

Successful Branding is Critical to Colleges and Universities Seeking to Prosper in Challenging Times

**By Kathleen Dawley, President
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The host of challenges higher education now faces are regularly reported by both professional trade publications and the general media. Fundamentally, colleges and universities of all kinds are struggling with the problems of shrinking revenues and rising costs. In a recent survey of four-year college and university presidents conducted by Maguire Associates for the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, respondents said that achieving a balanced budget is the No. 1 indicator of their success. From the perspective of the general public, most families engaged in - or even anticipating - the college search process express concerns about the rising costs of college expenses. In response, Congress has launched official government queries into the matter, focused primarily on the reasons why college and university tuition rates have increased at rates well beyond inflation for most of the last decade.

What is creating the problems of shrinking revenues and rising costs in higher education? The expenses associated with providing need-based financial aid and academic scholarships are soaring. Financial support from state and federal governments has been in decline for some time, causing both public and private institutions to work with less. The spending needed to bring - and keep - libraries, classrooms and laboratories up to date is both considerable and continuous. The pressures of deferred maintenance are significant, particularly in this centuries-old system of higher education that hosts its fair share of very old campus buildings. The price of faculty expertise is high and trending ever higher. The relatively new competition for students from for-profit institutions, exclusive providers of electronic or distributed education and corporations' own training programs has greatly expanded the range of options for students, particularly adult learners. The cost of technology is significant. And the rising costs of recruiting students domestically and from abroad in a highly competitive environment are especially notable.

In response to these challenges, and often at the urging of important board members who represent a more corporate approach to solving such problems, many colleges and universities are focusing on building and managing their institutional brands. In paying attention to brand strategy and brand management, these institutions are attempting to build more powerful, differentiated reputations and rise above the noise. They seek the benefits of a strong brand to:

- * Build interest in the institution and demand for their unique programs,
- * Foster closer, ongoing relationships with key constituencies such as alumni,
- * Help the institution command a higher price based on higher perceived value,
- * Differentiate and positively position the institution among competitors,
- * Help the institution weather changing conditions and crises, and
- * Convey immediate value to new academic programs and other offerings.

There are some folks, representing both insiders to the world of higher education and outsiders watching from a distance, who hold the opinion that branding strategy and management initiatives are not appropriate in the educational enterprise. Their impressions of branding

contain the notions of superficiality, promotion and gimmicks. Colleges and universities engaged in building and managing their brands prove much to the contrary. In fact, the right approach is marked by the notion of authenticity, with the very mission of the institution as the starting point - and as what the initiative is intended to serve best.

An institution's brand is shaped by the sum total of the expectations and promises it sets among a targeted set of constituents - and by how well it delivers on those promises. Institutions need to reaffirm their mission, vision and values, a process that finds the common ground across sometimes divergent views of the:

- * Founding mission of the institution,
- * Evolving vision of how that mission can be fulfilled in a changing world, and
- * Values that define the institution and form an important foundation on which key promises are built.

Both in-depth qualitative and quantitative research are central to this process. Through such research, colleges and universities inventory the key attributes and core capabilities that serve as the basis for making and delivering on credible promises - the DNA of reputation, image and unique positioning among competitors. This helps shape their portfolio of courses and programs to align with both their mission and the needs of the marketplace. The process supports development of a messaging system with proof points tailored to what resonates with various audiences and a visual identity system that reflects the character of the institution. Finally, it helps to shape an integrated communications plan that employs the right mix of print, digital and interpersonal communication at the right time to motivate desired engagements and actions (friendship, donations, enrollment, student persistence, employee satisfaction, research funding) from key audiences.

For example, a successful branding engagement at a Boston area college began with market research and analysis to help understand the vitality of the institution's brand in the marketplace and throughout its internal community. The research confirmed that the school's supportive environment and faculty were key drivers of student enrollment and satisfaction, but also indicated that students could be challenged even further in terms of academic rigor. This platform of important insights now serves as the foundation for integrated communications programs as well as a focused strategic planning effort within the institution. The result? This institution has enjoyed dramatic enrollment growth.

Will brand building and ongoing brand management completely solve the problems of shrinking revenues and rising costs for colleges and universities? Not quite. Higher education institutions attending to brand building and management - whether large or small, public or private - will, however, achieve greater success than they would have otherwise. As a widely-recognized carrier of positive expectations and promises to all who experience the institution and its offerings, a strong brand is synonymous with a strong, high performance institution that is better prepared to prosper in challenging times.

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