



FIRST STEPS: A Media Planning Competition



Background:

State University is a mid-sized public institution with a strong academic reputation and vibrant campus life. Located in a charming college town, State U has been working hard to shift campus culture around alcohol consumption. The university has made progress: hospitalizations are down 15% over three years, and more students are utilizing the campus Safe Ride program. But there's still work to do, especially with incoming freshmen who are navigating independence for the first time.

The Challenge:

Each summer, State University welcomes approximately 3,200 incoming freshmen to campus. These students arrive with varying levels of exposure to alcohol education—some come from high schools with robust prevention programs, while others have received minimal guidance. Research shows that the first six weeks of college are critical: students who make responsible decisions early are more likely to maintain those patterns throughout their college careers.

The university has developed "First Steps," a comprehensive program focused on preventing underage drinking, especially harmful alcohol consumption. The program includes online education modules, peer mentorship, and resources for students who choose not to drink or who want to support friends making healthy choices

**The Challenge: 10 weeks
to reach 3,200 students**

Your Role:

You're a summer intern in the Dean of Students office, working on health and wellness initiatives. It's early June, and you've just come from a planning meeting for the fall semester. The challenge: incoming freshmen won't arrive on campus until late August—more than 10 weeks away. The Dean wants to reach these students during the summer while they're thinking about college and before they arrive on campus.

The Dean of Students has allocated \$3,500 to promote the First Steps program and create awareness among incoming freshmen before they arrive on campus. Your supervisor sends you a late-night email: "We need a media strategy that reaches our incoming freshmen this summer. I've attached three recommendations from our marketing consultant. Pick one and tell me why it's the right approach. Let's meet Friday to discuss your recommendation."

Next Steps:

Your supervisor forwarded three media recommendations from the university's marketing consultant, listed below as Appendix A. Your job is to make a case for ONE of these recommendations in an essay. Explain how you intend to use the \$3,500 budget and why you made your decision.

There is no right answer; you will be judged on the rationale behind your decision, your writing ability, and creative/original thinking.

Appendix A

State University Freshman Orientation

Media Recommendations - First Steps Program

3,200

Incoming Freshman Students

\$3,500

Total Media Budget

10 weeks

Campaign Window (June - August)

Budget	Media Option	Average Cost Per 1000 Impressions (Adults 18+)	% of Media Audience Who Are Incoming Freshmen	Average Impressions with Adults 18+	Estimated Impressions with Incoming Freshmen	Cost Per 1000 Incoming Freshman Impressions
\$3,500.00	Social Media Ads (Instagram/TikTok) - targeting incoming freshmen ages 17-19 in State U's region	\$20.00	88.0%	175,000	154,000	\$22.73
\$3,500.00	Streaming Audio (Spotify/Pandora) - targeting college-aged listeners during summer months	\$45.00	82.0%	77,778	63,778	\$54.88
\$3,500.00	Gaming/Twitch Advertising - targeting college-aged gamers and streamers	\$60.00	75.0%	58,333	43,750	\$80.00

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Submissions are due January 24, 2026 by 11:59 PM EST and should include the following:

A written document no longer than two pages single-spaced in which you answer the following questions in support of your media recommendation. Include your name and contact information at the top of the document.

- Which of the 3 media recommendations did you select? Why?
- What factors influenced your decision about which platform would be most effective for reaching incoming freshmen during the summer?
- How does the context of summer (students at home, working summer jobs, transitioning mindset) affect your media strategy?
- What other ideas would you consider using to reach incoming freshmen before they arrive on campus?

Submit your Qualifying Round entry to the Washington Media Scholars Foundation [HERE](#).

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