

Are Colleges and Universities Commodities or Something More?

By Don Sutherland

On May 2, *Inside Higher Ed* ran an [article](#) concerning colleges' inability to differentiate themselves from their peers.

In her piece, Ellen Wexler begins, "In its brochures, a college is never just a college. A college is a gateway, or a Launchpad, or a training ground."

She continues, "Condensed into a few words, college's missions are similar, and the concrete elements of college life become less so..."

She goes on to provide an example related to what it means to attend one institution according to its website, an example where two colleges provide nearly identical messages, and the case of a school's new logo that failed to impress.

These generic messages raise a basic question: Are colleges and universities commodities or are they something more?

The lack of differentiation highlighted in the article expresses the unintended message that institutions of higher education are, in fact, commodities. That perception has potentially large implications. For example, if colleges are essentially the same, then cost ought to be the primary determinant of college choice. Of course, if such rationale were widely adopted, it would have substantial adverse consequences ranging from foregone student learning outcomes to reduced opportunities for college graduates.

Elite and flagship institutions do a great job in branding themselves. The others need to do much better.

To do so, they need an intimate understanding as to whom they serve, how they serve them, and what story they wish to tell, before they even begin to brand themselves. They need to connect that understanding and that desired narrative to the needs and desires of the people and communities they serve. Their story must be based on the actual value they provide to those they serve. That value needs to be sufficiently unique and compelling so that those whom they serve become champions of those schools in broadcasting that value. It needs to be truthful and it needs to inspire.

Furthermore, if there is a gap between what a school is today and the story it wishes to tell, that gap offers an opportunity for innovation, improvement, and renewal. Finding such opportunities can also strengthen a school's accreditation reporting.

A healthy dose of creativity and imagination can be valuable when it comes to framing messages, but the underlying substance should already be in place. Otherwise, the message will not be credible and the brand will not be self-sustaining.

A good question to start the idea generation for developing a brand is, “[Name of college or university] is a place where _____.”

The audience should be unique. The outcome should be something the college does very well backed by concrete evidence. The message should be something around which those targeted can relate. It should motivate them to build or strengthen relationships with the school.

The more often the story is told, the deeper those relationships grow. The deeper those relationships become, the more powerful the brand grows. Over time, the brand can differentiate a school in a fashion that is sustainable over a long period of time. Such differentiation can profoundly impact all aspects of the school’s activities ranging from enrollment to on-campus recruitment by employers.

In the end, very few within the Higher Education community would embrace the notion that their schools are bland commodities or that their work is little different from that found throughout the universe of Higher Education. Many, in fact, would object strongly, and rightly so.

What makes a school special should be branded appropriately.