



The Enrollment Management and Marketing Nexus (Part I)

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Enrollment and marketing outcomes share a symbiotic relationship. Yet the practice of each in higher education can be quite disjointed and even dysfunctional. Rarely is there organizational alignment, integrated planning, coordinated and synergistic implementation, or effective evaluation of related strategies between enrollment management and institutional marketing departments. At institutions where this phenomenon is compounded by the independent marketing, recruitment, or retention efforts by other administrative and academic units, the result is counterproductive chaos.

The natural consequences of this condition are a blurred institutional image, under-realized enrollment opportunities, duplication of effort, inefficient use of scarce resources, internal confusion, and an external perception that the college or university is poorly managed. Any institution yoked with such consequences can never fully optimize enrollment or marketing potential.

Contrary to Tom Peters' popularized business theory, the academy does not thrive in chaos (Peters, 1987). The conditions that dilute our brand and our capacity to recruit and retain students must be addressed. Put simply, the critical nexus between enrollment management and marketing must be honed to yield a finely tuned, high performing enterprise.

This three part series will focus on the three fundamental components of this nexus: (1) institutional branding, (2) delivering on the promise of the brand, and (3) an optimal academic program mix. Part I addresses institutional branding.

Throughout this series of white papers, we will explore the elements of each as well as related strategies. Regarding the latter, the emphasis will be on what Kim and Mauborgne (2005) call “blue ocean” strategies. In their book, *Blue Ocean Strategy*, the authors describe companies competing with marginal differences in products, services, and strategies as “red ocean” competitors—companies feverishly fighting over small increases in market share. Conversely, “blue ocean” strategies are those that allow an organization to “leapfrog” over the multitude of competitors in the same sector. For colleges and universities, this translates to staking claim to a unique market position.

If your school is struggling to shape its image or maximize enrollment opportunities, Part I of this series offers valuable insights that can be adapted to any institutional type as well as to any enrollment or marketing environment. While much of what follows is intuitive, some of the ideas presented here will challenge preconceived notions and common practice.

Institutional Branding

In a higher education context, your brand refers to the sum of what people think of and expect from your institution (Lull & Thiebolt, 2004). The purpose of

institutional branding is to shift from an unknown, indistinct, or undesirable brand to a compelling, positive brand affinity. There are five stages necessary to effectively transform an institutional brand: (1) understanding constituent needs, (2) segmenting a college or university's market, (3) identifying brand attributes, (4) positioning the brand effectively among competitors, and (5) communicating the essence of the brand with relevance to each market segment.

Constituent Needs

In a recent white paper by Ken Steele, senior vice president of education and marketing with the Academica Group, Steele asserts that academic institutions are reluctant to stand for anything concrete, focused, and marketplace specific (2008, May). Instead, academics and administrators are more comfortable having their school being known as “student-centered,” offering “academic excellence,” engaging in “world-class research,” or simply being “convenient” and “affordable”—how true and how bland. While these notions may have internal appeal, Steele rightfully concludes that they do nothing to help prospective students decide on a college or university.

Effective institutional branding can never be totally introspective. Admittedly, your brand must align with the institution's mission, vision, and values. Equally as important, the brand must be grounded in truth (University Business Staff, 2008, December). Brand claims must mirror brand experiences. All that said, a brand that does not align with constituent needs simply will not matter. Without

relevance to those you serve, your brand may look good in the president's annual report, but it will not influence enrollment decisions or your institution's image.

The foundation for understanding constituent needs is sound data. Perception or image studies, market opportunity analyses, demand analyses, and needs assessments represent the most common methods of collecting such data. Most colleges and universities also possess powerful student information systems chock-full of insights into the course, programmatic, and service needs of current and former students. Mining this data will provide a keen understanding of existing needs while foreshadowing future needs.

Regardless of the chosen methodology, the key to finding actionable brand intelligence is to begin with framing the right research questions. In terms of student needs, the following research questions are recommended:

- Who do we serve?
- What are their learning needs?
- What are their educational objectives?
- When, where, and how can we best meet or exceed their needs?

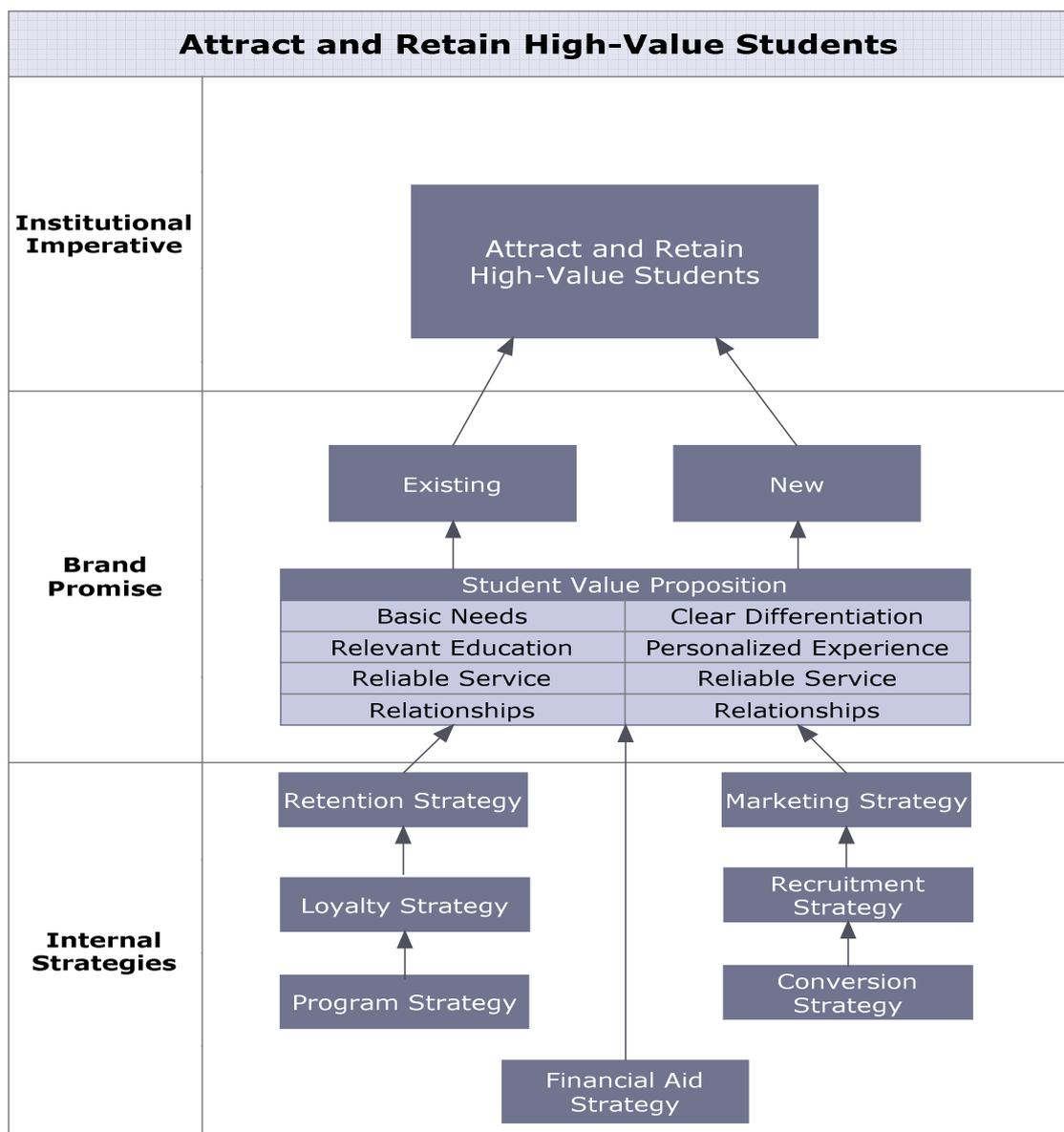
Once you identify the research questions, the next step is to select an appropriate methodology. There are multiple ways to address these seemingly simple questions. To illustrate, data collection for the first question could include:

(1) a comprehensive profile of the entire student body and possibly recent alumni, (2) a profile of successful students with “successful” being defined by the institution, (3) a profile of students who meet their intended educational objective, or (4) a profile of students the institution values most.

Using the last option to describe how data analysis might occur, consider the definition of a high-value student to your institution. Is the definition based on a business metric such as net revenue or potential financial contributions over a lifetime; an academic metric like potential to contribute diversity to the academic environment or probability of degree completion; or an enrollment metric such as populations contributing the most full-time equivalencies, credit hours, or enrollments in undersubscribed programs? In all likelihood, high-value students will be defined by some combination of business, academic, and enrollment metrics. After defining high-value students, analyze the data to determine common attributes as well as their demonstrated needs.

An example of how to transform the aforementioned analysis into actionable brand intelligence is depicted in the following graph. In this example, there is an institutional imperative—attracting and retaining high-value students, which should be accompanied by specific enrollment targets or goals for each high-value population. Using the institution’s brand promise as a lens, value propositions are defined for new and existing students. These value propositions should be unique to each high-value student population—essentially a version of

market segmentation. Value propositions are based on your best understanding of constituent needs and can be translated into relevant, audience-specific communications as well as into strategies as conveyed in the lower portion of the graph. The net result of such process is highly focused, impactful communications and strategies that will yield optimal enrollment and marketing outcomes.



The most successful institutional brands go beyond accounting for constituent needs. They are driven by constituent needs. Identified needs frame value propositions, which are used to purposefully guide strategy development and execution.

Market Segmentation

Segmentation is the true power of marketing. Accordingly to Huddleston and Ivanova (2004), the simplest method of identifying the market segments with the most potential is to analyze the patterns of applications and enrollments of current students. Of course, there are other methods you could adopt. The high-value student methodology explained in the previous section represents another option. Regardless of the methodology, the goal is the same—identify a manageable number of segments (usually five to seven) for concentrated brand strategies and communications.

Based on the work of Kotler and Armstrong (2001), Huddleston and Ivanova (2004), and others, there are four segmentation categories to consider:

1. Geographic
2. Demographic
3. Psychographic
4. Behavioral

Geographic segmentation is usually framed around the students' residency: in-state/in-province, out-of-state/out-of-province, and international. A more granular iteration of this method consists of segmenting by geo-markets within these larger geographic areas. The value of a geo-market approach is the opportunity to hone messages, target recruitment outreach, purchase lists more effectively, and advertise strategically. Another methodology to consider is to delineate geographic segmentation by the institution's primary, secondary, and tertiary markets. For institutions that have primary, secondary, and tertiary markets that overlap natural geographic boundaries, this approach is recommended. Strategies targeted at geographic segments often include differentiated communications, scholarships, promotion of academic program niches, and customized recruitment outreach.

Demographic segmentation allows marketing and recruitment personnel to consider differences such as gender, age, race and ethnicity, socio-economic status, occupation, education levels, and religion. Often motivators and barriers to enrollment will vary by demographic segment. Addressing these differences in marketing efforts will increase the probability of influencing choice. Steele (2008, May) uses the term "brand assurance" to convey that the college selection process is like most consumer decisions in that decisions are primarily driven by emotional factors and trust in the institution. For many students, an institution "just feels right" or it doesn't. They simply cannot articulate an intellectual process used to select a school. Because emotional factors are critical to college

selection, an institution's ability to connect with potential students on a basic level—their demographic identity—largely determines conversion rates.

Psychographic segmentation refers to a student's social class, lifestyle, and personality. Of the four segmentation approaches, this is the most powerful. It is also the most difficult to implement. The problem inherent in this approach is accessing accurate information about student-specific psychographic characteristics. The simple answer to this dilemma is to ask students. How to do this effectively is more problematic. Surveying, inquiry card or application questions, telecounseling, Web polling, and admission interviews are possible solutions to this challenge. Once the psychographic profile is created, customized communication streams and outreach activities must integrate this information in subtle but relevant ways.

Behavioral segmentation in an academic context refers to learner objectives. The behavioral segmentation scheme developed by Rogers, Finley, and Kline (2001) provides insight into the characteristics of learner segments.

1. *Career-Oriented Segment*: Learners who are attending an educational institution in order to prepare for future careers.
2. *Curiosity-Driven Segment*: Students whose quest for knowledge represents their ultimate goal.
3. *Socio-Economic Advantage Segment*: Learners seeking the status of obtaining a university or college degree.

4. *Stepper Segment*: Learners who want to build on their first degree, certificate, or diploma with additional educational credentials.
5. *Undecided Segment*: Individuals who do not know specifically why they are attending a college or university.
6. *Dual-Purpose Segment*: Learners interested in pursuing their primary objective (e.g., athletics, performing arts, delayed entry into the workforce) while obtaining a college or university degree.

In addition to these behavioral segments, others to consider include learners seeking professional development or personal enrichment course work or training.

By knowing the learner's objective, marketing and recruiting professionals can provide information and guidance that is meaningful to the recipient. Strategies utilizing learner objective-oriented information, position the institution as a partner in the student's educational journey—providing tailored solutions rather than generic content. This approach is effective for all types of institutions but particularly at community colleges.

Other segmentation options include:

1. *Student Type Segment*: Examples of possible segments include dual enrollment, high school graduates, delayed entry students, transfers, online learners, and stop-outs. Strategies are both marketing-oriented and

process-oriented. Marketing messages, visuals, and communication mediums reflect the student population the institution desires to attract. Enrollment processes unique to the transitional phase of each segment are explained and coaching through each stage of the process is provided.

2. *Program Segment:* Segmentation of marketing messages, information, and human interactions are defined by the student's program of interest. Ideally, this segmentation approach requires differentiation of strategies, effort, and resources based on a combination of institutional capacity and student demand. Programs with high demand and unused capacity receive the highest priority for institutional investment of human resources and marketing funds. These high priority programs are followed by programs with moderate demand and unused capacity, then programs with low demand and unused capacity, and lastly, programs where demand exceeds capacity.
3. *Influencer Segment:* This approach focuses on the influencer of the college selection process, not the potential student directly. For traditional-age students, the most important influencer is their parents. Other influencers include peers, other family members, guidance counselors, teachers, coaches, and employers. For adult learners, the most powerful influencer is often their employer. They also may be influenced by their spouse, other family members, friends, and business associates. The

challenge with this segmentation method is identifying and reaching student influencers.

No matter which segments are selected by your institution, you are encouraged to begin with a phased-in approach with each stage getting more granular. For example, a generic solution for high school students would be a year one activity. In year two, drill down into the high school population by creating tailored strategies and communication for dual enrollment students, individuals who are in the tenth grade and younger, high school juniors, and high school seniors. In year three, segment these sub-populations by geographic, demographic, psychographic, or behavioral characteristics. To achieve this level of granularity, adequate staffing (the number of people with the right skill sets) and technology (e.g., CRM software, instant messaging, or blogging capabilities) are necessary.

Brand Attributes

Ries and Trout assert that brands are developed around a single overarching attribute—preferably one that is credible, relevant to institutional constituents, and distinctly different from key competitors (2001). Said attribute represents your brand and should thematically guide the selection of secondary attributes. These secondary attributes, often referred to as selling points or proof points, should provide evidence to support the brand promise.

A two-tiered approach is recommended to the selection of proof points. First, identify **institutional selling points** that reflect the characteristics previously cited—credibility, relevance, and distinctiveness. Credibility is determined by the degree to which promotional claims align with institutional facts and student experiences. As previously inferred, relevance refers to alignment with constituent needs. And, distinctiveness means unique among your direct competitor set.

Second, develop **program-specific selling points** (three to five per program). These selling points should be developed with input from faculty and students in each program. Regarding the former, do not expect faculty to be marketers. They are the content experts and as such know the program, the job market, and natural competitors better than anyone. However, translating this knowledge to useful marketing information is a leap that few can make without the guidance of a skilled marketing professional. Interview faculty and students to glean the information needed to develop program selling points.

Brand Positioning

Brand positioning is both an art and a science. An institution's brand position must ring true to your internal and external constituents while effectively separating the school from its key competitors.

Steele suggests that an institution's position must fit within an existing "brand footprint"—the perceived reality in the minds of prospective students and others you serve (2008, May). Consequently, to develop a brand position, you must first know the perceived reality that exists for your institution. Perception studies and focus group interviews are frequently used to establish this baseline. From this baseline, a single position must be identified, which requires surrendering alternative options (Reis & Trout, 2001).

With a single brand position selected, the institution is ready to assess its comparative position among competitors. This comparison should encompass all of the tenets and potential permutations of the brand position. According to research conducted annually by the Academica Group with some 100,000 Canadian admission applicants, there are five institutional positioning styles, each with distinct college choice factors (Steele, 2008, May).

1. *Elite Positioning*: Institutions adopting this positioning style rely on their academic reputation and the quality of students they admit. Relevant competitor comparisons include prestige, academic rigor, admission selectivity, quality of faculty, and quality of academic programs.
2. *Outcome Positioning*: This positioning style focuses on what happens to students and graduates as the result of their educational experience. Competitor comparisons consist of jobs placement rates; graduate and professional school acceptances; participation in co-ops, internships, and other field experiences; as well as student and alumni satisfaction.

3. *Campus Positioning*: A positioning style that celebrates the campus environment engages in competitor comparisons on factors such as campus attractiveness, quality of facilities, safety, extracurricular activities, the social and recreational environment, and the surroundings.
4. *Nurturing Positioning*: In this positioning style, the institution is generally viewed as student-centered. Factors worthy of competitor comparisons include friendliness, caring faculty, small class size, respect for individuality, academic support, and focus on student success.
5. *Commodity Positioning*: Among the five positioning styles, this one is the least desirable because many of the brand attributes are outside the control of the institution and are primarily nonacademic. Students selecting commodity schools do so on the basis of factors such as convenience, proximity to home or work, affordability, availability of financial assistance, cost of living, and major offered. Competitor comparisons should incorporate these factors.

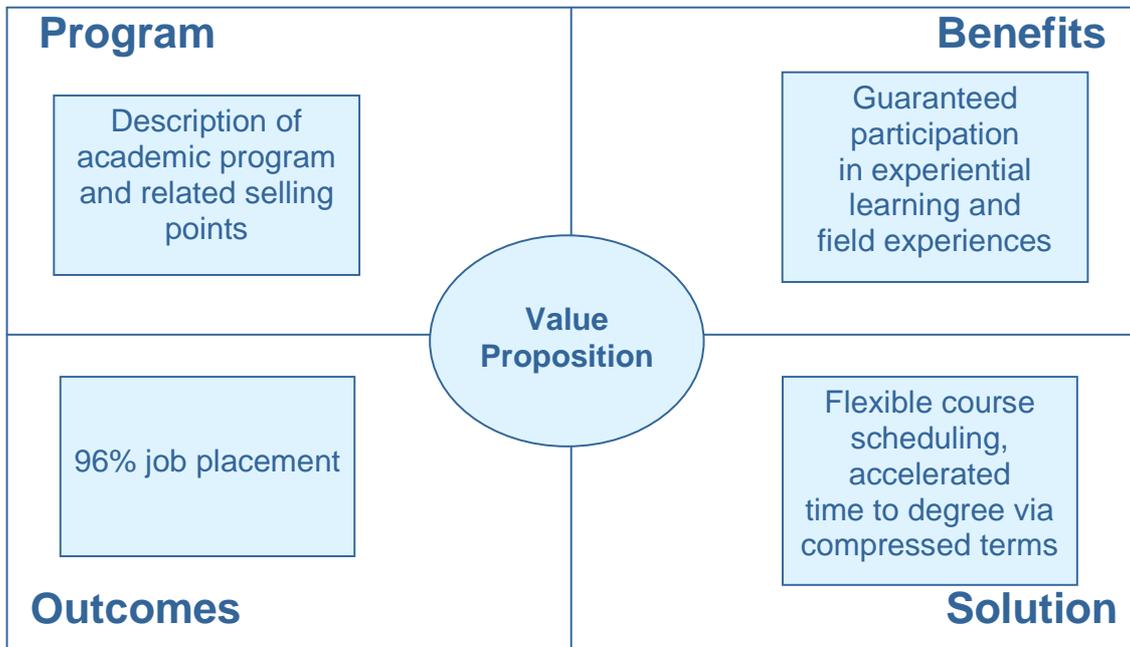
When the institutional position has been identified and its relative position among competitors determined, the task of exploiting institutional strengths and mitigating weaknesses or gaps among competitors begins. Lull and Thiebolt provide useful insights for enrollment managers and marketing professionals in regard to promoting the brand position (2004).

First, they claim that institutional differences need not be unique. By this, the authors refer to the failure of competitors to exploit a benefit similar to a benefit offered by your institution. Second, combinations can create distinctiveness, which primarily means packaging common student benefits or institutional offerings uniquely. Third, the most powerful differences can appear disguised as problems. If your institution has provided a solution to the community, industry, or a sector of the population, you may have an opportunity to differentiate your institution from its competitors. Finally, messages need not be identical to be consistent. While messages may vary somewhat depending on the style and orientation of the messenger or the characteristics and needs of a particular audience, the “drumbeat” must remain the same. Frequency and repetition are essential to penetrating the overwhelming volume of stimuli in the higher education marketplace.

Relevant Communication

Recognizing that relevance is determined by the prospective student recipient of a communication, not by the institution, is the first step to developing and delivering compelling brand communications. To be relevant, communications must address constituent needs and ideally be delivered at the point in the decision-making process when the content conveyed informs decisions and motivates the recipient to take action.

Relevance is virtually guaranteed when communications translate institutional offerings, benefits, and outcomes into a solution—solving a specific need of the recipient. Simply describing an academic program and related benefits, for example, is less likely to influence a prospective student than connecting the program and its benefits to a problem or opportunity the individual is facing. An illustration of solutions-oriented relevance for an adult seeking to complete a degree while balancing family and work obligations with course work is depicted in the following communications map.



Develop solutions-oriented communications maps for each of the institution's market segments to ensure communications are relevant. By packaging the offering, the benefits, the outcomes, and the solution into a well-defined value proposition, recipients are much more likely to respond to the institution's pitch and eventually enroll.

Conclusion

Institutional branding is most effective when constituent needs drive the branding effort, important market segments are identified along with related enrollment motivators and barriers; brand attributes for the institution and individual programs are customized for each segment; the brand positioning is credible, relevant, and distinctive; and communications are designed around a relevant value proposition. At the risk of sounding formulaic, these ingredients, if implemented well, yield a sharper, more compelling image. Ultimately, these ingredients position an institution to seize enrollment opportunities while protecting against adverse environmental forces.

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