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Communicating You Are Worth It in a Noisy Marketplace

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Communicating You Are Worth It in a Noisy Marketplace

Abstract

This paper provides guidance and specific examples of common elements needed for communicating the value proposition of liberal arts colleges to prospective students and families. In an environment where the worth of a college degree is questioned daily by the public and the mainstream media, this paper demonstrates how strategies that are distinctive, rooted in research and complementary to the institutional brand are imperative for communicating the worth of an institution. The paper suggests tactics to develop the key partnerships needed and provides metrics for how leaders can assess their value proposition initiatives.

Keywords

enrollment, communications, marketing, value, liberal arts, higher education

Disciplines

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INTRODUCTION

Since the US great recession started at the end of the 2000s, the value proposition of colleges and universities has never been more important to communicate.

College tuition has risen and household incomes have not kept pace, causing more families to focus on the value of a college education during the college selection process.

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As Jeffrey Selingo, a higher education reporter and author said in 2016, ‘rising tuition prices during the past 15 years coincided with falling incomes of American families. The percentage of households making more than \$100,000 has been shrinking, while the proportion earning less than \$35,000 has grown. As a result the average sticker price of college now eats up more than 40 per cent of a family’s paycheck. In 2001, it accounted for less than a quarter.’¹

With national trends like these, liberal arts colleges are under even more pressure to communicate their worth. Traditionally, the liberal arts have been widely considered to teach the soft skills needed in the workplace, good communication and people skills, while research and large public institutions are perceived to be better at preparing students for jobs and the real world. As early as 2012, Georgia Nugent, president of Kenyon College, a leading liberal arts college in Ohio, said ‘There’s a lot of negative press out there about how there’s no value in college, you’re not going to get a job, there’s no value in an English degree.’²

To combat these perceptions, liberal arts college marketing and enrollment leaders must employ strategies that are distinctive, rooted in research, and complementary to the institutional brand and develop strong value propositions for their institutions. Augustana College and Gettysburg College offer two case studies where these common elements can be found.

Founded in 1860, Augustana describes itself as a selective, private liberal arts and sciences college and located on the Mississippi River in Rock Island, Illinois. Gettysburg describes itself as a highly selective four-year residential college of liberal arts and sciences, founded in 1832, and it is located in the renowned town

of Gettysburg, adjacent to the Gettysburg National Military Park in Pennsylvania.

The communications office at both schools has a reporting structure through the Vice President for Enrollment, which makes developing communications strategies for prospective students and parents easier than other reporting lines. Augustana’s strategy was to create an aggressive, unique campaign to position them against their competition and to increase applications by increasing mindshare early in the college selection process. Gettysburg also wanted to develop an aggressive strategy that would position them with a unique value proposition against the competition, and to ensure the integration of that strategy across the institution.

GETTYSBURG COLLEGE

Enthusiasts of the liberal arts model have maintained that a liberal education, one that focuses on building a student’s capacity to consider multiple perspectives and foster excellent communication skills, is most essential in the workplace.

According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers, the top three attributes employers seek in a candidate’s resume in 2016 are the ones that liberal arts colleges feel most proud to provide: leadership, the ability to work in a team and written communication skills.³

But this still is not enough. In the USA, as the cost of college continues to rise and student loan debt (and default rates) increases, people cannot help but ask, ‘Is college really worth it?’

To compound that sentiment, a recent report by Innovative University stated that, ‘since the late 1980s college tuition and fees have risen 440 per cent, four times faster than inflation.’⁴ Student loan debt has skyrocketed and is now the second highest consumer debt category — behind

only mortgage debt — and higher than both credit cards and auto loans.⁵ New data released in February 2017 by the Federal Reserve Bank shows that there are more than 44 million borrowers with US\$1.3 trillion in student loan debt in the USA. Likewise, the student loan defaults rate continues to increase at an alarming rate.⁶

In 2014, Politico summarised a series of negative remarks by US politicians about the liberal arts.

U.S. President Barack Obama said (and later apologised for saying), ‘Folks can make a lot more potentially with skilled manufacturing or the trades than they might with an art history degree.’ Likewise, the governors of Texas, Florida, North Carolina and Wisconsin have all suggested cutting liberal arts programs on the premise that they are not job creators.⁷

All of this media attention regarding the value of a liberal arts education was having an impact on the admissions process — both at liberal arts institutions across the country and at Gettysburg College. Parents of prospective students were more likely to ask about job placement rates, career development opportunities and the overall Gettysburg College student experience. The questions to the admissions staff were becoming more specific and data driven.

It was time to rethink how Gettysburg College talks about the value of a liberal arts degree and answer the questions prospects sought. The challenge was to stay true to (and continue to grow) the college’s brand, but more importantly, to not lose sight of the college’s commitment to, and the benefits of, a liberal arts education.

The right people in the room

Gettysburg College recognised that shifting how the college addresses the

value of a liberal arts degree was not a marketing challenge alone, but instead, an institutional one.

During the summer of 2013, Gettysburg College convened a small group of administrators representing different offices on campus to discuss the value of a Gettysburg College education. The ‘value committee’ included representation from the Center for Career Development, Provost’s Office, Alumni, Development, Communications & Marketing and Admissions. The committee investigated and discussed the role the Center for Career Development plays in the value of a Gettysburg College education and how that role interacts with the other offices represented. Over the course of six meetings, the value committee discussed the student experience from ‘cradle to grave’, or prospective student to lifelong learners and alumni.

After a focus group with current students and an audit of value statements and materials from competing schools, the value committee learned that, when it comes to making a college decision, the college needed to talk about placement in a more forceful way. Stories, data and rankings all resonated with prospective families. Current students told the committee that they had a desire to know more about opportunities on campus for career preparation, more insights into how alumni and faculty progressed in their career, and more connections to the Gettysburg network. With this anecdotal information in hand, Gettysburg College decided to test this information with a larger sampling of prospective families

Making friends with institutional analysis

In 2014, Gettysburg College conducted an image study that was sent to prospective students and their families. The

study, which was carried out in collaboration with Hardwick Day, an enrollment consultant, asked participants to rate how important certain qualities were in the college search process. Working with Institutional Analysis, the value committee inserted questions into the survey to solidify next steps and drive strategies.

Three strategic questions were added to the survey. First was a question that asked how important certain qualities were in the college search process. What we learned was that the top three of the ten items that people rate as important were 'good job and graduate placement', 'the college is highly regarded by employers' and 'internships are available'.

In addition to asking about attributes of an institution, the committee also tested a new value message: 'If a college offered every student a chance to develop a career plan and professional network, would you be more or less interested in that institution?' Overwhelmingly, prospective students and families said they would be more interested.

The same survey also found that the attribute that was rated most important by high-income students and their families was a college that has an extensive alumni network.

The insights that were gained from the survey and through the work of the value committee made clear the work Gettysburg College had to do to strengthen its value proposition.

Data into action

The Communications and Marketing office and the Career Development office worked together to deliver a new institutional commitment: Gettysburg College offers every student a chance to develop a career plan and a professional network.

During the spring of 2014, the Career Development office began adapting their internal business processes to meet this commitment. As tested successfully in the image survey, the value committee decided to market Career Development's services to students as a 'career plan'. The career plan, which begins before a student steps foot on campus through an initial contact from the Career Development office the summer before their first-year of college, is a continuous cycle of education, experiences and one-on-one mentoring that results in a successful outcome after a student's Gettysburg experience.⁸

To build upon the core message, four supporting messages were developed to drive tactics and focus strategies. The messages were tested and reviewed by key constituencies, including Gettysburg College's parents' advisory board, an alumni council made up of marketing professionals⁹ and the board of trustees.

Core message: Gettysburg College offers every student a chance to develop a career plan and a professional network:

- Gettysburg has an active and global network.
- Every experience helps you build your skills, network and articulate your story.
- Gettysburg graduates land great jobs and lead great lives.
- Gettysburg provides a lifelong commitment to your career.

The messages helped to keep the college focused on its value in the higher education marketplace, but also reinforced the benefits of a liberal arts degree.

Finally, these messages answered the call of the image study results and aligned with the college's central mission.

Once the messages were refined and approved, the Communications and Marketing office and the Career Development

office spent the next month presenting the findings from the committee and the image study to campus constituents. Internally, Communications and Marketing focused its annual retreat that year on value. The group analysed what they were already producing about value and outcomes to see in what areas they could improve. First, they took a deeper look at the college's main marketing tool for prospects — the website and the stories that are told through the homepage. They found that in 2013, only 12 per cent of homepage stories were value-focused (alumni career success, internships, etc.). The office has since increased that number to 40 per cent.

The office also looked at data provided by Institutional Analysis including: young alumni employment rate, graduate school placement, early to mid-career salaries, where students go to work and where they are accepted into graduate school, and third party rankings. Just as the committee did with marketing Career Development services, the Communications and Marketing office began to create new materials that illustrated these points, but in a bolder and more cohesive way.

Integration

The strategies to promote value and career success were integrated in two very distinct ways. First, Communications and Marketing looked inward, streamlining and integrating communications (from digital strategy to storytelling) and sought new and creative ways to showcase the college's value messaging. Secondly, the tactics were integrated across campus and customised to meet the need of specific campus partners.

Integration within communications and marketing

In the summer after students graduate, they are asked to participate in a survey

that, among other things, asks them if they are employed, in graduate school, where they live and how they found their jobs. The results are published annually in a multipage report from Institutional Analysis. With this information in hand, Communications and Marketing was able to create a campaign of 'one-year out' tactics aimed at prospective students.

One area where the college dedicated increased attention was on the Gettysburg network. The survey data showed that for the past three years, nearly 75 per cent of Gettysburg College students landed their first job by using the Gettysburg network. To illustrate the strength of the network, Communications and Marketing designed an infographic that conveyed the connectivity of the Gettysburg network.¹⁰ The office asked 10 Gettysburgians to name five people who were in their Gettysburg network. They asked those five people to name their Gettysburg network and the network grew from there. What they ended up with was an interconnected web of Gettysburgians who transcended graduation years and disciplines. The message was, by being a Gettysburgian, you can be part of this active and global alumni network.

In addition to the infographic, the office also created a video that highlighted Gettysburg College alums at some recognisable companies, welcoming students to their places of work for career experiences. Finally, the Communications and Marketing staff writers began asking alumni a simple question when they were interviewing them for stories: how did you get your job? Time and time again, it was through someone in the Gettysburg network. With this information, the staff writers began to add the network element into their stories.

Campus integration

Everyone has a role in recruiting students. It was this philosophy that helped the value committee shape who would be involved in conversations and why the committee dedicated time towards introducing all of the campus to the new value messaging. This same philosophy continues as the college implements various tactics related to career and value. Each time Communications and Marketing creates a new value-related tactic, it is shared across campus.

Another strategy was to engage coaching staff when they recruit athletes. Together with the coaches, Communications and Marketing created personalised recruitment packets for them to use with their top recruits. Each packet is customised for individual students and has pages dedicated to the major(s) they are interested in, extracurricular activities that are available, practice schedules and a message from their coach. However, most importantly for the purposes of this paper, the packet has a number of pages dedicated to career success of the players who came before them. The packets have proven to be an invaluable resource in helping the coaches recruit scholar-athletes.

Impact

The value committee's work to showcase the value proposition of Gettysburg College continues. Communications and Marketing continues to seek new ways to use data and make an impact with a prospective audience. Further, the work from the college has been recognised by a number of higher education marketing institutions, including the Council for Advancement and Support for Education (CASE) and College and University Public Relations and Associated Professionals (CUPRAP), who

recognised the value campaign in its entirety and various pieces within those campaigns for individual awards. Nevertheless, perhaps most notable has been the recognition from third-party rankings. For the first time in the college's history, the Princeton Review has recognised the College for two consecutive years for the strength of its alumni network and the strength of its internship programme. In addition, Gettysburg College continues to be recognised as a 'College that Launches Careers' and a 'College that Pays you Back,' also by the Princeton Review¹¹. Each ranking is a testament to the work the campus has done to highlight the value of a Gettysburg degree.

A BETTER U

Data drives elections, changes in health-care, sales and every sector of economy. In this data-driven world, it is no wonder that Augustana College's campaign to attract new students was spurred by a survey.

In January 2015, new data confirmed the college's competitive pool was continuing to change. No longer could it be assumed that students looking at Augustana were only considering small, private, liberal arts colleges. Research undeniably showed respondents interested in Augustana were also interested in much larger, often public, research institutions. Among Augustana's main competitors were the University of Illinois (48,250 students) and Illinois State University (22,599 students) – both much larger than Augustana (2,500 students).

Additionally, the research showed that the attributes most desired by respondents were not surprising either – with 'affordable' ranking no. 1 (Figure 1).

In the post-recession period, it is understandable that 'affordable' made the top of the list in the Augustana survey

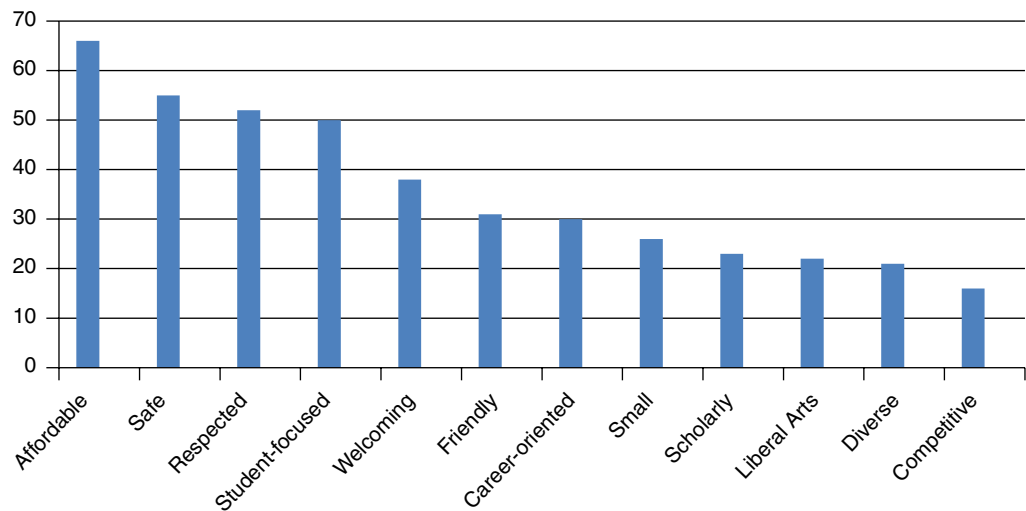


FIGURE 1 Top 12 words that describe respondents' preferred institutions
 Source: Hanover Research 2015 for Augustana College/Academy Administration Practice.

and respondents' answers were echoed nationally. In one 2015 report by the National Association of Student Financial Aid Administrators, 'when pressed to list the single most important factor when deciding where to go to college, students were most concerned with how much a specific college costs (63 per cent)¹²

The pairing of these challenges – growing competition from the public universities and a student's desire for affordability – seemed to dovetail based on the common perception of public institutions offering a less expensive four-year experience.

The creation of an aggressive, unique campaign to position the college against the competition of universities became a priority. The campaign goal was simple, to increase applications by gaining mindshare early in the selection process; however, the task was no easy one. A small campus, in lean times, set out to grab mindshare from Big Ten Universities who were filling up the airwaves with weekends of basketball and football games, and from research institutions

with hospitals alone that were three or four times larger than Augustana's entire campus.

Distinctive facts and feelings

The plan was to develop a campaign using both factual messaging and emotional appeal. Facts were gathered to compare and contrast Augustana with its competition. Facts are important because they tell what one college does better than other colleges; often the facts are surprising and do not match common perceptions. Augustana could easily be compared against state schools in terms of class size, tuition, graduation rates and employment after graduation.

To get at the emotional messaging, an outside vendor hosted a discovery session with individuals across campus, including students, to uncover *why* Augustana is the best choice for students. Participants were asked what they love about the college that drives differentiation and helps Augustana stand out from the competition.

The distinctions the college had been using in marketing materials for a number of years were confirmed as the best differentiators to utilise for the campaign. Those distinctions include:

1. US\$2,000 toward internships/research/study abroad.
2. Quad-Cities location.
3. Career preparation/internship.
4. Academic All-American ranking and tradition.

After a few failed attempts to develop the creative approach, including a version that showed graduates residing in a dingy basement and a version that shockingly stated 'I hate universities', the 'A Better U' theme became the strategic favourite.

From concept to reality

In 'A Better U', the 'A' stands for 'Augustana' and relies on the college's established brand mark – a gold A in the shape of archways that grace several college buildings. 'U' stands for 'university' and was created to resemble traditional university font treatments. 'U' also was meant to sound like the word 'you', swivelling the interpretation so that Augustana can represent the place where you (the student) can become your better self.

The concept reinforces the entire Augustana experience – academics, student life and personal growth, as well as affordability. The messaging combined with photography provides an emotional and inspirational hook. And the concept uses competitors' colours to boldly position Augustana against the competition.

Testing the message

On campus, early 'A Better U' concepts did not entirely fare well. Those with

an insider's view of the college's brand were struggling to read the 'A Better U' text treatment. So before going too far too fast, 'A Better U' was tested with prospective students and received favourable feedback. When shown the text treatment, respondents read several favourable messages related to the college. Augustana's partner — MindFire Communications of LeClaire, Iowa — conducted the research via an online survey.

With the assurance that the overall message was understandable, the next step was finding visuals and uncovering the best statistics. Similar to Gettysburg's effort to 'make friends' with Institutional Analysis office, Augustana's Office of Institutional Research and Assessment provided assurance that numbers and messages were being used in ways that were always completely accurate.

Messages had to be short. The campaign needed bite-size nuggets that 17-year-olds could consume quickly on social media. A complete message matrix was developed. The matrix matched facts with photography and allowed for the categorisation of messages. The categories were loosely tied to the distinctions identified previously – location and experience – plus affordability and outcomes to match the research from 2015.

Social media launch

In September 2016, the social media advertisements began. Three flights of advertisements ran in late 2016 and early 2017. Advertisements and videos ran on Facebook and Instagram. These directed prospects back to a landing page and form. Those who replied began receiving a flow of information from the college, starting with e-mail.

All social media advertisements were used as A/B tests, so the advertisements

also were a live research tool, educating the process. The testing results revealed:

- Messages about affordability and experience resonate most.
- The intimate or personal photos were most successful.
- Instagram showed itself as an inspirational platform, providing the most reach.
- Facebook showed itself as a discovery platform, providing the most action.
- Video earned considerably more attention than still photos.

Messaging continues, with most content being shared through social media. While efforts remain focused on gaining mindshare of high school students, effort is being given to alter messaging for parents and students during the spring yield season. The college also has plans to do more sharing of the messages with current students in an effort to support retention.

Internal error

Since the campaign is far from over, it is too early to pinpoint failures or mistakes. More attention, however, needs to be given to internal/campus efforts. On-campus audiences, including staff, faculty and administrators, responded well to A Better U messages shared with them and considerably more promotion through internal channels stand to offer better payoffs.

Long-term commitment

Augustana set out to create a campaign rooted in research, complementary to the brand and in a way that would support the college's value proposition. The campaign has been launched, but it is far from done.

A statement offered by Kristi Eaves-McLennan in *Inside Higher Ed's* Call to

Action blog: 'Too often, colleges and universities get caught up in chasing the excitement of launching something new, and end up ditching a branding campaign after a few years.' A standard rule of thumb for college marketing campaigns is at least four years. This ensures the first class of students recruited with the campaign have time to become alumni, who feel more connected to their alma mater when they see all aspects of their college experience as related.¹³

Remaining committed to the campaign is important from a logistical standpoint, too. Augustana is a small college on a small budget, but committed to follow-through on its best big ideas.

CONCLUSION

Liberal arts colleges, now more than ever, need to communicate their value in a busy and noisy marketplace. Since 2008, the media has consistently focused on the cost and value of higher education. Often they do not portray liberal arts colleges in the most positive light.

Although Augustana and Gettysburg both took different approaches, they have strengthened their communications and marketing efforts by focusing on value and outcomes. These focused campaigns are successful due in large part to their authentic appeal for both schools.

The value proposition for a liberal arts college needs to be tested and verified through research. What works for one school might not work for another based on any number of factors including location, institutional mission and resource base. The value proposition needs to be integrated throughout the institution and also work as a complement to the institutional brand. Both case studies saw an engagement with the institutional research office. These colleges can be some of your

most valuable partners as you build bridges across the institution. An institutional value message will elevate your school's efforts beyond anything that an individual office or department can accomplish. Finally, communications and enrollment teams need to be able to execute the value proposition across myriad platforms and media. If you do not have the basic building blocks for a highly functioning communications team in place your message will not matter. Senior communication officers need to be focused on hiring good people who can find a passion for higher education.

Augustana College and Gettysburg College are examples where these common elements can be found. Their strategies were rooted in research and worked as a piece to their institutional brand strategy. The implementation of each strategy was integrated across each institution, and the communication and enrollment teams were able to execute and assess the success of the tactics.

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