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Communicating Culture in a Distributed World

by David V. Rosowsky and Kim Hallman

Communication has taken on much broader meaning and greater significance for organizations of late, both inward- and outward-facing. Nowhere is that truer than for colleges and universities, as the higher education sector struggles with long-needed change, financial and organizational constraints, volatile public perceptions about cost and value, and now the impacts of COVID-19.

In recent months, colleges and universities have expanded their communications, both in terms of frequency and content, to all their constituencies. They have done so to provide timely and vital information about response plans and changes in operations, as well as to maintain confidence and support in the institution, its leadership, and its plans for the future.

What has taken a backseat though, and arguably where colleges and universities need to start to turn the conversation now, is communicating culture in this uber-distributed world.

What role does culture play in a college or university's branding, communications or marketing strategy? How can you communicate culture in ways that are both true to your institution and resonant with increasingly distributed target audiences, whether they be current or future students, faculty and staff, alumni, donors, trustees, or the broader general public? Is your institution's culture universally cherished, valued and respected by all of these groups? By graduates of different decades? By people who've had different intersections with the institution? How can culture come through with authenticity, consistency and demonstrated effectiveness?

Culture is the glue that binds organizations together. And colleges and universities, like any other brand, need to communicate culture to effectively articulate who they are, what they offer, and why it matters in a rapidly changing global environment. If anything, that need has ballooned in the current global pandemic, as contested value propositions are further called into question, students and families seriously consider gap years or alternate pathways, and alumni and donors understandably become more discerning with their dollars.

¹ *Across the Green* was started as a series of periodic letters from Provost Rosowsky to provide updates on current initiatives and information on topics of interest to the broader UVM academic community. Started in 2013, *Across the Green* was published three times per year during the six years Dr. Rosowsky served as UVM's Provost and Senior Vice President. The *ATG Brief* series continues in the spirit of this communication with topics focused on higher education and leadership.

The first two points -- about who colleges and universities are and what they offer -- are often conflated, but benefit from separation.

So first, who. This can be addressed at a more universal level but should then quickly become differentiating and distinguishable. By Merriam Webster's most-direct definition, colleges and universities are "educational establishments" and "institutions of higher learning." With modern flourish, one might venture to say "training grounds for future generations." But what's overwhelmingly absent in the dictionary definition, and only partially suggested by the training grounds elaboration, is the people and the personal. It's incumbent upon colleges to "crack the cultural code" -- in other words, to uncover and compellingly articulate a core ethos which gets at the sense of place, spirit of the people and shared values of their institutions.

Arrival at that core ethos comes from asking lots of hard questions. Is culture universal, or ubiquitous, throughout the institution? Is it baked into the college itself, or espoused only by the president? And how does an institution articulate values that often go unspoken or have never been formally asserted or documented? Do those values translate outside the college? Do they have relevance? Do they inspire the same emotions and commitments they do within the college community? Do they resonate? How can culture be widely adopted, promoted and celebrated?

If clued into correctly, the "who" is constant -- even amid leadership changes, as new classes of students rotate in and out, and in the face of a global pandemic.

That constancy, however, does not connote being purely anchored in the past. Many colleges and universities date back 100 or even 200 years. Higher ed, perhaps more than any other industry sector, cherishes its history, traditions, ceremonies, and institutional/campus culture. Those cultures can be hard to define and hard to describe, but they are harder to break from. That means taking the good and the bad, often finding back-bending ways to explain the bad.

Take, for example, the institution that has a culture of faculty-driven leadership and strong shared governance, with high turnover in presidents. That may be explained as "We are University of X, and we've always clashed with whomever is president." Or consider an institution that prides itself on being distinctive but has a long history of neglecting or, worse, failing to adopt what has been shown universally to be best practice for student recruitment or student success (such as advising, career services and so forth). This may be defended as "We are Y University; we are different from everyone else."

The current pandemic has exacerbated cultural dilemmas. How can college culture be both respected and made relevant when people are living and working off the campus? How do we at once instruct new students in accordance with new, distributed learning methodologies, while also recognizing that returning students are mourning the very loss of traditional instruction? How do we assure alumni that traditions, rituals, and culture will persist, endure, and be there when the college returns to a more normal state -- while also communicating all that needs to change in this thrive-to-survive environment?

We may encounter resistance. We'll probably hear refrains of "We've always done it that way" and "That's not the University of Z way." Navigating culture can be tricky; operating within it can be

downright dangerous. But now more than ever, as institutions are made to separate themselves from parts of their history and traditions that are wholly inconsistent with modern-day values, it is increasingly important to perceive and project culture in a way that both honors where we've been and captures future aspirations. For example, loosening attachments to a particular historical figure, and instead celebrating the timeless ideals they represent. Separating long-established practice and best practice. Shifting the narrative from an institutional legacy to a living philosophy of innovation and progress. Or very practically in this COVID era, recognizing beloved spots on campus are less about the physical plant and more about connectedness and community, and creating virtual exchanges that cross generational and geographic divides.

The next order of business -- yes, business -- is articulating what colleges and universities offer. Here, you'll hear a common litany of strategic pillars and staid representations: academic and research excellence, interdisciplinary learning, innovation, transformative experiences. Undoubtedly, such qualifiers are true for a majority of institutions. But they fail to be ownable or relatable -- at least without some more grounding element, which is where an added layer of individuality and authenticity must be applied. The "offer" should not be overwrought. It should not be clinical. It should not be easily claimed by another institution. Rather, it should move beyond the transactional to deliver on higher-order emotional benefits. And it should focus on people, innovations and intellectual property. In some cases, it can be captured in one word. One enigmatic but still defining characteristic. UCLA: Optimism. Texas A&M: Fearless. University of Arizona: Wonder. For others, it offers direction for who will thrive and how they'll learn. NYU: Home to Earth's Boldest. Tulane University: Only the Audacious. For still others, it's a custom rallying cry that speaks to the individual but suggests community. University of Florida: For the Gator Good. Colby College: Dare Northward. Keep in mind, it's not a tagline, so much as an encapsulation of your brand essence.

This is the high-level offering, more evergreen in nature. Of course, the COVID world calls, too, for tactical, time-sensitive communications around offerings -- from curricular adjustments to special enrollment considerations. Until we can protect the world's population against the virus through a vaccine or other therapeutics, we will probably continue to have restrictions on crowd sizes, recommended social distancing, and possibly even limitations on movement across state lines. Almost certainly, institutions at best will be moving to a combination of on-campus and remote classes in fall 2020. They will also be providing regular health checks and ensuring proper isolation and care for any students that test positive for the virus, as well as eliminating or significantly altering many of the traditions that have come to define our campuses in the fall, from football to Homecoming.

Some institutions may delay or cancel the fall semester. Others will continue to offer all instruction online. Any of these possible eventualities -- coupled with difficult and painful decisions to reduce staff, not renew lecturers, not replace retiring faculty, cancel capital project plans, or announce furloughs -- present challenges for renewing traditions and communicating culture. Communications and marketing campaigns must acknowledge and address these current educational and economic realities. But if they can be presented in a way that connects back to the institution's unchanging principles -- staying the course of a commitment to core values and best serving students -- they can promote greater understanding and move audiences to the greater picture.

That leads us to our final consideration (and a different kind of cultural context, one more outward-looking): why it matters. Colleges and universities represent some of our greatest social institutions. They are a menagerie of human intellectual achievements, champions of excellence but in the name of enlightenment. They are shepherding -- and frankly, caring for -- the most connected, most media-savvy, most socially responsible generation we've ever seen.

That certainly hasn't stopped with the shift to remote learning -- if anything, those outside of higher education have become more acutely aware of it. Whether in person or online, colleges and universities are safe spaces for self-exploration and self-expression, while sitting at the tip of the spear for diversity, access and inclusion, and integration conversations. They are builders of community and common ground, even when physical locations are dispersed, and they prepare young people to dialogue through differences and across distances. They are our most successful incubators of ideas, innovations, and social and scientific breakthroughs -- where schools of thought become the seedlings of change. And certainly, they are major employers and economic drivers.

Colleges and universities are profoundly invested in human potential. Intrinsicly linked to societal progress. Deeply interwoven in our cultural fabric. We have perhaps never needed them more as we look toward a changed-but-encouraging future. And we have to be the first to stand up and say it.



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