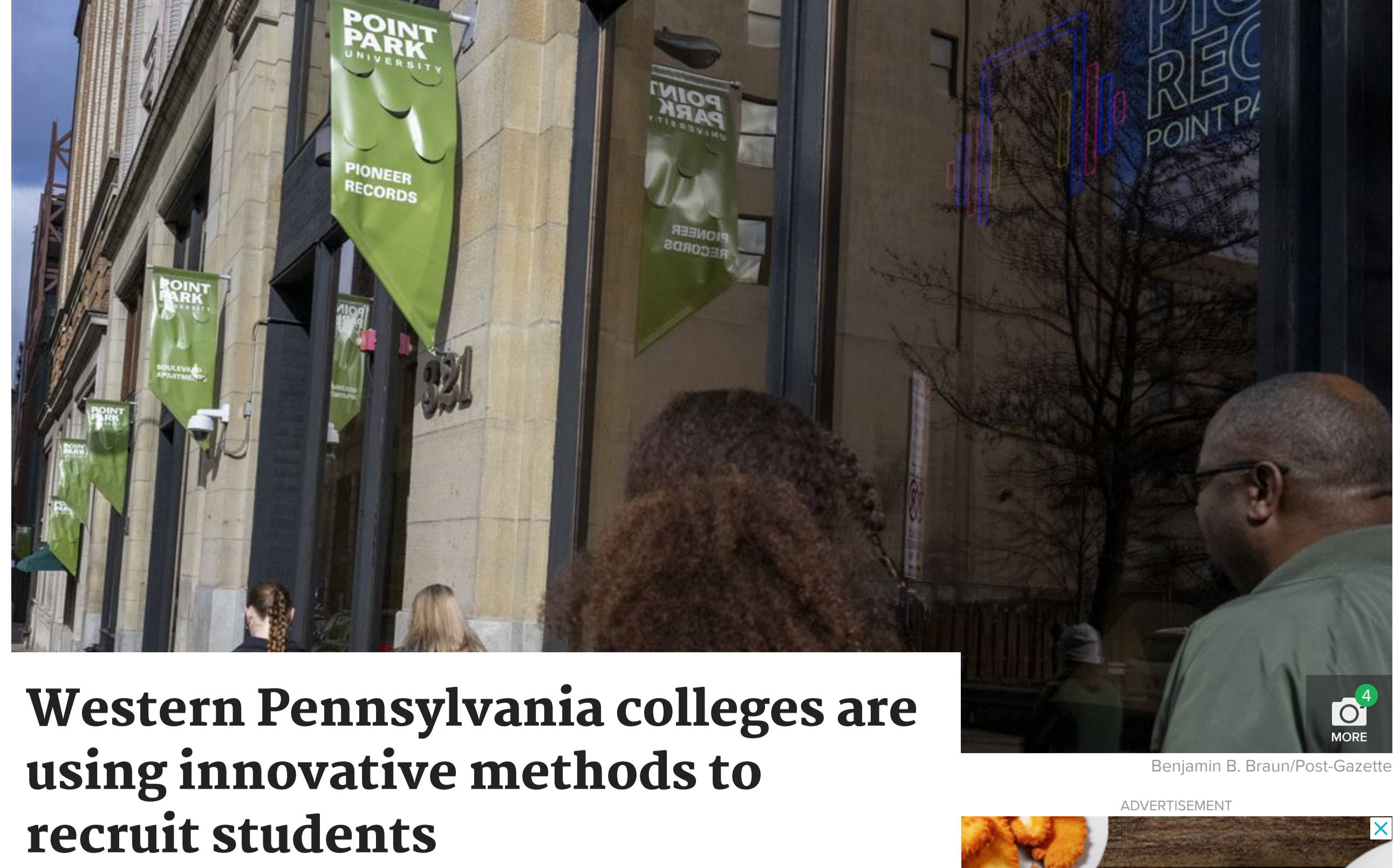


ADVERTISEMENT Fly the Nordic way in Premium Economy Round trip starting from Helsinki \$1250 Finnair



Western Pennsylvania colleges are using innovative methods to recruit students

SYDNEY CARRUTH Pittsburgh Post-Gazette scarruth@post-gazette.com

MAR 16, 2024 12:08 PM



When it comes to recruiting, one of the largest hurdles Point Park University faces are people who are “not going to college,” said its vice president of enrollment.

That’s why the Downtown university, along with many other higher education institutions across the region, have thought of innovative ways to attract students.

Western Pennsylvania is a region defined by its higher education institutions, with a significant concentration of universities, community colleges and trade schools. Pittsburgh alone has more than 30 higher education intuitions and for many of them, recruiting a diverse population of students from across the state and bolstering long-term student success is a top priority.

Recruiters at regional schools such as Point Park, the University of Pittsburgh, Duquesne University and West Virginia University are creating innovative outreach and retention strategies to accomplish that goal every year.

Jordan Anderson Historic Downtown Pittsburgh church getting long-awaited renovations

Leading the pack are tactics that include using TikTok to reach potential students, recruiting students from rural counties, providing equitable pathways to college access and focusing on keeping parents and families informed throughout the application process.

“One of the things that we really did this year that has made a difference in our recruitment is really the increased use of TikTok, which has been a really important tool for us,” said Martin Collingwood, the vice president of enrollment management & marketing at Point Park University.

Social media has been a critical tool for reaching prospective students and their families for years, Mr. Collingwood said, but the rapid popularity TikTok has gained with teenagers over the last three years has prompted the school to focus on creating content for the app.

“TikTok is really the place where 18 year olds are hanging out these days,” Mr. Collingwood said. “It’s where they get all their information. It’s where they actually get any news that they might get.”

The university has made a “concerted effort” to increase engagement on TikTok over the last year by posting videos created by students, for students. The videos are intended to be a fun, engaging and real-time representation of life on campus.

In addition to the candid-style videos, Point Park University also used paid TikTok advertisements that focused on enrollment. The advertisements highlighted specific programs and clubs at the university.

The combination has proved successful. Account views increased by 246,184, or 157.4%, between 2022 and 2023, according to data shared by Point Park University. Engagement, defined by the amount of users who interact with a TikTok post, increased by 106.2% during the same time period.

Maddie Aiken Pitt wants more students from rural areas. He’s traveling to remote corners of the state to recruit them.

Point Park University was not alone in leveraging popular social media to encourage students to apply.

At West Virginia University, Tony Dobies, the senior director of marketing, said targeted social media advertisements on platforms that range from TikTok to Snapchat to YouTube have been helpful for moving students to apply.

“Our hope from those ads is that they get to our website, they search and look around a little bit and maybe they schedule a campus tour,” said Mr. Dobies.

The marketing director pointed at an Instagram story posted to the university account last September that featured the various jobs students could work on football game days. The story led to 160 clicks and an estimated 40 applications, according to data shared by the university.

Equally as important as generating applications from prospective students on social media is reaching their parents and making the application process as digital as possible, Mr. Dobies said.

The university has focused on adapting to what students respond to, which in their experience are fewer phone calls and recruiter visits, and more emails and digital communication. Since most prospective students don’t want to pick up the phone and call, the school has pivoted to text messaging and emails, Mr. Dobies said.

Outreach via email has also been successful for getting information about the university to parents.

“Parents are so much a part of the process of choosing where to go to college ... that’s a really critical piece. That has not necessarily changed, but it’s gotten much clearer to us as we do our work,” Mr. Dobies said.

At Point Park, the enrollment department has echoed that priority. In an effort to keep parents informed and interested, the university launched a portal in May that allows them to see information tailored to their student’s specific interests.

“That portal is a really important tool for parents to get ongoing communication and in many ways curated communication to their needs and their interests straight to their email inbox,” Mr. Collingwood said.

Additionally, both schools use teams of in-person recruiters who are broken down by region. In recent years, the area of focus at the forefront is rural counties.

West Virginia University is a land-grant institution, meaning it was established through a federal program intended to make higher education accessible in places that previously had no universities, so their rural recruitment focuses extensively on rural populations within the state. About 40% of the enrolled students are first-generation college students, Mr. Dobies estimated.

In Pennsylvania, 48 of the state’s 67 counties are rural, according to the Center for Rural Pennsylvania. An estimated 3.4 million people in the state live in rural areas.

As a result, universities in Western Pennsylvania have put an emphasis on reaching students from rural counties. Often, many students who live in rural areas are first-generation college students who may deal with additional cost barriers to higher education, according to April Belback, the associate vice provost for student success and advising at the University of Pittsburgh.

“We kind of look at the numbers and look at the data and we figure out how we can put interventions in place to help our students,” Ms. Belback said. “In looking at the data, we realized that rural students are a place where we could do a little bit better.”

Rural students fall into the category of what Ms. Belback called “primrose students” which are students who have traditionally been “left behind in higher education.” Pitt has created extensive outreach programs, scholarships and academic support students to address historical inequities in higher education, Ms. Belback said.

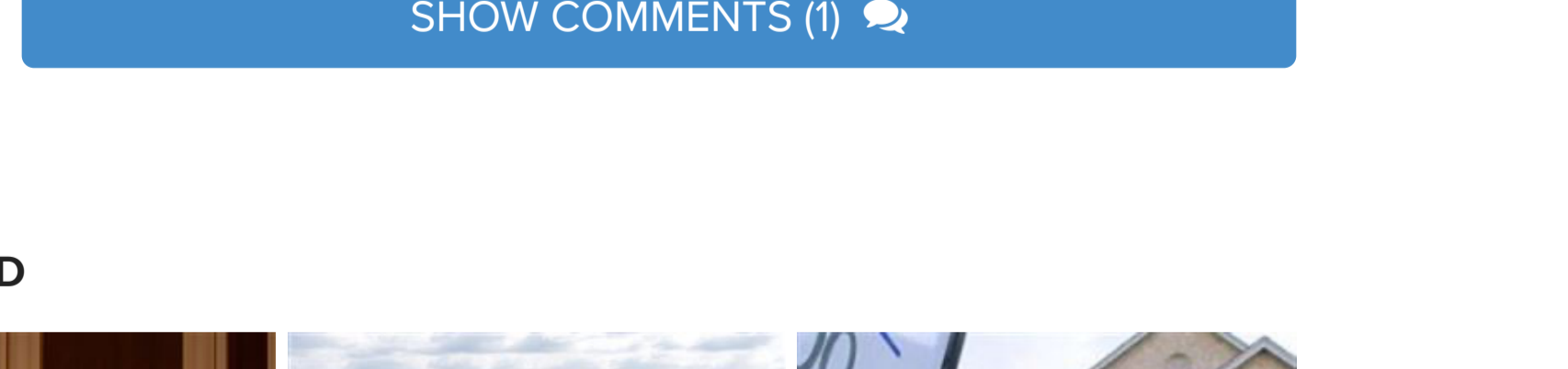
In May of 2022, Pitt hired a recruiter dedicated exclusively to rural areas. Their job is to visit high schools in the most rural communities in the state, with the goal of making sure they get the same amount of outreach and access as high schools in urban areas.

Following the receipt of a grant from the federal Department of Education this January, the university is in the process of hiring a second rural recruiter to expand outreach.

The grant is intended to increase rates of rural enrollment in postsecondary education institutions across the country. In addition to improving rural outreach, Pitt will also use the funds to bolster the student success resources and programs available to rural students once they are admitted.

“We’re really truly making student success a priority here,” said Ms. Belback. “It’s an institutional priority, it’s a wonderful way to make sure that our institution is more dynamic and inclusive for all.”

First Published March 16, 2024, 5:30am



AdChoices | Sponsored

SHOW COMMENTS (1)

MUST READ

- 3 Local Breweries for Your Next Adventure by Made in Pgh
'Not a solution!' State senator asks Pittsburgh schools to drop threatened lawsuit to force a reassessment
Business Association of Realtors agrees to settle claim against high commissions

FROM OUR SPONSORS

3 Local Breweries for Your Next Adventure by Made in Pgh
Core Digital Marketing Strategies for Small Businesses by PGH Digital
Staying Relevant Amidst the Political Buzz by PGH Digital

TRENDING

- Steelers acquire Justin Fields from Bears, setting up intriguing QB dynamic
In Ohio, Trump warns of 'bloodbath' if he doesn't win election
Analysis: Omar Khan and Russell Wilson are ushering in a new era of Steelers football
WATCH: Reacting to Steelers' trade with Bears for Justin Fields
Steelers positional analysis: Linebacker room must be more than just Queen's gambit

ADVERTISEMENT LENTEN FISH FRIES Interactive map of churches, firehalls and fraternal organizations Find your spot Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

LATEST NEWS

- Kurt Franck, vice president of newspaper operations for Block Communications Inc.
Obituary: Carlos Vivas, Pittsburgh transplant surgeon from Argentina, never sought accolades or admiration
Battle for the White House looms large over Pennsylvania's U.S. Senate race
Crescent Township community mourns couple killed in home explosion as investigators seek answers
Some Pittsburgh-area school districts contemplating elementary consolidation amid nationwide trends

ADVERTISEMENT PITTSBURGH Loves Nurses ITS THANK A NURSE FOR NURSES WEEK 2024 Know an AMAZING nurse? Share a photo and your thanks! See Nurses Photo Gallery

Customize your free Newsletter Preferences

Email Preferences
Archives
Advertising
Email Newsletter
Products & Services
Contact Us
Subscribe
Subscriber Services
RSS Feeds
PGe
Corrections
Help
Terms of Use
Privacy Policy
About Us

Copyright © 1997-2024 PG Publishing Co. All rights reserved.