

## Thirty percent off Ontario tuition: A student engagement problem

Daniel Tisch\*

Argyle Public Relationships, Toronto (Ontario)

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### ABSTRACT

The Argyle Public Relationships team worked with the Ministry of Training, Colleges, and Universities to develop a campaign for a government program providing tuition rebates to post-secondary students. Argyle used research-based communications and evaluated the student environment, identifying key issues – including the narrowness of the program scope, difficulty of completing the application, an unidentified target audience, and potential controversy – and strategies to address them. By focusing on “student-to-student” communications, finding ways to pre-qualify students, and pairing on-campus interaction with online socialization, the team made face-to-face contact with 29,000 students on 47 campuses in 21 days, resulting in a 27.5% increase of registrations on average.

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In late December of 2011, Argyle was engaged to develop and deploy an experiential learning/audience engagement campaign to communicate the new 30% Off Ontario Tuition program to students on university and college campuses across Ontario. The program, a top priority of the newly elected minority government, provides a partial tuition rebate to students who met specific requirements, including parental income of less than \$160,000 and recent high school graduation. Awareness of the new program was very low, but the application deadline was very soon (March 2012). While the Ministry had a digital communications team, success demanded face-to-face interactions with students on every campus in Ontario – within weeks.

\*Corresponding author (Daniel Tisch)

Email: [dtisch@argylepr.com](mailto:dtisch@argylepr.com)

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## Context

Ontario's provincial government had been re-elected on October 6, 2011, with a plurality of seats in a minority government where both opposition parties held the balance of power. The government's re-election platform promised a 30% across-the-board post-secondary undergraduate tuition grant for students in the province. At the same time, a slow economy, declining manufacturing, and increasing unemployment had caused government revenues to fall while demand for services increased. An independent report on reducing the deficit by bank economist Don Drummond was expected in February, and a budget proposing cuts to program spending was expected in March. The 30% Off Ontario Tuition program was launched in late December, and financial information had to be submitted by mid-March. An entire communication program, including staffing, messaging, collateral, logistics, training, and media relations had to be designed, developed, produced, and in the field within weeks.

## Research

Argyle undertook a 360° environmental scan with three components: a news media review, a social media scan, and a focus group of recent university and college graduates. The focus group gave the team four insights into student attitudes and behaviour:

1. Awareness of the program was very low.
2. When presented in person in a busy campus environment or online amid social media feeds, the offer of free money was met with skepticism; it had to be readily clear the source was genuine and authoritative. The existing Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) was disliked and distrusted.
3. It would be important to establish that this was a grant and not a loan.

4. Since the grant was contingent on family income and other criteria, Argyle would need to determine eligibility quickly and easily or risk investing scarce time and resources on ineligible students.

This analysis identified a number of distinct strategic issues that would need to be addressed by the communications strategy.

- **Large, hard-to-reach audience:** There were some 300,000 undergraduate students, but the 165,000 already receiving financial assistance were processed automatically and did not need to apply. Finding the remaining 135,000 and getting their attention would be difficult.
- **Multi-step application process:** Argyle learned about the process by looking at it from the public's perspective and having the project leaders go through it themselves. Applying required several complex steps. After determining eligibility, students had to get formal authorization from their parents to allow the Canada Revenue Agency to release family income information to the Ontario government.
- **Cutting through in the student milieu:** Based on the focus group, Argyle knew that the barriers to the desired behaviour were high despite the obvious advantage to students (\$800): low awareness, a suspicion of anyone showing up on campus offering free money, "homework" involving filling out the application and communicating with one's parents, and all this amid many competing academic and extracurricular priorities early in the new school term.
- **Controversy:** Our media and social media analysis identified where controversy was likely to emerge. Where the government's official election platform had proposed a 30% across-the-board post-secondary undergraduate tuition grant, the program was far more limited in scope. This refinement generated targeted criticism from some stakeholder groups. The program roll-out also coincided with the National Day of Action for students across the country.

## Analysis

Argyle's analysis drew on the four key research findings to provide insights that would guide strategic planning:

- To find the subset of students within the diverse and dispersed community, the program required broad reach, swift triage, and targeted communication to the key audience.
- Given the complexity of the application process, one-way communication would not be enough. Communications would have to engage students to begin the process, with limited control over their follow through. The on-campus team would have to motivate them to complete it later.
- With the many demands on students' attention, making them aware of a government program would not be enough. The team would have to grab their attention quickly, make their future gain compelling enough to outweigh their present preoccupations, and communicate in ways that were authentic and relevant to them.
- In a context of confusion (who is in or out of the program and why?) and controversy around tuition in general, the program would need to be flexible to address criticism without generating conflict. On-campus staff would have to be well-trained to present the facts while avoiding controversy and referring the difficult questions to experts.

## Communication

The target audience consisted of approximately 135,000 students. Their characteristics: not currently on financial assistance, family income less than \$160,000, and within five years of high school graduation. They were typically aged 18-23 and came from middle-class families. They had high literacy and cultural diversity, and they lived busy, active, and social lives. Their greatest influencers were their peers.

The project budget was set at \$270,000 including management and staff fees, hiring and training ambassadors, venue permit fees, uniforms, signage, booth hardware, computers, local WiFi network, cell phones, flights, hotels, meals, short-term vehicle leases and local rentals, gas, parking, and shipping.

In 1959, both Ford and Carnegie foundations criticized advertising education for being housed in business schools, which focused on “how to” professional training, as opposed to liberal arts education. According to Stankey, the two foundations advocated “... increasing academic standards, increasing admission standards, reducing the degree of vocationalism and overspecialization, increasing the component of liberal arts to fifty percent, and improving the quality of business research, among others” (as cited in Rotzoll & Barban, 1984, pp. 7-8).

## *Strategies*

- **Peer-to-peer communications:** Argyle’s strategy was innovative in delivering a government program by using youth to connect with youth. By retaining and training a team of current and recent students to intercept and educate students in an assertive but authentic way, Argyle and FFAM aimed to reinforce the non-commercial nature of program. Two-way interaction would be critical.
- **Make it easier:** Argyle and FFAM trained ambassador teams to reduce the steps required to identify the target audience by pre-qualifying students (e.g., currently receiving student assistance or not?), having one or two ministry experts available in person, and having laptops with internet connections on site where students could begin the process.
- **Geographic breadth, high traffic, and high impact:** For reasons of fairness, the program had to visit every campus in Ontario – rather than “chasing numbers” on the big campuses alone. The team designed an eye-catching but highly mobile display with 30% off branding, and they targeted high-traffic areas on each campus.
- **Socialize the brand in person and online.** Argyle worked with the client to design clear, sharable content with lucid benefit statements. Teams distributed collateral widely to promote the program and

provided reminders to complete the process post-interaction. This included email or SMS notification and take-away material. Having ambassadors at a booth and roaming the campus would be required to drive awareness for the program by increasing campus reach and visibility.

## *Plans and Tactics*

- 1. Hiring and training.** Young people with exceptional interpersonal skills were hired as student ambassadors. The team developed an extensive training program that taught the nuances of the program and registration methods while preparing ambassadors for media inquiries and potential student-led protests.
- 2. Designing and producing eye-catching displays and materials.** Argyle and FFAM identified, designed, and prepared branded information booths, signage, furniture, and computers for online registration. They also designed and ordered branded uniforms to ensure ambassadors were identifiable, enabling them to roam campuses and distribute information, educate students, and drive interested applicants to the booth.
- 3. Cross-province deployment.** Ambassadors were deployed to 47 colleges and universities over five weeks and 21 activation days. They were organized in teams of three to cover the entire province. Challenges included arranging for transportation and lodging in the winter; arranging for the rental of space location, with different authorities depending on the nature and ownership; identifying key sites on campus depending on size, layout, and usage patterns; establishing and coordinating registration procedures; providing bilingual services in many locations; and liaising with campus security. Logistics required set-up and tear-down in less than one hour. We had four sets of equipment (one for each team and one for pre-shipment).
- 4. Communications support.** Argyle supported the field staff with a central communications team that provided advice and managed protocol for attendance by the Minister and other elected represen-

tatives at campus locations, worked with policy experts from the Ministry to connect them with students where necessary, and deployed issues management and media relations specialists to support ambassador teams, particularly on days when there were student protests.

5. **Regular program evaluation.** Weekly tracking included metrics for each location. This included qualitative insight into awareness and attitudes, including verbatim quotations from participants, as well as quantitative analysis: total impressions, interactions per hour, and quantity of collateral distributed. This feedback allowed messages to be developed, coordinated, and used in social and digital applications. As tracking began to show we had earned increased awareness, we shifted primary messaging from awareness to completion of online registration. Argyle’s final report also included qualitative insights into student attitudes as well as recommendations for improving the government’s future student outreach programs.

## Evaluation

Communications Goals	Program Objectives	Evaluation Tools
<p><b>Raise awareness of the program among college and university students across Ontario</b></p>	<p><b>Awareness and reach:</b> Intercept students on every college and university campus in Ontario, if possible helping them begin registration but at minimum ensuring they understand the issue and leave with 30% off Ontario Tuition application materials. Argyle set a target of 20,000 intercepts, based on a tight budget, vast geography, and very tight six-week time-frame.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Number of student interactions</li> <li>• Ambassador interactions per hour</li> <li>• Volume of collateral distributed</li> </ul>

Communications Goals	Program Objectives	Evaluation Tools
Drive student applications	<b>Action and outcome:</b> Achieve an increase in online registrations following each campus visit. Argyle aimed to increase registrations by 15% at schools we visited, based on the target number of intercepts as a percentage of the target student population.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rate of online applications</li> <li>• Increase in applications corresponding to activation days</li> </ul>

Objective	Results
<b>Reach:</b> Put program materials in the hands of students on every campus in Ontario. Target: 20,000.	Ambassadors distributed material directly to more than 27,000 students at all 47 college and university campuses in Ontario. More than 29,000 students were directly engaged at the booth with ambassador
<b>Outcomes:</b> Achieve an increase in online registrations following each campus visit. Target: 15% increase.	On the days the campaign visited colleges, <b>online registrations rose 40.5%</b> compared with the daily application average. On the days the campaign visited universities, <b>online registrations rose 14%</b> . <b>The overall average per campus visit was a 27.5% increase in registrations.</b>

## Conclusions

Because it operated in an environment in which controversy and confusion were risks, the program was grounded in careful research and clear insights into audience attitudes and behaviour. As in a crisis situation, the keys to achieving communications goals in a volatile context with narrow time frames were as follows:

- **Communications process efficiency.** Have regular communication with decision-makers and those executing the program, including

daily conference calls and integrated client/consultant teams at activations. This allowed information to flow up from the point of public contact to decision-makers within hours. Decisions could be made quickly and without unnecessary process.

- **Scenario planning.** Carefully thinking through any eventualities and risks in advance ensured that the plan could be built and executed quickly without requiring constant changes and all the attendant approvals.
- **Clarity of responsibilities.** To avoid any missteps or conflict, student ambassadors had in-depth training on what was their responsibility, what wasn't, and what policy and political questions should be referred to Ministry staff.

## Key Learnings

**There was not a “one size fits all” solution.** The student body is not homogeneous. Groups such as aboriginal, mature, and married students had unique questions. By having a Ministry official embedded with each team, responses were rapid and effective. The ambassadors were trained to respond and adapt to each situation, using a combination of our broad guidelines and their own judgment.

**Social engagement had to be coordinated, not controlled.** Usually, Argyle's PR team manages both in-person and online engagement. Since social media was in the team's skill-set but not its mandate, Argyle provided counsel and ensured rapid coordination of daily messages and calendars with the Ministry team responsible for its social platforms.

**Protest and criticism needed to be managed respectfully and defused through effective engagement.** Given the narrowness of the program, dissenting comments were routine, and protests occurred on a few campuses, including on a National Student Day of Action on tuition fees. With well-trained ambassadors and centralized issues management, the team defused criticism without a single major incident or negative media story.

