

Tulane Admissions receives top national award for its TikTok account

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Tulane University's Office of Undergraduate Admission used its official TikTok account to connect with prospective students during the pandemic with a coordinated strategy between social media platforms and email marketing and was rewarded for its efforts with the prestigious 2021 Grand Gold Circle of Excellence Award from the Council for Advancement and Support of Education. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

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Award from the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

Tulane University's [Office of Undergraduate Admission](#) has received the prestigious [2021 Grand Gold Circle of Excellence Award](#) from the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) in the category of digital communications, social media and student recruitment for its official [TikTok](#) account, and coordinated strategy between social media platforms and email marketing.

Each year the CASE Circle of Excellence Awards recognize hundreds of institutions whose staff members advanced their institutions through innovative, inspiring and creative ideas. The awards acknowledge superior accomplishments that have a lasting impact, demonstrate the highest level of professionalism, and deliver exceptional results. Some winners are showcased on the CASE website, in *Currents* magazine, and at various CASE conferences.

Launched in 2016, TikTok is a social media platform that allows users to produce and share short videos. According to [Wallaroomedia.com](#), TikTok has one billion users worldwide, with much of its audience between the ages of 13-60 and is available in 150 countries. The United States alone has over 130 million active users.

Tulane admissions created its TikTok account in December 2019, but it was the COVID-19 pandemic that forced the group to pivot and find a way to get their message out when most of the country was shut down including for traveling to campus during spring 2020. The admission team soon discovered their TikTok account was one of the best avenues to reach prospective students about Tulane.

“At the height of the pandemic, we were trying to figure out the best balance for communicating with students, who are already very anxious about the college obligations process,” Satya Dattagupta, the senior vice president and dean of admission for enrollment management and graduate and pre-college strategy. “The pandemic in many ways enhanced their stress level. I thought our team did an excellent job of finding the right balance with our TikTok account. They were light-hearted, but at the same time, the messaging was sensitive to what's happening in the world. Striking the right balance is why this has worked so well. It's not just about Tulane. It's about the entire college applications process.”

Owen Knight, the director of admission engagement, spearheads the admission's TikTok account and content creation, but teamwork was critical to the account

receiving high accolades. Knight, along with Leila Labens, executive director of communications and marketing, Ali DeFazio, communications specialist, and Makenzie Kozojet, associate director, work together to brainstorm ways to effectively share the TikTok content within the landscape of the office's print and email marketing efforts. The group is supported by the media team of Jeff Schiffman, director of admission, Bailey Gabrish, senior admission counselor, Aidan Cadley, admission counselor and Stuart Sox, videographer. Tulane does everything in-house, using members of their media and communications teams in concert.

"It's a tremendous honor to be recognized for our work," said Knight. "The award validates our efforts because we have done a ton of great work this year, especially with our virtual events and the print pieces we've been doing, along with the videos. I think Tulane rose to the occasion and tried to make our recruitment strategy appropriate for the COVID-19 world with informative messaging that was positive and light. We are honored to have our work acknowledged and mentioned among some fantastic schools in our category."

According to Knight, the group worked together to find the best way to use the TikTok account to connect with students in an authentic way. The group wanted to share their voice and information about Tulane in the language that students want to hear. The goal was to ensure that even if Tulane does not end up on a student's list, a positive impression of the university remains.

"I have to credit my coworker Leila Labens, who first suggested we get on TikTok. I was very hesitant at first because I didn't want us to come off as trying too hard. But I think it worked out well with the timing of the pandemic. Our team is great about brainstorming and coming up with light-hearted captions and clever ways of relating whatever trend is happening on TikTok to Tulane or college applications in general. Some of our ideas are a little sassy. It's been a fun exercise," said Knight.

Some of the team's top TikTok results from 2020 include:

"What do Colleges Prefer?" 84.7k views, 10,000 likes

"Common App Tip"- 76.9k views, 6443 likes

"Vietnamese Food"- 62.9k views, 8554 likes

"Lonely"- 86.4k views, 7841 likes

The account reached an even broader audience in 2021, with two videos surpassing one million views.

“We all know social media can be a very powerful tool when used well, and it can enhance your brand. In many ways, it has become a very critical way to communicate with students. But there's a fine line between being cool and trying too hard. I think Owen and the team toed that line well and erred on the side of being cool and effective. This award is great recognition for their efforts, but also their sensitivities as it relates to the college applications process,” Dattagupta said.

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