Playing to your Strengths

State Colleges and Universities Know that Differentiation Matters

Last summer, Gallup polled U.S. college and university presidents, in part asking about their institution’s purpose, brand and culture. The survey found that many higher education leaders use the same words and phrases to describe these things.

As John Hitt, president of the University of Central Florida, points out, this isn’t too surprising, since the underlying mission of any higher education institution is to transmit and apply knowledge.
We’ve all seen the great success with and endurance of the classic tripartite mission of landgrant institutions, which is teaching, research and service, and we’ve applied those rather uncritically to our mission statements,” Hitt says.

So what does this mean for prospective students trying to determine which institution is right for them? What does it mean for the communities and regions in which college and universities reside that each have their own needs? Public higher education institutions have always tried to focus on what best serves their students and community, but that imperative has only intensified in recent years.

“No longer can we sell that a college or master’s degree will get you further in life,” says John Roberson, CEO of Advent, which creates brand spaces for higher education institutions. “We have to sell and tell why a degree here will impact you more positively.”

That means not only offering the programs and degrees that benefit students and communities, but also marketing that differentiation. Beyond any performance-based funding realities, higher education institutions must do this to stay relevant in their regions.

“If we just uncritically say our mission is teaching, research and service, without defining how we will go about those and why that matters to the place we’re in,” says Hitt, “I think we are missing an opportunity and probably not doing our jobs as well as we could.”

Determining the Differentiator

Some institutions have specified missions ingrained in their founding that still guide them today. The University of Wisconsin-Stout evolved from lumber company owner James Huff Stout’s long-term need for a workforce with a strong background in applied learning. His vocational education school eventually became UW-Stout, which is now the UW system’s polytechnic university.

To this day, UW-Stout is responsive to employers in the area. The university uses a program director model for course and degree curricula, which focuses on the needs of the employer, while also meeting all the requirements for general education as well as the university’s global learning and diversity requirements.

“I think we have a very responsive curriculum,” Chancellor Bob Meyer says. The data back up this assertion: The placement rate for UW-Stout graduates is currently 97.1 percent.

The University of Wisconsin System has done a good job of differentiating its universities based on their geography and immediate employment base. For example, UW-Milwaukee, near Lake Michigan, has a water studies focus, UW-River Falls focuses on agriculture and biological and environmental sciences, and UW-Stevens Point is known for its study of wood fibers and paper products, a big industry in the state.
The Value of High-Impact Educational Practices in Differentiation

Leaders looking to develop a new program or update an existing one are wise to consider incorporating high-impact educational practices into it. These practices are helping to catapult students into real-world success. Such practices are discussed in detail in the 2007 book *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter*, written by George Kuh and published by the Association of American Colleges & Universities. In the book, Kuh presents National Survey of Student Engagement data about the practices and explains why they seem to particularly benefit underserved students, who are also least likely to be exposed to them. The practices are:

- First-year seminars and experiences
- Common intellectual experiences
- Learning communities
- Writing-intensive courses
- Collaborative assignments and projects
- Undergraduate research
- Diversity/global learning
- Service learning, community-based learning
- Internships
- Capstone courses and projects

California State University, Monterey Bay’s Undergraduate Research Opportunities Center (UROC) launched in 2009 with high-impact practices in mind. UROC offers undergraduate students research-related workshops and seminars and then helps place them in paid research positions so they can put theory into practice.

The program has grown in both staff and funding “because of the growing recognition that providing opportunities for deep engagement, and especially higher-impact practices, has the potential to transform student learning and academic opportunities for the future,” says UROC Director John Banks. “Undergraduate research is one of many high-impact practices people are focusing on these days.”

UROC is working with other units on campus to explore combinations of high-impact practices—to see whether or not there are synergies that occur when students engage in more than one of these deep engagement activities,” says Banks. Already, UROC combines intensive writing practices with undergraduate research in the two-year UROC Scholars program. And UROC staff are considering combining undergraduate research with service learning—a requirement for all CSUMB students—and offering more research opportunities in other countries.

“There is increasing evidence suggesting that the earlier the better for these sort of engagement practices,” Banks says. “So another thing we’re doing at UROC and CSUMB in general is trying to get students engaged in high-impact practices as soon as realistically possible.”

Sometimes a program that starts small can end up helping to differentiate an institution. In Maryland, Salisbury University began an entrepreneurship competition in 1987 at the behest of a local entrepreneur who had trouble raising the initial $5,000 he needed to start his business. That amount was the competition’s prize for its first 25 years.

Today, the prize pool has grown to $30,000, and the students taking part are more likely to bring their business plans to fruition. Probably related to that fact, the local business community has become much more involved.

“We have gone from having four judges from the business community to having almost 40 judges from the business community,” says Bill Burke, director of entrepreneurial activities at Salisbury. “Those business community representatives have become mentors and individuals who would encourage and motivate the students to turn their business plans into an actual business.”

Burke sees the entrepreneurship competition as a way to distinguish and brand the university—the entrepreneurship-focused TV show *Shark Tank* has used the university as one of its audition sites for two years running—but it’s also serving a community service. That’s because the university allows sponsors, such as the city of Salisbury and local businesses, to create their own competition within the university’s competition. So, as faculty members select the university’s winner, the city and local businesses choose their winners, who get separate prize amounts, using their own criteria.

Community and business partnerships have been UCF’s focus from the beginning, and particularly under President Hitt’s tenure. He notes that the university was founded to serve the space and defense industries, which still loom large in the area. In 2013, the university announced its commitment to serving the needs of its region by branding itself America’s Partnership University.

One of UCF’s latest partnerships is with Osceola County, which has invested $61 million to help fund a new manufacturing institute. “We’ve got a long-term lease to manage and operate the project for them,” Hitt says. “We think it’s going to produce thousands of high-tech jobs in Central Florida.”

Like “partnership” has become synonymous with UCF, “marine sciences” might come to mind when thinking about California State University, Monterey Bay (CSUMB). In 2009, the university took this research focus a step further by creating the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Center (UROC) in an effort to deeply engage undergraduates through mentored research projects in any discipline. UROC has been a success on multiple fronts, as evidenced by the number of Ph.Ds., master’s, and prestigious graduate fellowships UROC students have gone on to earn.

The program isn’t an island unto itself, however. UROC staff work with departments across the university to build out curricular changes that will increase research activities in various courses. “A lot of our funding is leveraged and distributed across campus in the form of capacity building,” says John Banks, UROC’s director. “For example, equipment that they could use in their classrooms to build some research component. What we do is not just this intense training of a select few.”
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Getting the Word Out

Marketing how an institution differs from its peers is critical. In some cases, showcasing that differentiation via a campus building or installation sends a strong message.

“I believe our audience these days—millennials and Generation Z—are particularly driven toward an experience,” says Advent’s Roberson. “The printed material has to be differentiated, but I also believe that our primary audience of millennials and Generation Z are not moved much by printed material.”

Advent recently worked with the University of Western Kentucky on the construction of the Honors College and International Center. Before this building, the honors program was run out of a house and a double-wide trailer in the backyard of the house, and the study abroad program was tucked away in a classroom in the business college.

“If we are truly going to be a leading American university with international reach, we needed to have space where people knew where to go if they wanted that international experience,” says Craig Cobane, WKU’s executive director of the Honors College and chief international officer. The building has 20 flagpoles in front for the 20 countries from which the current international students hail. “There’s just no missing the international statement that this building makes.”

And because the Honors College also needed more space—and Cobane runs both programs and honors students are likely to study abroad—it made sense to house the Honors College in the new building as well. “Our ability to take guests through the building means that now the building has become a recruiting tool, not just for the Honors College but for WKU also,” Cobane says.

At Salisbury, the university added an entrepreneurship living and learning community this academic year, which further highlights the university’s focus on helping its students start their own businesses. Students in the community take field trips to the downtown business districts of Easton, Berlin, Ocean City and Salisbury to meet with business owners in those areas, and the university hosts low-key networking events at the living and learning community. “It starts to stimulate the whole thought process about starting businesses at a younger level, and opportunities that might be available in the community,” Burke says.

For Meyer at UW-Stout, the 97.1 percent placement rate affirms that the university is doing what it should, and enrollment is also healthy. “This is the second year in a row that we are at record enrollment,” Meyer says. “People are seeing there’s value in what we are doing.”

Determining and Maintaining the Comparative Advantage

Even though UW-Stout has always specialized in educating and training its students for jobs in the community, Meyer continues to focus on meeting that goal through regular strategic planning processes that include all stakeholders. “We have a visioning session that bring in our employers, community leaders, and even state leaders to help inform us as to what should we be looking for around the bend,” he says.

Banks emphasizes that community engagement has to come not just from the presidential level. Faculty and staff have valuable insight to gain from and offer to their communities. He says that through the reappointment, tenure and promotion process, CSUMB encourages faculty to engage more at the community level. This engagement then filters to students.

When determining comparative advantage, it’s helpful to choose something that the institution can control instead of something that is subject to many external factors or regulations, Cobane says. “With honors we control everything,” he says. “There are no state or national regulations. Same with study abroad, within reason of safety.”

Hitt points out that sometimes this discussion of advantage and differentiation stems from brand definition or enhancement activities. That’s because at its root, a brand is a promise to deliver on an institution’s mission statement and key values.

“We’re all concerned about brand and how do we enhance our brand,” Hitt says. “Well, if a brand is a promise to do something, we better be sure it’s a promise to do something that’s consistent with who we are and what we hope to bring to be.”

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