



**COMMUNITY  
COLLEGE  
CHALLENGE**

# Experts' Guide to Branding at Your Institution

The real champions behind *The Million Dollar Community College Challenge* are its project leads. In just over two years, these trailblazers have transformed their institutions, rebranding them to serve adult learners better, creating authentic institutional identities that resonate deeply with students and communities, and fostering a stronger sense of belonging for all. This work is designed to enhance the student experience and drive enrollment by forging stronger connections with prospective students and meeting their needs head-on.

Now, these experts are here to share their invaluable insights with you—offering actionable advice on how to build a powerful, student-centered brand.

## Hear from Some of Our Experts

<b>Madera Community College:</b> Madera, CA.....	2
<b>College of Eastern Idaho:</b> Idaho Falls, ID.....	3
<b>County College of Morris:</b> Randolph, NJ .....	4
<b>Great Falls College:</b> Great Falls, MT.....	5
<b>Northwest Shoals Community College:</b> Randolph, NJ .....	6



## Dr. Ángel Reyna, President

*Project Co-Lead: Cory Burkharth,  
Director of Communications*



**WINNER**

- 1. Set a bold, inclusive vision that reflects community and student aspirations.** I have learned that the CEO/President must champion a future-forward identity that is both ambitious and authentic—rooted in equity, student success, and local relevance (mission aligned). This means articulating a clear, compelling narrative that aligns institutional goals with the lived experiences and goals of the students and communities we serve.
- 2. Develop spaces and visual representation that speak to identity.** The creation of student spaces and centers is essential in providing a sense of community and belonging. These aren't just places of support; they reflect your commitment to students. Visual representations, such as murals, posters, and statues, tell your students' stories in a way that builds identity and reinforces belonging.
- 3. Highlight the power of storytelling.** Encourage storytelling and share real stories from students, faculty, and alumni about their journeys and experiences at your college. Personal narratives create emotional connections and elevate the sense of belonging.
- 4. Increase your visibility.** By placing your brand in key areas and providing students and community members with swag, you're ensuring that your college is always top of mind. From billboards to campus events, you're integrating your brand into the daily lives of students and the broader community.
- 5. Bridge the gap between campus and community.** One of the most powerful ways to create a sense of belonging is by inviting the community to campus and actively engaging with them where they are. Host community events, workshops, and open houses that invite locals to experience your college. At the same time, take the college out into the community by participating in local festivals, partnering with local organizations, and hosting pop-up information booths in key public spaces.



## Cory Burkharth, Director of Communications

*Project Co-Lead: Dr. Ángel Reyna, President*

1. **Create a brand platform and operationalize it fully across the institution.** Ensure everyone on your campus, including administration, staff, faculty, and student workers, is fully aware of the brand platform, what it means, and each person's role in ensuring its success. Engagement from all parties is critical to deliver a transformational brand experience.
2. **Identify and utilize your brand champions.** Find the people who genuinely exhibit all of the positive qualities your brand stands for and use them to coach other employees, improve your campus processes, and identify new ways to serve your community.



## Hailey Mack, Dean of Student Affairs

1. **Engage students in design and planning.** Work-study students and student council members shaped this project around their needs and desires, ensuring that the project "fit."
2. **Collaborate across functional areas.** We received ideas from academic departments to highlight student work, from facilities management to ensure quality products that can be maintained, and from campus safety about branded window vinyl. Together, these perspectives created a multi-faceted approach and increased buy-in.
3. **Determine what will be most impactful and sustainable.** We identified key spots in high-traffic areas for our branding. This included adding door wraps around entrances to buildings, having branded information on student services with QR codes inside classrooms, and even including inspirational messages about graduation on mirrors in bathrooms. We recognize that creating lasting change will require ongoing investment. Consider the upkeep required and the parties responsible for maintenance.



## **Melissa Albright, Vice President of Marketing, PR, & Enrollment Management**

*Project Co-Leads: Kelly Meola, Executive Director of Institutional Advancement; Gina Garcia, Manager of Creative Services*

- 1. Make it fun!** When you are ready to launch your new branding elements—a website, mascot, logo, or other piece—consider using fun and engaging elements like teasers, activities, music, and gatherings. Positive energy is contagious, and people buy into change when they are enjoying themselves.
- 2. Provide training.** Know from the onset that branding takes training. Be ready to train on the simplest of things, such as the use of logos, how to use the website, or how to help your mascot bring energy. Training is ongoing and must have a sustainable plan. Remember that people don't always know what you know. Be patient!
- 3. Develop a process for collecting feedback.** We knew feedback regarding our website—the positive and the negative—was part of the process, but preparation and systems allowed us to receive it without being defensive. All feedback and requested changes were sent to the dean, director, or vice president and compiled into a templated spreadsheet and shared with leadership. This process took a few months but was manageable and allowed us to meet with departments to review their requests versus individuals driving their own agendas and ideas. We wanted to serve the departments with excellence and meet their needs but do it in a manageable and well thought-out process.
- 4. Balance the strengths of project leads.** Recognize team members' variety of styles and gifts. Let each person shine in what they do best, whether attending to details, visioning, being a realist, or balancing competing priorities.



## GREAT FALLS COLLEGE

### MONTANA STATE UNIVERSITY



#### Dr. Stephanie Erdmann, Chief Executive Officer / Dean

*Project Co-Lead: Scott Thompson, Director of Community Relations*

1. **Begin with listening and self-reflection.** Take time to thoroughly understand your institution's core values, mission, and vision. Connect with students, faculty, alumni, and staff to understand what sets your college apart. What themes emerge that show how your college is unique?
2. **Center around the student experience.** Ensure that the brand developed is strategic and authentically reflects students' experience on your campus. A college's brand isn't just a logo or a tagline. Brand work should go beyond marketing needs and address student experience, academic programs, faculty development, and community engagement.
3. **Engage all stakeholders.** Find ways to include all stakeholders in brand development—from faculty, staff, and students to employers and community partners. If they help develop it, then the support they provide will be incredible. Think Mo, the River Otter!
4. **Tell your story.** Authentic storytelling is one of the most powerful tools for creating an emotional connection. Develop narratives around your institution that resonate with your target audiences. This could be through student success stories, alumni achievements, or faculty innovations.
5. **Take the long view.** Branding is a heavy lift, so create a team from all areas of the organization that enjoys working together and has a passion for the college and its impact on the community.



## Northwest Shoals COMMUNITY COLLEGE



### Trent Randolph, Director of Public Relations and Marketing

*Project Co-Lead: Jessi Harrison, Director of Grants Development,  
and Leslie Tomlinson, Dean of Workforce Development*

1. **Respect the process.** Institutions tend to want to go straight to the creative and fun design portion of the rebrand. Let your research lead the way as you build the foundation of your new brand.
2. **Keep an open mind.** Be open to hearing both the good and the bad about your institution. Respect all opinions and let them lead your creative process without preconceived ideas of your stakeholders. This will lead to an identity that accurately reflects who you are and what is valued most about your college.
3. **Cast a wide net for input.** Open the process to all your major stakeholders in your branding efforts, including alumni, K-12 partners, chambers of commerce, economic development organizations, and local elected officials. Your stakeholders will be more likely to champion your new brand after being involved in the process.
4. **Invest in yourself.** As you roll out your new brand identity, do not be afraid to go big and bold with environmental signage, bus wraps, wall graphics, etc. The more pride you take in your college, the more your students and alumni will as well.
5. **Have fun with the process.** Branding is a heavy lift, so create a team from all areas of the organization that enjoy working together and have a passion for the college and the impact it has on the community.

# THE Million dollar

## COMMUNITY COLLEGE CHALLENGE

*The Million Dollar Community College Challenge* has ignited a transformative movement across campuses, led by these campus champions. By rebranding their institutions to better serve adult learners and cultivate authentic connections, they've laid the foundation for sustained student success and engagement. This work isn't just about changing logos or slogans—it's about building brands that reflect a deep understanding of student needs, foster a sense of belonging, and drive enrollment by reaching prospective students where they are.

Now, these experts are passing the torch, sharing the invaluable lessons they've learned and offering practical advice to help you create a brand that speaks to your students and your community. With their guidance, you have the tools to shape a brand that not only stands out but stands for something meaningful. As you embark on your own branding journey, remember: The work doesn't stop here. The real impact comes from taking these insights, putting them into action, and creating a lasting connection that shapes your institution's future.



Lumina<sup>™</sup>  
FOUNDATION

StrategyForward<sup>®</sup>  
ADVISORS