

Basic Information:

Company: Buchanan Public Relations

Email: anne@buchananpr.com

Phone: 610-228-0155

Entry Category: Integrated Communications

Title of Entry: *Our Tuition Promise*: Rosemont College Announces 43 Percent Cut in Tuition

Client: Rosemont College

100-Word Description:

Buchanan Public Relations and Rosemont College partnered to announce Rosemont's bold decision to slash tuition by 43 percent. "Our Tuition Promise" was unveiled to wild cheers at an all-campus assembly, followed by timely advertising during the Pope's visit. The communications strategy of openly discussing the broken college tuition pricing model – along with embargoed pitching – led to extensive media coverage. A heavily-syndicated CNN story carried this headline: *College Slashes Tuition 43% and Blasts 'Sticker Price' Model*. The news received 18,000 shares on social media. Coverage sentiment was 89 percent positive. Student inquiries are up at Rosemont.

PROGRAM OVERVIEW / OBJECTIVES

Situation Analysis

College tuition has been climbing at a rate that has far surpassed inflation, sparking considerable debate nationwide. In June of 2015, Rosemont College – a small, liberal arts college in suburban Philadelphia – decided to dramatically reduce its tuition by 43 percent, beginning with the 2016-2017 academic year.

The pricing of college tuition is not well understood by consumers. Tuition prices at most colleges are artificial “sticker prices” that are raised every year, so that colleges can then offer “discounts” to desired students, in the form of scholarships and grants. Resetting tuition is a step to return to the “true” cost of tuition.

Rosemont College was determined to not simply announce its tuition reduction; it also wanted to expose the brokenness of the pricing model.

Together, Buchanan Public Relations and Rosemont College developed an ambitious communications campaign.

Campaign Goals

- Appeal to families who thought that Rosemont was beyond their means
- Assume a leadership position in reforming a tuition model that is badly broken

Research

The agency researched 15 colleges that had already reset their tuition and learned that:

- Most received only hyper-local media coverage

- Only one “branded” its reset with a distinctive name
- Few noted the flawed tuition model
- National media conducted its own research on tuition pricing with little input from the colleges

The team concluded that full transparency and education around flawed pricing, along with aggressive media outreach, could position Rosemont as a national leader on this topic.

Target Audiences

- Rosemont students, faculty, staff, and alumni
- Families within a 150-mile radius of the college
- Other area colleges and universities
- Media

Objectives

- Generate positive media coverage in at least **25 regional outlets**
- Achieve at least **95 percent** positive reaction from students, faculty, staff and alumni
- Reach a positive sentiment rating of at least **85 percent** in all media coverage generated by the announcement
- Include mention of the “broken tuition model” in at least **70 percent** of the media coverage

Planning

It was decided that the news would be announced at an all-campus assembly on Sept. 16 that would also serve as a news conference. The team developed:

- Key Messages
- FAQ’s (internal and external versions)
- Remarks and presentation, delivered by the President

- News release, with infographic and video footage of President embedded
- Follow-up communications to key audiences

EXECUTION

Strategies

Transparency: Rosemont’s tuition reduction was always framed in the context of the broken tuition model. This approach distinguished Rosemont from other colleges that had reduced tuition, but failed to discuss the flaws in tuition pricing. And, it made the announcement more compelling to the media.

Embargoed Pitching: Top-tier media were pitched with an embargoed release several days before the announcement, allowing journalists ample time to digest and research the nuanced, complex topic of tuition pricing.

Multi-Media. The news release was accompanied by videotaped remarks by the President and an engaging infographic, which the *Washington Post* ran in its story.

Rosemont also made a pre-announcement editorial visit to the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. A two-hour meeting with the Pulitzer Prize-winning education reporter there led to an extremely lengthy, positive piece on Sept. 16.

Tactics

- A “branded” name (*Our Tuition Promise*) and distinctive logo
- Relentless preparation and fine-tuning of the Key Messages, reinforced by media training sessions
- A broadly covered campus assembly / news conference
- Embargoed pitching to top-tier media
- A compelling infographic to accompany the release
- Videotaped remarks by the President which accompanied the news release

- Wire distribution of the release along with aggressive media outreach
- Extensive outreach to key audiences, including alumni, donors, other area colleges, guidance counselors
- Complementary advertising (television, radio, billboards) launched one day later

EVALUATION / RESULTS

The campaign was an unqualified success.

- In week 1, 62 media outlets ran the story; **27** were regional outlets. Total reach was 1.24 million.
- Personalized pitching led to major stories in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Washington Post*, CNN, *U.S. News & World Report* and all broadcast outlets in Philadelphia.
- Social media shares were 17,800.
- Social media reaction by students and faculty scored **98 percent** positive.
- Sentiment assessment of media coverage was **89 percent** positive.
- Coverage of the “broken tuition model” appeared in **74 percent** of news stories (headline from syndicated CNN story: “College Slashes Tuition 43% and Blasts ‘Sticker Price’ Model”).

The day after the announcement, the Board Chair was contacted by a Trustee at another college, praising Rosemont for its “courageous” decision and asking to learn more.

The Philadelphia Inquirer, *Washington Post* and *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* plan to run op-eds from the President.

The advertising campaign – developed by Harmelin Media and Allied Pixel and built on the communications developed by the Public Relations team – broke to positive reception on Sept. 17 during the papal visit.