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College and university marketing strategies: In search of a sense of community

Abstract

Many institutions of higher education are undergoing an identity crisis. In years to come, such a crisis may be viewed as a salient force in the historical evolution of American higher education. The 1980s and 1990s eventually may be acknowledged as the era when colleges and universities began to pursue their unique identities in an aggressive way. The purpose of this paper is to review the marketing strategies used by institutions of higher learning to communicate their unique identities and to review the elements essential to building organizations with a sense of community.

COLLEGE AND UNIVERSITY MARKETING STRATEGIES:
IN SEARCH OF A SENSE OF COMMUNITY

A Research Paper
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Master of Arts in Education

by
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Many institutions of higher education are undergoing an identity crisis. In years to come, such a crisis may be viewed as a salient force in the historical evolution of American higher education. The 1980s and 1990s eventually may be acknowledged as the era when colleges and universities began to pursue their unique identities in an aggressive way. The purpose of this paper is to review the marketing strategies used by institutions of higher learning to communicate their unique identities and to review the elements essential to building organizations with a sense of community.

Marketing Strategy

One important factor involved in the search for identity is competition for students. In the late 1970s, the idea of retrenchment began to haunt college officials across the nation.

At that time, it was common for interpreters of the impending decline in the 18-24 "college age" population to warn capitol and campus decision makers that they should prepare for a severe enrollment decline in the 1980s and 1990s-- one that institutions should anticipate by sharply reducing expenditures for faculty, support staff, and operations of physical plant. (Dickey, Asher, and Tweddale, 1989, p. 1)

For most institutions, this fear did not become a reality. However, this fear about the impending decline did cause institutional leaders to become more aggressive in their marketing strategies to compete for the dwindling 18-24 college-age population. In addition, these leaders began to realize the increased importance of non-traditional students and included this population in their marketing plans as well.

The results of this intense marketing was evident in various college and university catalogs, bulletins, and promotional brochures. Each statement conveyed the unique emphasis and philosophy of the individual institutions. The uniqueness of Upper Iowa University (1990) was reflected in the philosophical statement that appeared in a recent promotional brochure.

A college education is more than bricks and mortar; at Upper Iowa University it's people. Any college or university has buildings, books and trees, but the thing that really counts is the people. It is a community, a family (and hopefully a caring family). Upper Iowa University is just that. Our faculty, administration and staff are here for just one purpose and that is to be the best we can for our students. At Upper Iowa you will find that everyone here is committed to the students. We care about the students not only during their stay at the university but also for their entire life. (p. 1)

Another example of communication designed to convey institutional uniqueness was provided by Wartburg College (1990) whose market emphasis is leadership training.

There is a great need in our society today for leadership--ethical leadership. Wartburg College will challenge you in every way to recognize and develop your potential for leadership. Our leadership emphasis will help you gain self-confidence; cross-cultural experiences will broaden your perspective of the world; and a mentoring program will allow you to discover the values and qualities of proven leaders. We want you to dream big dreams. Wartburg can be the first step in making your dreams a reality.
(p. 2)

The University of Iowa (1990), long recognized as a major research institution, has promoted the research ideal, even at the undergraduate level.

Iowa is a liberal arts university in the truest and best sense of that term. It is a place where you will be educated broadly not narrowly. Your spirit of inquiry will be kindled and your ability to investigate a subject thoroughly will be challenged and encouraged. We have 1,600 full-time faculty members who take pride in being learners as well as teachers. Their learning happens as they actively conduct research in their disciplines, expanding human understanding across hundreds of subject.

The fruits of their research are returned to the classroom and to their students. Discoveries too new to be published are frequently presented first to students in lectures and seminars. Iowa's classrooms become arenas for the discussion and debate of ideas, where professors entreat their students to not only [sic] grasp a concept,

but to nurture it for a while, to gather evidence to support or reject it, and then to take a stand. (p. 3)

At the University of Northern Iowa (1990), a major institutional objective has been student-faculty involvement in and out of the classroom.

Professors . . . for many, the term evokes an image of a 65-year-old gray-bearded man who, for fun, ponders whether we really exist. At the university of Northern Iowa, we have our share of philosophical professors. But our professors, you'll find, are approachable, friendly, and interesting. Because they pursue their interests, students who want to learn about a specific area may find professors who are experts in those areas.

At smaller schools, a small number of professors teach a lot of courses, so you won't find a variety of experts in diverse areas. At larger universities, faculty spend most of their time doing research, while teaching assistants (graduate students) teach the courses. For undergraduates, a medium-sized school like UNI offers the best of both. . . . Our professors play tennis, enjoy concerts, go to 'The Hill' after classes to socialize, and get together with friends to talk about sports, politics and religion. (p. 5)

These excerpts are not intended as a comprehensive description of the identities of these institutions, but instead center on certain communicated ideas used in their respective publications to establish their institutional uniqueness and identity. It is likely that a more comprehensive review of the promotional

materials of these institutions would yield similar findings.

Beginning in the late 1970s, this competitive environment gave rise to the use of strategic planning and other concepts borrowed from the business sector. It became more necessary for admissions officers to develop as efficient marketers which involved knowing their potential clientele as well as their own institution and their competition. Hossler (1988) described the aggressive techniques used to develop focused marketing strategies.

In the 1970s, offices of admissions began to use marketing techniques such as: improved publication materials; targeted mailing strategies; and telemarketing techniques to attract larger numbers of students. At the same time, senior level administrators began to utilize strategic planning techniques borrowed from business. Strategic planning incorporates market research to help organizations better understand their clients and the organization's position in relation to its competitors. (p. 47)

This emphasis upon strategic planning resulted in institutions identifying their uniqueness among the wide array of college and university programs available to the pool of potential students. In addition, this type of planning enabled institutions to create promotional materials that communicated this uniqueness

in a more definitive way. A large number of colleges and universities began to promote living-learning environments that created a sense of community. The following samples from various pieces of promotional literature substantiate this.

Walk across the 60-acre Iowa Wesleyan campus and you may see a professor sitting on a bench talking with a student. About classes. Ideas. Concerns. Even personal matters of importance to the student. Because here, a dedicated, hard-working team of faculty and staff value the ability to get to know and work with students as individuals. (Iowa Wesleyan College, n.d., p. 2)

At Simpson, we offer our students a personalized education. That means small classes and individual attention. That means professors who know you as a person, not as a number. That means an informal approach in the classroom but an overall structure that will get you where you want to go in your career or profession. (Simpson College, n.d., p. 3)

A lot of sharing goes on at Marycrest. You develop close relationships with your instructors and fellow students because they're interested in what you have experienced and who you are becoming. Marycrest faculty members encourage you to express yourself in class, and your opinions are acknowledged and valued. Your instructors are genuinely concerned about you. They want you to realize your potential and help you succeed--not just academically, but in every area of life. (Marycrest College, n.d., p. 3)

Our mission is to promote a student-centered university characterized by high academic standards, enriched learning experiences, and stimulating student-faculty-staff interaction.

We value quality, integrity, caring, and teamwork. These values are practiced through leadership and service to students, to each other, and to the university community. (University of Northern Iowa, 1994-1996, p. 21)

Establishing Community

Based on a review of literature, it appears that colleges and universities are committed to providing a learning environment in which a sense of community for students is created. Unfortunately, this type of environment is not created merely by selecting or creating appropriate promotional materials. The authors of Campus Life concluded that "the idyllic vision so routinely portrayed in college promotional materials often masks disturbing realities of student life" (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990, p. 3). Problems too frequently ignored include: student conduct, social and racial divisions, sexism, and a lack of commitment to learning. The Carnegie study also said, "If students and faculty cannot join together in common cause, if the university cannot come together in a shared vision of its central mission, how can we hope to sustain community in society at large" (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 1990, p. 3).

The process of identifying and agreeing on university goals does not occur merely by documentation or admonition. Instead, university goals are achieved when plans are made and implemented to accomplish the objectives. It is also important to identify the individuals who contribute to the living-learning environment. The role of student development professionals in establishing a sense of community should not be overlooked.

Student development professionals should have an active role in the implementation of university objectives. In fact, these professionals are key players in helping students to attain a sense of community. The Student Personnel Point of View looks at the student as a whole. The concept of education is broadened to include attention to the student's well-rounded development--physical, social, emotional, and spiritual, as well as intellectual (American Council on Education, 1949, p. 1).

Since student development professionals' jobs entail creating an environment that is conducive to the development of the whole person, they should play an active role in the design and implementation of

institutional objectives. In order to create an environment conducive to this holistic view of student development, student development personnel themselves must feel a sense of community. They must believe that the everyday activities in which they engage make significant contribution to the accomplishment of institutional objectives toward the development of students.

Research indicates that individuals who are aligned around an appropriate vision or purpose can have an extraordinary influence on their campuses. McCarthy, Pretty, and Catano (1990) suggest that a sense of community can be attained through the following four-dimensional plan.

Membership--has invested part of oneself and has a right to belong (sense of belonging, identification, and emotional safety).

Influence--believes one can affect the community and the extent to which the community can exert power over other larger systems.

Fulfillment of Needs--association within the community must be considered rewarding based on togetherness.

Shared Emotional Connection--has shared history of struggles and successes (not necessarily participated, but able to identify with the history) (p. 214).

Metanoic Organizations

Many organizations do not give enough attention to aligning individual and institutional purposes. They assume there must be a sense of community as long as other objectives are accomplished and as long as the majority of personnel appears to be fulfilled. Kiefer and Senge (1984) propose a model, borrowed from the business sector, which seems to hold the necessary elements, administered properly, to attain a true sense of community. They illustrate the dynamics of the model using the analogy of a championship rowing crew.

The elements of a metanoic organization are similar to those of a championship crew. It starts with *talent*, people who have mastered the *skills* and developed the *power* to excel as individuals. But good rowers are not enough. Winning next week's race might encourage better-than-average performance, but if you want great performance you must have a great goal. Championship performance comes only from striving for the championship. To excel, the team must have a *purpose* or *vision* that is both challenging and lasting because the ability to achieve peak performance develops over time.

Moreover, the rowers must row together. Translation of the individual's commitment and resources into collective accomplishment requires *alignment* of individual energies. Many people

with individual talent find rowing with others a difficult and frustrating task; but when the crew starts to gel, something very exciting happens. Each individual is aware of a new dimension or feeling, as all eight blades strike the water in unison. There comes a rush of power as everyone recognizes how much more they can accomplish collectively. As alignment strengthens, individuals find themselves progressively more aware of and attuned to each other, sometimes to the point during peak performance where each experiences himself [sic] mystically as the entire team. (p. 2)

A properly working metanoic organization consists of:

1. Purposefulness and Vision
2. Alignment
3. Personal Ability and Mastery
4. Attention to Organizational Design
5. Intuition and Emotional Stability

The metanoic organization's ultimate strength is its belief in the creative power of highly aligned individuals. At its essence is the realization of the extraordinary power of a group committed to a common vision. In metanoic organizations people don't assume they are powerless. They know and believe in the power of visioning, the power of the individual to determine his [sic] own destiny. Through responsible participation, organizational members empower each other and ultimately their institutions and society, thereby making life meaningful and satisfying for everyone. (Keifer and Senge, 1984, p. 3)

Student development divisions can benefit by adapting metanoic principles into their plans and organizational structures. The most obvious advantage

of the metanoic framework for student development is the emphasis on unity of purpose. An examination of the elements of a metanoic framework reveals the methodology for implementation.

Purposefulness and Vision. Attention must be directed toward the communication of the educational mission statement. Equally important, a methodology for communication must be planned to relate significant departmental goals and vision to a variety of constituencies. The importance of communicating the vision should not be overlooked. The ultimate vision of student development is the development and maturation of each student--physically, emotionally, intellectually, spiritually, and socially. Each individual of the department needs to be reminded continually of this service-related vision. If student development divisions are to be effective, they must have a unified purpose that allows them to function on common ground. This common ground also serves as a barometer of individual effectiveness.

Alignment. In constructing an effective student development department, care should be exercised in hiring and promoting individuals who believe in the

goals and vision of the institution. Alignment has been described as the "condition wherein people act as part of a whole while recognizing both their individual purpose and their commitment to a common purpose" (Kiefer and Senge, 1984, p. 5). People have a desire to express themselves in ways that are satisfying and fulfilling. One way to assure this personal satisfaction is to affiliate themselves with an organization whose purpose is aligned with their own. Conversely, individual actions will assist institutions in accomplishing institutional objectives as well. Emphasis must be placed on hiring individuals who share a belief in institutional goals and philosophy. As Kiefer and Senge (1984) have suggested, "Alignment is a natural by-product of focusing on a lofty result; it is unlikely to be achieved by trying to become aligned" (p. 7).

Personal Ability and Mastery. In metanoic organizations each individual's performance reflects upon the whole. Since most individuals have a need to feel vital and useful, an atmosphere that allows individuals to develop, improve, and utilize their individual talents is essential. Too often student

development divisions put structures in place that maintain the status quo rather than give opportunity for individuals to make contributions based on individual talent and skill.

Attention to Organizational Design. A traditional concept of organizational structure centers on the reporting relationships outlined by an organizational chart. While reporting is a key communication link in organizational systems, it is not the end product. Kiefer and Senge (1984) described the relatively simple organizational design of a metanoic organization.

Instead, metanoic organizations tend to promote simplicity as an effective approach to increasingly complex situations. They frequently utilize small, autonomous work units in which everyone understands the system and his [sic] role in it. People operate under a few, simple, widely understood and agreed upon goals and rules, whereby everyone knows where he [sic] is and where he's [sic] going and accepts responsibility for himself [sic] and others. (p. 10)

In order for people to feel a sense of "community," they must believe they can affect their environment. Consequently, even small committees must understand that as part of the whole their input is valuable and meaningful.

Intuition and Emotional Stability. Intuition is described as knowledge gained by using means other than

the senses or deductive reasoning. Kiefer and Senge (1984) explained that metanoic organizations seek to develop a balance between intuition and rational analysis.

Intuition is inherent in a highly aligned group. As individuals deepen their intuitive awareness of each other, activities fall into an easy, almost unconscious synchronization. Diverse projects come together in a natural and extraordinarily efficient way that goes beyond the level of coordination that could be planned rationally. It is as if each individual knew what was going on in the rest of the organization and executed his [sic] part at the exact and most appropriate moment to unconsciously maximize [sic] the efficiency of the whole. (p. 12)

It is possible, utilizing a metanoic system, to have a student development division that is unified in purpose, vision, and capability. However, it will not happen automatically. Appropriate administrative planning and shared vision must be developed and implemented. The ultimate reward for this type of preparation would surely be the successful achievement of institutional goals and the development of students and staff alike.

Summary

Success in establishing a sense of community ultimately will be determined by students. College and university promotional materials carry many claims, but

it is students who determine if those claims are valid in the final analysis. It has been demonstrated empirically that satisfied students are the best advertisements and recruiters for an institution. If students, then, do not feel a sense of community, finding the claims in promotional materials to be merely rhetoric, they may just as surely become negative advertisements for an institution. Many institutions experience high attrition rates because of student unrest and dissatisfaction, factors which are usually related to a feeling of "not belonging." A sense of community can be established and maintained in large part by a properly administered and functioning student development department. The metanoic model examined in this paper, although not the only workable model, contains the elements to establish such a department. Whatever model is followed, successful systems contain certain fundamental elements.

Purpose. Personnel understand the departmental goals and objectives. These goals should be communicated and actively supported by the President and other leaders of the institution. The goals should

be student oriented and the measuring criteria on which all departmental actions are based.

Unity. Personnel need to understand and feel that they are an integral part of the department. They should have the opportunity to share fully in departmental goal setting and decision making.

Mastery. Attention should be directed toward hiring people who are competent and professional. These people also should be encouraged and directed toward continuous improvement of their skills and increased knowledge.

Organizational Design. An organizational structure must be established that allows individuals to believe their input is valued and important to their work environment. This structure should include well-defined methods for effective communication as well.

Attention to Creative Ability. Personnel should be challenged to explore new ways to accomplish college goals continuously. The total student development division should experience and believe that individual accomplishments reflect upon the whole department.

Maintenance. A variety of vehicles such as retreats, conferences, committee meetings, and

togetherness nights should be scheduled to promote the continuing idea of unity of purpose. The department will develop a sense of community if attention is directed toward that goal.

A student development department that is fully functional and directed toward the fulfillment of institutional goals will help to establish a sense of community in the student body. When that sense of community is present, the students will serve as primary promoters of the special identity of the institution. This commitment to establish an environment conducive to learning along with the aspiration of becoming a unique, institutional community are inter-related. Both of these goals are achievable only when the college or university "family" comprehends and accepts the concept of "who they are." The comprehension and realization of institutional goals does not occur merely through documentation or admonition. Instead, these goals are achieved successfully through adequate planning and incorporating the building of community into the broader institutional objectives and strategic plan.

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