Case Study

# **How We Used Career Data** to Transform NC State's **Student Recruitment Strategy**



**Program-to-Career Connections** 

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# Introduction

In 2018, NC State University began a promising project in collaboration with <u>Lightcast</u> (formerly Burning Glass) and Verified Studios of Durham, NC. The objective: to recruit more students by embedding the high-quality, comprehensive career data provided by Lightcast into NC State's online and distance education website.

Decades of experience in student recruiting had led the Verified team to believe that incorporating career information into the digital recruiting process would be a game-changer—and the results were even more impressive than we'd expected. We also learned that this move was best supported by other strategies, creating a comprehensive approach to recruiting success.

This project significantly moved the needle for NC State's recruitment process. In fact, the Verified team was so inspired by its success that we created <a href="Invisible Us">Invisible Us</a>, a spinoff company that replicates the end results of this project—but with significantly lower investments of time and money for customers.

"... We have opened new doors in program-level marketing, from site building to cutting-edge marketing strategies, and the development of new enterprise-level marketing initiatives to meet the competition for successful student recruitment within approved timelines and budgets. Verified Studios helped us find solutions, develop extraordinary new marketing strategies, and implement new technologies—and then turned those ideas into realities that delivered results."

#### - Kay Zimmerman,

Assoc. Vice Provost for Marketing & Partnership Development, DELTA (Distance Education Learning Technology & Partnerships), NC State University

If that sounds interesting to you, visit <u>invisible.us</u> for more information.

But first, we'd love for you to spend a few minutes with this case study so you can understand more about what makes Invisible Us special.

# **The Problem:**

## It's a New Game

NC State's DELTA marketing team observed that over time, the students applying to their programs were becoming more selective. They weren't willing to enroll in higher ed programs unless they knew that their investment would pay off in the form of tangible career opportunities.

Just like everyone else in their field, the marketing team was receiving pressure from stakeholders to produce:

- More applicants—and higher quality applicants, at that
- Higher matriculation rates
- Better retention rates
- Lower marketing costs

Doubling down on the usual tactics and strategies was not creating the results that they needed.

Looking for solutions led them to two important observations. First, it didn't make sense to simply increase their investment in the usual paid advertising and accompanying analytics to manage those efforts. The ads were performing, but student enrollment rates weren't following suit. There was something else—something less obvious—at work.

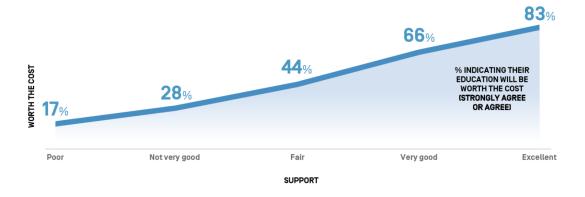
Which led to their second observation:

There was growing evidence that applicants and students were extremely concerned about career and salary outcomes.

This had been apparent since the Great Recession, and the COVID-19 pandemic had only increased the demand for connections between academic programs and subsequent careers.

#### Here are some interesting related graphs from a 2020 Strada report:

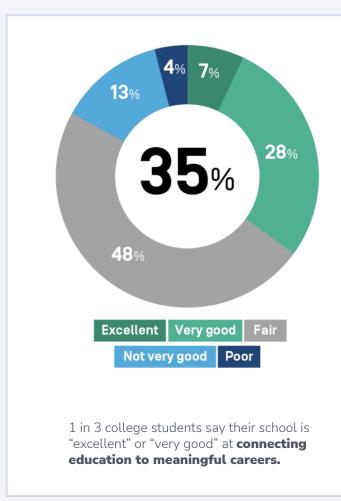
When students have the support to connect their education to a career, they are more likely to say their education will be worth the cost.



Sadly, the second graph suggests that two-thirds of respondents did not feel their institution was providing enough support in linking their education to a satisfying career—and the first indicates that this will likely lead to less satisfaction with their investment.

That same <u>Strada</u> report offers a few more interesting data points:

- → 58% of high school graduates report that a desirable career outcome (getting a rewarding job that pays well) is the primary motivation for enrolling and completing a higher ed program.
- → After graduation, 72% of college graduates cite career outcomes as the primary motivation for any continued education. Furthermore, students are concerned about getting burned. Strada also found many students have not gotten a satisfactory return on their investment in higher education.
- → 52% of millennials with student loan debt say their loans weren't worth it.
- → 68% of millennials with student loan debt are still working on paying off that debt a decade after graduation.



Behind these numbers lies a staggering 2022 stat from <u>US News and World</u> Report:

The average student loan debt is just shy of **\$30,000**. It's not surprising that prospective students are wary; they don't want to be paying for their degree forever.

Given these challenges—and the lack of viable solutions in sight—the DELTA marketing team reached out to Verified and Lightcast to create a solution.

The assembled team agreed to focus on three types of prospective students:

- Students who need credentials in order to establish their careers
- Professionals seeking career advancement
- Career changers

NC State asked Verified to tackle this problem head on, and we love a challenge! As we worked through the mechanics of embedding Lightcast data in DELTA's website, we realized that true success would require a multifaceted approach.

Sure, DELTA was using pay-per-click (PPC) strategies to drive prospects to their website. And they were quite good at using analytics to help understand the performance of those strategies. They had designated pages for many of the programs for which they wanted to recruit. These are all standard operating procedures for a modern university.

However, with a closer look, we uncovered some challenges. It turned out that some programs did *not* have a page. Many existing pages were out of date and full of inaccuracies. And most weren't written to effectively engage prospects and lead them to take action.

The lightbulb came on: simply driving traffic to existing program pages would not produce the desired results. We'd have to rethink the pages themselves.

# **The Solution:**

# Focus First on Program Pages, Then on Careers

Simply adding career data to the existing website and adjusting marketing protocols was not going to cut it. We needed to build a bridge between Lightcast's compelling data and prospective students, and the program pages were a critical part of that bridge.

If we moved forward with the existing program pages, the bridge was going to collapse. Strengthening it would require an entirely new approach.

Luckily, building the website's capacity to present quality career data would, in itself, provide a competitive edge. From there, we could leverage those data connections to create and deliver dynamic ads for nurturing and remarketing campaigns.

We developed a five-part solution to help NC State transform its recruitment process. Now, we're going to pull back the curtain and let you see how each of our five components interact to create better, more productive relationships with prospects.

### The five parts of our solution are:

- Enhanced, state-of-the-art program pages using defined templates to standardize the client's web presence and remove barriers to prospective students' explorations on the site
- Deep content
- 3. Data-rich career profiles and a searchable career database, integrated into the entire web experience
- 4. Best-practice PPC digital ad campaigns that leveraged the enhanced program pages (the first component), spotlighting programs and related careers data—complemented by web analytics that help maximize results
- 5. Remarketing ad campaigns (ads that follow the student) that showcase career data as related to programs in which they have shown interest

Now, let's look at them one at a time.

## **Component 1:**

# Enhanced Program Pages

Each program page needs to accomplish the following goals:

- Provide compelling information about coursework, faculty, and other distinguishing program merits, delivered with language that builds connections with prospects
- 2. Show the clear link between each program and desirable career outcomes
- 3. Engage and excite the prospective student
- 4. Remove obstacles to enrollment
- 5. Establish an emotional connection between the prospective student and program instructors, so the prospect knows that they will receive personal attention
- 6. Lead the prospect through all the necessary stages—discovery, engagement, and application—with clear calls to action and an intuitive path from interest to enrollment
- Be easy to find, both by search engines and students exploring the website

Many colleges and universities have not yet invested in providing deep content on individual program pages. We always recommend providing detailed, professionally written program pages for each program in order to:

- > Communicate program value to each department's specific audience
- Put an effective sales funnel in place—piquing interest, answering questions, and providing compelling reasons to apply and enroll
- Provide valuable SEO real estate

We'll talk about this in detail when we discuss Deep Content in the next section.

## Step One: We Set the New Standard for Program Pages

NC State had many program pages in place, but they were lacking in clarity and consistency. The pages also were missing clear calls to action, instructions on how to apply, and essential program information to help students feel comfortable applying.

We crafted a standard template to ensure that every program page answers the following vital questions:

- → What makes this program special? Why should I enroll in this program instead of another one?
- What careers will this program prepare me for?
- → What sorts of credentials will I get if I complete this program? Are those credentials right for the career I'm interested in?
- → Am I eligible?
- How much will it cost?
- → What is the application process, and when are the deadlines?
- → How do I apply?
- → Does this program care about me and my success? Is there somebody whose face and name I can get familiar with? Is it possible that I could form a personal connection with this person? (Bonus points if this is a member of the program faculty!)

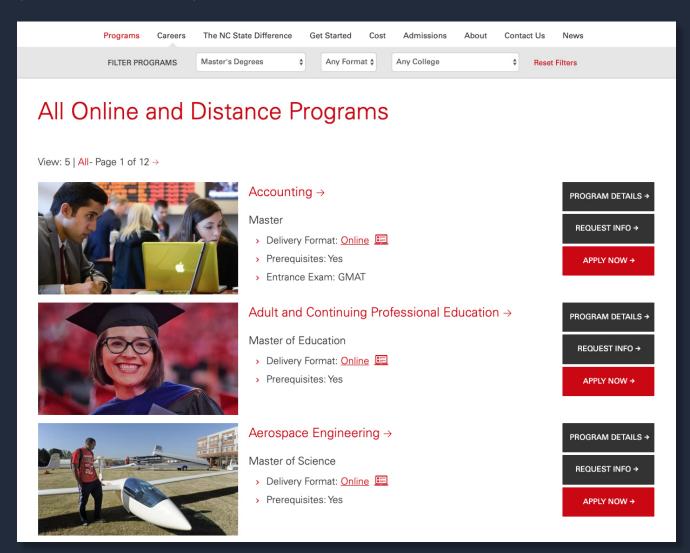
Here is an example of an enhanced program page from NC State's website, helping prospects answer those critical questions:



## **Step Two:** We Improved the Program Search

Using user experience (UX) best practices, we crafted an intuitive search filter to ensure that students could find programs easily. You might be surprised how many institutions don't provide a robust search function, even those with dozens of programs!

Here's an example, after we updated search functionality for NC State, of a generic search for "all programs":



#### The End Result:

A compelling program pages that convert—because they provide the deep content that prospects need in order to make a decision, and they don't confuse prospects with unstandardized pages and search results.

# **Component 2:** Improved Content

#### **Content Matters**

As we reviewed the program pages, we realized that many of them did not provide the information that students need in order to feel comfortable committing to the program. The content varied dramatically from page to page: some program pages were overflowing with information, and others offered only the barest essentials.

Program content matters for several reasons. For starters, prospects need to know what they're signing up for. We've learned that means providing at least some detail on each of the following:

- Which licenses, certifications, or other credentials can be secured through participation in the program
- Whether students completing the program earn these credentials automatically or via an extended process made possible by program completion
- → Whether those credentials are useful for other tangible reasons (career outcomes and/or academic outcomes), such as admission to higher level programs or securing a promotion or raise
- → How and why this program stands out against the competition
- The program's primary point of contact—an instructor or program coordinator—and how a prospect can get their questions answered
- Assurance that the prospect will receive personal attention, should they need it
- > Eligibility requirements, including any admissions tests
- → How to apply
- Application and notification deadlines

## **Emotional Attachment**

It's not enough to just answer the basic questions we reviewed above. Doing so will make a prospective student feel more comfortable and informed about what the program could do for them—but prospects also need to feel inspired. They want to see pictures of students and graduates doing the

things they hope to do, and videos of students interacting with instructors in a way that compels them to join the program.

## **SEO**

Carefully constructed, up-to-date content is essential to expanding the SEO real estate of your program pages. Search engines don't rank small amounts of irrelevant content as important. They need to see a robust landing page or program section that screams (in SEO-friendly language) that the page is important! When that happens, pages benefit from higher rankings and earlier listings in search results.

SEO-friendly web copy and images provide the necessary foundation for effective ad campaigns and organic web traffic. By building program pages with this in mind, you can improve both organic SEO rankings and the effectiveness of advertising campaigns.

## **Summarizing Component 2**

Using best-practice templates that were professionally written, we standardized and expanded the program content. This ensured that every program page provided the necessary information, images, keywords, and video (when possible). Compelling content on every program page provided a natural uptick in SEO ranking and solid material for ad campaigns.

#### **Takeaways:**

First, improved program page content gets more students to the pages. Once they're there, well-crafted content makes them comfortable with the program, increasing the chances that they'll apply.

Second, the program coordinators were able to provide foundational information, but they recognized the value in hiring marketing experts to write the actual copy for their review.

## **Component 3:**

## Career Profiles and Searchable Databases

Adding career information to program pages accomplishes two goals. First, it makes the program-to-career pathway evident. This establishes the institution and program as a source of trusted expertise, which typically results in longer time spent on the page and more frequent visits—improving SEO for the entire website.

Secondly, giving students the information they want about program-specific career opportunities results in increased applications. We've learned that the career information that prospects want to see includes:

- Salary ranges, both state and national
- Job demand
- Education & experience requirements
- Skill requirements
- Industry & common employer information
- Similar & related job titles and career paths

#### **Takeaway:**

Most importantly, prospective students want to know if your program can result in the credentials they need to land the job, or promotion, that they desire.

### What Does Effective Career-Related Content Look Like?

Which career-related content you offer is important, and so is how you present that data. It needs to be easy to navigate and accessible to readers without a degree in statistics. The longer a prospect has to spend trying to understand what they're looking at, the more likely they are to simply move on to a competitor's website.

### See the examples below to get an idea of what good career-related content looks like.



#### Landscape Designer / Landscape Architect

Work outdoors. Cultivate perfect landscapes. Take pride in designing beautiful gardens by working as a landscape designer or landscape architect.

- > What Does Working as a Landscape Designer or Architect Look Like?
- > Landscape Designer or Architect Salary
- > What Education is Required to Work as a Landscape Designer or Architect?
- > Landscaping Job Opportunities

#### What Does Working as a Landscape Designer or Architect Look Like?

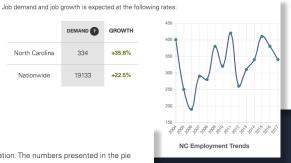
Plan and design land areas for projects such as parks and other recreational facilities, airports, highways, hospitals, schools, land subdivisions, and commercial, industrial, and residential sites.

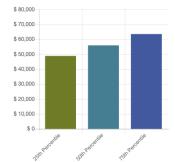
If you pursue a career in landscape design, you will most likely do the following:

> Confer with client: architects to unde aesthetic and avai



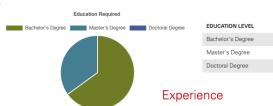
	DEMAND ?	GROWTH
North Carolina	334	+35.6%
Nationwide	19133	+22.5%





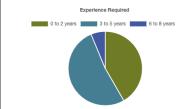
#### Education

This career typically requires the following level of education. The numbers presented in the pie charts below were derived from actual job posts over the past year. Not all job postings list education requirements



35% 0%

This position typically requires the following level of experience. Th charts below were derived from actual job posts over the past year



EXPERIENCE REQUIRED

0 to 2 years

3 to 5 years

6 to 8 years

These skills are specific to working in this career:

- > Landscape Architecture: Landscape architecture is the design of outdoor public areas, landmarks, and structures to achieve environmental, social-behavioral, or aesthetic out
- > AutoCAD: AutoCAD is a commercial computer-aided design (CAD) and drafting software

The average salary in North Carolina for those pursuing this career is \$55,981

- > Adobe Photoshop: Adobe Photoshop is a raster graphics editor developed and published by Adobe
- > Landscape Design: Landscape design is an independent profession and a design and art tradition, practised by landscape designers, combining nature and culture.
- > SketchUp: Working experience of SketchUp. SketchUp, formerly Google Sketchup, is a 3D modeling computer program for a wide range of drawing applications such as architectural, interior design, landscape architecture, civil and mechanical engineering, film and video game design. It is available as a freeware version, SketchUp Make, and a paid version with additional functionality, SketchUp Pro

40%

50%

#### **Takeaway:**

If you want prospects to enroll in your program, you've got to make it crystal clear that it will give them the knowledge and credentials to get a desired job or promotion. It's one thing if a program that you have doesn't fit the needs of the prospect—that happens, and they should look elsewhere to find what they're seeking. But if they leave your site because it's incomplete or too difficult to navigate, you've lost a student who might have enrolled.

### But Wait, There's More...

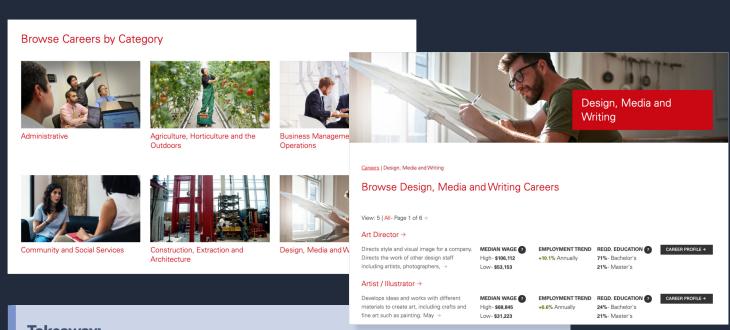
As part of the integration of career outcomes data, we developed an intuitive search filter to facilitate the display of career profiles. Why is this important?

When we analyzed site traffic patterns, we found that the searchable career database attracts prospective students to the NC State site as a career-planning platform. Prospects were visiting multiple career profiles, and they often went on to view associated program pages. A good search function helps people find trusted information about relevant careers, details about related programs, and employment opportunities after graduation.

Students began to see the NC State site as much more than a website that promotes its programs. They come to see the website as:

- → An authority on career information
- → A comfortable place to explore careers and related programs

Comfort + Authority = the Trust that NC State seeks to establish with prospective students.



#### **Takeaway:**

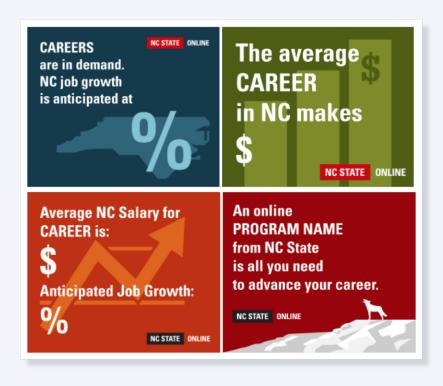
Searchable career information attracts prospects to your site and keeps them there, establishing you as their trusted resource. Trust is essential for prospective students.

# **Component 4:**

# Best Practices PPC Marketing Campaigns

NC State was already paying for digital advertising, as they recognized the value of online ads. However, like many colleges and universities, they had focused primarily on brand-related ads. One of the problems inherent in focusing on the brand as the primary selling point is the challenge of quantifying the connection between brand management and student recruitment. It's hard to know whether success is related to a specific strategy, or just a lucky break.

So we took the ad campaigns in a different direction. Instead of relying on the NC State name as the primary advantage, we focused on program advantages related to career outcomes. For example, take a look at the example ads presented below.





Ads that feature optimized career information and bring potential students to compelling program pages do a great job of capturing prospects' attention. They deliver warm, easily quantifiable leads to NC State's programs. This approach enables entry to the website via either program or career searches, and then facilitates seamless exploration of both worlds as students zero in on their target program.

We observed additional benefits, too. Focusing on both programs and careers allowed us to accomplish two additional tasks:

- **1.** Concentrate advertising efforts to spotlight programs that were new, exciting, or otherwise suited for extra ad support
- 2. Take advantage of career trends—for example, we were able to target ads for the role of data scientist, which had received an uptick in student interest and was perfectly matched for several NC State programs

Instead of relying on the name of NC State to carry the ads, we were able to showcase the very programs that the institution most wanted to promote. This carefully tailored approach made for a much more targeted, effective marketing spend.

#### **Takeaway:**

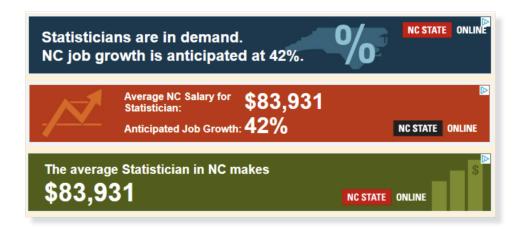
Targeted PPC campaigns that leverage great program pages, and integrate program and career information, are both successful and cost-effective.

# **Component 5:**Remarketing Campaigns

Remarketing ads are ads that follow you around the internet. When you've looked at a cool jacket on a website and see ads pop up showing you that jacket a few hours later, you're seeing remarketing ads—and, like them or not, they're effective!

Remarketing ads allow NC State to show relevant information to people who have previously visited their website. With messages tailored to their audience, remarketing helps the institution build leads and recruit students by bringing previous visitors back to the NC State site to complete what they started.

For example, let's say you checked out the Master's of Statistics program page today. A remarketing ad might pop up a day later informing you that statisticians typically make X amount per year. Another example might be an ad that tells you that job demand for statisticians in North Carolina is high. That's how remarketing works—by reminding you of products and ideas that you've deemed relevant or interesting in the past.



#### Our ad campaigns were particularly effective because they:

- → Were personalized for each prospect
- Provided data that prospects found interesting and helpful—and, dare we say, enticing and motivating
- → To ensure that our ads were of the greatest use to NC State, we designed them to be:
- Easily customizable
- → Simple to manage and modify
- Tracked and supported by analytics
- → Brand-compliant

#### **Takeaway:**

Remarketing ads, featuring program and careers outcome data, speak to your target audience and direct them to your programs.

# **The Results**

Marketing teams measure the effectiveness of their efforts in many ways. The end goal of our NC State project was to fill student seats with better qualified applicants, of course. But that indicator takes a relatively long time to register changes, and we need to be dialing in adjustments much more frequently than once a year. At Verified, we're often doing A/B testing in real time—making changes to images, copy and page structure to ensure that we're getting the most out of our efforts.

So, we have quick-response metrics that are commonly used to adjust strategy, messages, and other components of recruiting. Different industries and agencies use different measures; in higher education, the term **conversion** is often used. This is basically a measure of how well paid advertising performs, as measured by **number of conversions** and **cost per conversion**.

If you're familiar with this concept, skip down a couple of paragraphs. Otherwise, here's some more context: a conversion is how often prospects click on links that you've identified as important. Each click on designated links like "How to Apply" or "Request Information" is called a **conversion**. The **cost per conversion** measures the amount spent on a campaign divided by the number of conversions. Each measure is simple enough to track using standard Google Analytics.

Additional measures include changes in **site traffic** (how many people are visiting your site) and changes in **time-on-the-website** (how long are people spending on your site once they get there). We can also track more granular metrics like time on specific pages, which sites prospects come from, and which pages they visit after browsing your site (all parts of **user behavior flow**). The metrics we track depend on what questions we need to answer. Each of these individual measures contribute to the larger picture of how a website is performing.

Alongside enhancing program pages and adding careers content to the site, NC State asked Verified to manage digital marketing for a subset of specific programs. Over the course of three years, from 2018 to 2021, the effectiveness of the PPC

advertising for those programs almost doubled. And, very importantly, they doubled while the budget fell 60% over that three-year span.

#### In sum, our strategy:

- Generated 12.6 million impressions
- → Increased conversion rates by 84%
- Decreased the cost per conversion by 92%

Additionally, Verified ran paid **remarketing campaigns** (ads that follow the student as they browse) for a group of programs with some outstanding results over the course of the three-year project:

- → 525,215 clicks (5,382% increase)
- → 12,460 conversions (15,475% increase)
- → \$0.25 average cost per click (84% decrease)
- → 3.76% conversion rate (974% increase)
- \$7.96 cost per conversion (93% decrease)

The number of clicks on buttons and links that we agreed were important went up, while the cost to advertise went down—by significant amounts. In other words, NC State's DELTA marketing program was able to get standout results without expanding their marketing budget! Who wouldn't want that?

Some readers will note that we did not include the ultimate goals (new applicants and new students) in our discussion of results. That's simply because those goals are the natural outputs of the outcome measures discussed above. If we get conversions right, we'll see more applications and more enrollment by qualified students.

# The Biggest Challenge of All

This project produced significant learning for everyone involved. As rewarding as it was to solve these challenges for NC State, our success uncovered another very important problem that would set the stage for the creation of a brand new company.

# Our system works—but at a price point that too many institutions simply cannot afford!

It's a custom website development project, after all. Those typically require a complex team working for a year or more—and they often cost hundreds of thousands of dollars. And that just doesn't work for most educational institutions. Schools need these tools, which are grounded in decades of knowledge and experience from the team at Verified. And so, we set out to tackle our biggest challenge yet: **how to provide these capabilities at a much, much lower price point.** 

#### Our targets:

- → Reduce cost from \$200,000 to \$5,000
- → Reduce implementation time from 12 months to under 2 months

#### Our assumptions:

- The school has personnel who can configure the system
- → The school's website is using WordPress
- → The school will provide the data source(s) for career data
- Prospects do not need to leave the school's website in order to enroll

To make this happen, Verified created <u>Invisible Us</u>. The first thing that Invisible Us did was to turn to the world of WordPress plugins. They are small, easily integrated into a website, and usually purchased on an annual subscription basis—which lowers initial costs, and provides updates and fixes without extra maintenance contracts.

Plugins provide new features or capabilities to a website, and they're often very limited in function. We realized that in order to solve problems like NC State's at an accessible price point, we needed to basically figure out how to provide an entire new website via a plugin. That's no small feat—but we're happy to say that we cracked the code.

**The result:** two simple solutions that can be put into place either on their own or as a package, installed on a school's WordPress site and configured by any WordPress administrator who has access to the needed information. No special technical skills or knowledge are required.

The cost is based on the size of the implementation, and the purchase can be made online using a school credit card. All that remains is adding your program content and mapping your programs to the careers.

Of course, setup assistance and ongoing technical support from Invisible Us are included. We also keep the technology up to date, tracking all API updates and other requirements.

Verified Studios is available to assume responsibility for implementation, if a school so desires. Fees for services also vary by size and scope of the project; reach out to us directly to learn about pricing for your project.

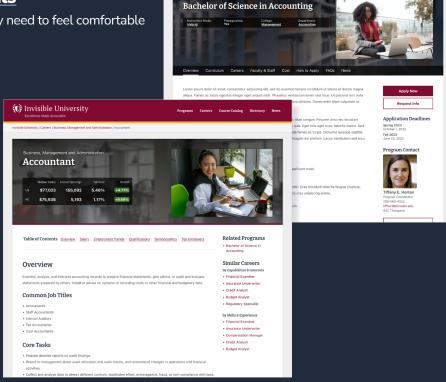
## **The Solutions**

## > Program Marketing Essentials

Ensures your students have everything they need to feel comfortable committing to your program.

## Career Profiles Pro

Creates visually engaging profiles of the jobs that interest your prospective students and drives traffic to your higher ed programs.



(1) Invisible University



# **Ready to Get Started?**

For additional information, to schedule a demo, or just to begin a conversation, visit invisible.us. We would love to help you develop the competitive edge that you need.