The Power of Branding
Protecting the Priceless: Your Reputation

2016 TIAA Institute Higher Education Leadership Conference
About this Research

The TIAA Institute Higher Education Leadership Conference (HELC) offers valuable opportunities for higher education leaders to explore drivers of change and innovation at U.S. colleges and universities. Featuring subject matter experts, practitioners, scholars and leaders from multiple sectors, the conference provides relevant, actionable information—attendees come away with new insights and perspectives on some of the most pressing challenges and interesting opportunities facing higher education today. This paper shares key messages arising from a conference session entitled, “The Power of Branding—Protecting the Priceless: Your Reputation”


About the TIAA Institute

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Executive Summary

In this session, a panel of experts discussed the power of institutional branding from a variety of perspectives: corporate marketing, media strategy, university public relations and presidential obligations to protect and enhance their institutions’ brands. Advancing an institution’s reputation and differentiating its brand can seem like a daunting task, consuming both time and money that may not be readily available—and complicated by the fact that stakeholders’ perceptions often flow from how a brand makes them feel as opposed to being based on what the institution is offering. Panelists noted that the unique mission and culture of each institution helps differentiate its brand, and emphasized the importance of building upon a university’s mission to create its distinctive brand. Establishing an emotional connection with stakeholders while maintaining the distinctiveness of the campus is key as well. At a time of turmoil in higher education, and ever-present threats to both the brand and reputation of every college and university, campus presidents must identify the best means to mitigate those threats and protect their brand.

Panelists for this session included:

**Connie Weaver**, EVP and Chief Marketing Officer, TIAA

**Brett Pulley**, EVP, Corporate and Media Strategy, Weber Shandwick, and former dean, Hampton University

**Michael Schoenfeld**, Vice President, Public Affairs & Government Relations, Duke University

**Nancy Zimpher**, Chancellor, SUNY

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Key Takeaways

- College and university brands must capture and convey the institution’s core values.
- Creating a brand demands serious time and effort devoted to understanding the institution’s mission, values, and value proposition.
- Institutions must differentiate themselves through their branding efforts.
- Senior campus leaders represent their institution’s brand.
- Brands take years to develop and nurture, but can be quickly diminished.
- Social media can have a more powerful effect on brand than well-designed view books or websites.

Connie Weaver introduced the concept of branding by emphasizing that a company or institution’s brand is “who you are, what you do, and why you’re different. It is your reputation.” Contrary to the popular view of a brand as merely a logo or tagline, she said a brand should be far more. College and university leaders must be aware that everything that happens involving their institutions influences and shapes their brand. A brand is best when it is envisioned as conveying everything about an institution’s public image: graphic identity, logo, trademark, tagline, mascot, team names, nicknames, and even the legal name of the institution. Describing how a brand can be leveraged to affect how people feel about an institution, Weaver’s description echoed the words of Maya Angelou, who once said, “I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.” Following an introduction that illustrated the importance of brand with background about TIAA’s new brand and the process behind its launch in 2016, and noting the increasing speed with which social media can tarnish a brand, panelists approached the topic of brand from their unique perspectives. In framing the importance of the topic, Weaver also quoted Warren Buffet, reminding the audience, “It can take 20 years to build a reputation and only 5 minutes to ruin it.” While historically the concept of branding colleges and universities may have been viewed as too commercial for higher education’s nonprofit realm, administrators increasingly are recognizing how important it is to capture and convey the essence of their institutions through branding.

“The best test of brand is when I get in the elevator with 10 people from the company and ask them who they are, what they do and what does the company stand for, and at least 9 out of 10 say the same thing.”

–Connie Weaver
State University of New York (SUNY)

Nancy Zimpher has led the largest higher education system in the country since the mid-1980s and, in that capacity, must manage not only a system-wide brand, but also must ensure that the 64 different colleges and universities within the SUNY system are attentive to how they are perceived. Her broad experience at several institutions has led her to understand that all brands are a product of geography, economic realities, and the value proposition of the institution. The recognition of SUNY as an economic engine for New York State led to the branding tag, “The Power of SUNY,” as a compelling way to capture SUNY’s key role in the state and to brand the entire large system. Zimpher’s use—and, importantly, application of—the term “system-ness” to define collective impact and action has moved SUNY to create new paths for student transfer within the system, develop a broader reach for online courses across the system, and adopt system-wide policies on sexual assault prevention. Brands, Zimpher noted, have both internal and external effects.

Hampton University

Brett Pulley approached the topic of branding from multiple perspectives. As a former student, trustee and dean at Hampton University, he recognizes the importance of branding his alma mater in ways that maintain its strong reputation and history as an HBCU. Pulley also has worked as a journalist and was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize, and he is currently an executive at a major company specializing in brand and reputational issues. Pulley’s extensive experience with media informs his understanding of how the approach to branding at Hampton needs to be all inclusive, ranging from how students behave and dress to the

“No brand, no value proposition is going to be good unless you have others committed to that value proposition.”
—Nancy Zimpher
Hampton has successfully capitalized on its roots within a changing environment. Pulley described, for example, how the School of Communications is finding ways to move beyond traditional journalism to address digital media platforms as well. Indeed, Hampton was able to host a symposium on diversity in digital media at Twitter’s headquarters in San Francisco, largely as a result of the institution’s unique history and expertise, an event which served to enhance its reputation and brand.

**Duke University**

Michael Schoenfeld is keenly aware of the power of branding at Duke University, which enjoys extraordinary brand recognition but that also has weathered its share of challenges to its brand and reputation. Duke’s strength, Schoenfeld noted, is that it is seen as an excellent private research university with high-quality academics that serves both the community and the world. Given that Duke is just 85 years old—yet has managed to compete with schools that were founded hundreds of years ago—Schoenfeld pointed out that Duke is able to tell its story through the “lens of youth and ambition, and being unformed,” and less tied to tradition. This “youthfulness” gives Duke a distinctive identity that sets it apart from other prestigious universities.

**Brand differentiation**

Panelists noted that in the current environment, brands can easily blur together, and that it is critical for campuses to differentiate their brands—that is, to highlight what makes them different. Those factors could include location, selectivity, academic programs, cost, ranking, or history. Institutions are indeed different, with some focusing on online education, a liberal arts mission, career preparation, faith-based commitment, or ground-breaking research. All of these differences need to be celebrated rather than lost and blended into a picture of happy students on a green lawn in front of iconic buildings, as is too often the case. Understanding and conveying what makes an institution unique flows from an honest assessment of what it stands for, consistent adherence over time to the institution’s values, and carefully selected ambassadors to represent the institution’s brand.

Panelists agreed that the core strategy of differentiating an institution or system is driven by truthfully articulating its value proposition. For Hampton and its School of Communications, that meant focusing on key pillars in the changing world of digital media and communication, and addressing what students were being taught about their chosen field. For Duke University, the success of its men’s basketball team presents an opportunity to highlight the quality, leadership and values of the institution. Duke uses its intercollegiate athletics program to draw attention to the academic strengths of its faculty and the educational experience it offers, demonstrating the integration of all aspects of the institution into

“We look at brand and identity and reputation in a somewhat different but complementary way in that all are about excellence, about quality, about creating and delivering the highest and most interesting educational experience to the students who come to us.”

–Michael Schoenfeld
a single brand that denotes high quality. For SUNY, the brand had to be both broad, encompassing 64 campuses, and diverse, in response to the individual characteristics of each institution. The panelists agreed that for university presidents and chancellors, a strong brand is extremely helpful in articulating their institutions’ strengths and advocating for the resources—whether through legislative appropriations, donor gifts, or by creating public-private partnerships—that are critical to achieving their institutions’ missions.

Panelists were clear that branding does not happen by accident. Even though the resulting images and taglines may seem simplistic or effortless, the reality is that much work goes into creating and promoting an institutional brand. A successful brand must be consistent with the college or university’s core values. Brands capture and convey a wide range of traits and feelings, depending on the institution. A brand can capture the power of tradition at Ivy League schools, the history of HBCUs, the innovation of large research universities, the mandate for access at community colleges, the well-rounded education of private liberal arts colleges, or the faith-based mission of religious institutions. Ultimately, brands must reach a broad audience of students, parents, alumni, business and industry, legislators, funding agencies, and journal editors, among others.

Audience participants eagerly explored additional aspects of branding and how it actually plays out. Panelists focused their responses on the importance of engaging stakeholders, respecting shared governance in the process, and building lifelong ambassadors who are fully committed to the institution. The value of rankings by U.S. News & World Report, Princeton Review and others, was both praised as a positive way for consumers to learn about higher education and maligned as arbitrary and capricious—but all panelists agreed that most prospective U.S. undergraduates pay far less attention to rankings than do international students or alumni. They also agreed that the rankings won’t go away and the need to contend with them will continue as colleges and universities brand themselves.

“No matter how you feel about rankings, they do have a lot of influence and a lot of people turn to them.”
–Brent Pulley

Our stakeholders interpret every choice we make

What you say—written and verbal, your message, your tone of voice, your vocabulary

What you do—your actions, behaviors, attitude, achievements and integrity. Do you deliver on your claims?

What you look like—your brand identity. How well does it visually communicate what you are trying to say and do?
Challenges to the brand

In spite of institutions’ best efforts to establish meaningful brands that encapsulate their values, crises can pose serious challenges to brand and reputation. At a time when social media spreads news and (mis)perceptions faster than ever, isolated incidents and substantive issues such as on-campus student protests, investment choices, controversial hires, or administrative salaries can take on a life of their own and rapidly diminish what decades of wise management and sound policy have built. In the end, social media can prove more powerful than messaging via ambassadors, view books or websites.

Panelists recognized that brands are fragile, and even the best brands can suffer dramatically in light of any number of problems such as research fraud, lack of integrity on the part of administrators, athletics scandals, or even natural disasters that compromise facilities or programs. Perhaps the most significant threat today, however, is the overall strain on higher education as a result of the public questioning of the cost and value of higher education and the disinvestment of states in public education. In the end, higher education leaders must be ever vigilant about branding, live up to the brand they promote, and recognize the tremendous responsibility they have to nurture the institutions they lead. Weaver ended the session with a cautionary paraphrasing of her opening remark: “The power of your brand is within you. It’s who you are. What you do. How you make people feel.”

“Your brand is what people say about you when you leave the room.”
–Jeff Bezos, Amazon.com
Additional Resources

“The Power of SUNY.” https://www.suny.edu/powerofsuny/

Calkins, Timothy. “Reviving a Brand That’s Lost its Luster.”
https://insight.kellogg.northwestern.edu/article/reviving-a-brand-thats-lost-its-luster

Cline, Kimberly R. “Redefining the Concept of the University Branding.” University Business

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https://www.universitybusiness.com/article/50-best-branding-ideas