychologist role will allow me to continue to have a positive impact in my community but will also offer a
stronger work-life balance. I’m motivated by the gratification I get when I practice the applied aspect of my field—I feel strongly I have found a great fit, and I’m excited to continue!”

Through the use of personal savings and a graduate assistantship, Brian was able to fund his education and find a healthy work-life balance as a student, husband, and colleague.

**Story 4: O’Brian Elijah Yarde, 34**

**CITY:** Muncie, IN

**CURRENT PROGRAM:** Master’s in Emerging Media Design and Development

**ELIJAH’S STORY:** Elijah and his wife are both from St. Lucia, West Indies and recently from South Bend for 15 years. They currently live in Muncie, Indiana and are both pursuing their educational dreams. Elijah defines himself as a creative at heart and loves art, photography, and design. Although this did not come easily to him, being the son of an accountant and a teacher. Through the use of a graduate assistantship, savings, and student loans, Elijah was able to fund his education as a way to reach his career goals. He hopes to continue being a graphic designer and use his creative skills as a way to become self-employed. When asked what motivated him to attend graduate school, Elijah said, “My motivation to attend graduate school was to be more marketable, to learn and gain some new skills. The main reason however was to expand and develop my analytical thinking my left brain so to speak.” The endless opportunities for learning and exposure are a few of Elijah’s favorite things about Ball State’s graduate school along with the knowledge that everyone wants you to succeed.