

# White Paper



## Acting Strategically

**A Handful of Breakthrough Strategic Moves That Will Strengthen Your Position in the Marketplace**

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### SUBJECT HIGHLIGHTS:

Rather than spending more and more time and money on tactics, colleges and universities need to think and act strategically if they are to address the challenges and realize the opportunities that are ahead. This White Paper will outline six breakthrough strategies that could substantially increase your ability to recruit and retain students.

### “Troubles there are aplenty.”

Those words were voiced to me by a president at a recent meeting of college presidents in North Carolina. His summation, in retrospect, was as accurate as it was poetic.

Many of America’s colleges and universities are in trouble. Consider just a few of the challenges they face:

- The changing demography of today’s—and tomorrow’s—college student will result in fewer residential, fewer full-time, and more aid-dependent students
- An increasing cost to attend, the wide—and in some places widening—tuition gap between publics and privates, and the declining family saving rates and contribution will confound the cost and financial aid conundrum even more

- The rise of publics, including two-year institutions, as major players in the recruiting and fund-raising marketplace will dramatically increase the level of competition
- The danger, or at least the distraction, of the virtual university

One college president summed it up neatly when he noted that higher education has moved from the Golden Age to the Age of Survival.

### The age of survival

The challenges facing higher education are significant. However, throughout its 300-year history, higher education in America has often faced significant challenges. What has changed is not merely the array of problems, but the inability of colleges and universities—boards, administrators, and faculty—to respond strategically to these problems.

In an illuminating comment, Cohen and March describe colleges and universities as “organized anarchies.” They write, “The American college or university is a prototypic organization anarchy. It does not know what it is doing. Its goals are either vague or in dispute. Its technology is familiar but not understood. Its major participants wander in and out of the organization. These factors do not make a university a bad organization or a disorganized one, but they do make it a problem to describe, understand, and lead.”

How difficult is it? Consider the following excerpt from *Fortune* magazine:

Here’s a line of business whose customer base is shrinking. Rivals battle for market share by offering deep discounts. If they hold the line on prices, they risk losing out to cheaper, state-subsidized competitors. Their physical plants are falling apart. They can’t fire their highest-paid workers—who put in far less than 40-hour workweeks—and federal law says that even the laggards never have to retire.

Sound pretty bad? It gets worse. The CEO isn’t free to run the business; he or she needs the workers’ approval for most major decisions. The pressures of managing-by-compromise force most bosses to depart within four years. As Thomas Hobbes, the 17th-century English philosopher put it, their lives are nasty, brutish, and short.

Welcome to the byzantine business of higher education.

While some may argue that the article in *Fortune* overgeneralizes—and to a certain degree it probably does—there are myriad other individuals, organizations, and associations who have a similar take on the challenges that face higher education. A recent cover story in *Time* magazine lambastes the high cost of college, particularly at private institutions. In a March 1997 *Forbes* interview, Peter Drucker essentially writes off the future of “big universities.”

As I think about this rash of recent comments, I am immediately drawn to two quotes. First, Twain noting “the reports of my death are greatly exaggerated.” And second, the old saw, “where there’s smoke....”

There is clearly something going on, and higher education must respond. The question is, how? Better strategic planning? I think that’s part of the answer, but only part. Equally important with strategic planning is the need to act strategically.

### **But we’re already acting**

Few would accuse the average college or university administrator of not being busy. Our prospect pools get larger and larger. We spend more on advertising. We hire

more recruiters and buy more advanced software. We embrace CDs and look longingly at the Web. We continue to do things—lots of things.

What we have done, I suspect, is confuse tactics with strategy. We are so bent on doing things better, faster, and cheaper that we seldom ask the two big questions:

- Are we offering the right products?
- Are we serving the right students?

We distract ourselves from these core questions with discussions about tactics. We act tactically when we should be acting strategically.

### **A quick look at the 4 Cs**

We are all familiar with the 4 Ps of marketing: product, price, place, and promotion. Of late, however, I have been entertaining what Schultz, Tannenbaum, and Lauterborn call the 4 Cs. In many respects, the 4 Ps are written from the perspective of the institution, or what one writer called “inside-out thinking.” We focus on our institutional “self.” What product do we offer? What is our price? Where do we do what we do? How should we promote?

The 4 Cs, on the other hand, require us to examine these same four variables from the perspective of the customer. Instead of product, we have consumer. Instead of price, we have cost. Instead of place, we have convenience. And instead of promotion, we have communication.

While I am not completely sold on the 4 Cs (for example, I am struggling with the notion of “convenience”), I do find them useful because I believe that higher education has confused stakeholders with customers. While we have many stakeholders—faculty, staff, boards, alumni, and others—we have only one customer: the person who pays the bills. We should always recognize the importance of our stakeholders, but we should never focus so totally on their needs and concerns that we ignore the needs and concerns of the people who pay the bills. To do so is folly.

### **Moving forward strategically**

My goal throughout the remainder of this White Paper is to present a handful of breakthrough strategies that will focus more directly on the needs and expectations of the customer. As a consequence, these strategies should increase the number of new and returning students and positively affect the amount of donated resources to the institution.

It is important at the outset to note that these strategies are not a cure-all. They will probably not aid the fundamentally flawed or profoundly weak institution. Nor will they be equally effective at institutions that serve narrow niches or geographies. And lastly, they will



have no impact at institutions that suffer from paralyzed leadership.

### Lay the groundwork

For these strategies to work well, some groundwork must be laid. First, you must affirm, at the highest and lowest levels of your institution, a commitment that:

- Recruiting students is one of your most important undertakings, and it will be supported to the highest possible degree
- Retention is as important as recruiting. It does us little good to recruit students who can't or won't persist
- Fund-raising must be used to support the recruiting and retention functions

Second, you must plan to succeed. Within the parameters of your mission, you must have a realistic, achievable vision that excites and enthuses prospective students, administrators, faculty, staff, donors, and other key publics. A strong, realistic vision is essential. If you are interested in a fascinating discussion of vision, take a look at Burt Nanus's *Visionary Leadership*. It's one of the best around.

Third, you must make decisions more quickly. I have noticed that when the stakes rise, it takes longer to make a decision. Unfortunately, I have seen no evidence that a lengthened decision-making process results in better decisions.

I am a firm believer in consensus management—to a degree. However, many, myself included, believe that colleges and universities are becoming strangled by consensus management: everyone involved in every decision every time. In times of plenty that might be OK. However, these are not times of plenty; they are increasingly times of want. Deliberate, sure. But don't confuse process with product. You have to decide in as timely a fashion as possible.

Fourth, you must organize for action. In particular, your recruiting, retention, fund-raising, and public relations activities must be operating in concert. Traditionally, the recruiting function reported to the chief academic officer. Of late, this office has been reporting to the president. We still see the public relations functions report most often to advancement. And the retention functions are usually divided among recruiting (input), student services (throughput), and alumni (output).

Given the opportunity and a blank slate, I would make the following changes. These changes have two overarching rationales. First, to share recruiting, marketing, retention, and fund-raising goals. And second, to share resources.

My suggestion is radical and will no doubt ruffle many territorial feathers. However, I am still thinking strategically—what's best for the institution with less concern about what's best for the careers of individual administrators.

As you can see, the above model links all of your marketing (image-building), recruiting and fund-raising (the folks who benefit from a strong image), and student services under one administrator.

This reorganization is my first choice. However, many of you will find this change either impossible or too costly to undertake. In that case, look at the philosophical underpinnings of this model. Its purpose is to share goals and resources. Regardless of your organization, the degree to which you can share goals and resources may well spell the difference between an institution that is successful and an institution that is marginalized. A president once reminded me, "When you don't have the cash, you better have the conversation."

And finally, invest in the best people you can find. Good, experienced people. People who can truly think strategically and then support strategic decisions with tactical actions are rare, and they are likely to command substan-

tial salaries and require significant resources. But while their salary and resource needs may be high, the cost of bad or delayed decisions is even higher.

Too often we focus almost exclusively on what a person will cost and seldom examine in any depth what a person will contribute or accomplish. Hiring a newly minted \$22,500 marketing person without a budget and staff support and then giving him or her the responsibility for marketing the institution or building an image is seldom a good idea. A novice lacks the experience, clout, and champion qualities you need. In my experience, it is always a solid management move to hire the best people you can find. Resist the temptation to go cheap. Hire senior, successful people and support them well. To ask even the most experienced and capable professional to perform without a budget or staff support is setting that person up for failure.

### **Breakthrough strategies**

With the goal of acting strategically, I offer the following six breakthrough strategies:

- Gather strategic data to support student recruiting, retention, and fund-raising
- Undertake a marketing evaluation of your academic majors
- Shorten time to degree
- Emphasize academic quality
- Raise money
- Write and fund an image-enhancement plan

Two quick thoughts are in order. First, the length of this White Paper precludes my ability to treat each of these strategies at great depth. My purpose, therefore, is to create enough interest on your part that you will turn to the myriad books, articles, workshops, and consultants on how to set these strategies in motion.

Second, I call these strategies “breakthrough” not in the sense that they are new—many have been around quite a while. But these strategies are powerful and designed to help you *break through* organizational, territorial, and even paradigmatic log jams and move ahead.

### **Breakthrough strategy # 1: Gather strategic data to support student recruiting, retention, and fund-raising**

I am amazed at the generally poor quality of data that are being routinely collected by America’s colleges and universities. I suspect the paucity of quality data undercuts, at least to some degree, the ability of institutions to make strategic decisions or to have confidence in the decisions they do make. If you are going to make million-dollar decisions, you need solid data. Intuition, a focus group of six prospective students, and a telephone call from one alum will only go so far.

At the very least, most colleges and universities need to undertake the following studies:

#### Done yearly

- Survey of nonmatriculating students
- Survey of prospective students with competitive-positioning and perceptual data
- Survey of withdrawing students

#### Done every other year

- Survey of parents
- Survey of current students
- Survey of current donors

#### Done every three years

- Survey of prospective donors
- Survey of alumni

While studies of local business leaders, community residents, and other populations are important, the studies outlined here are essential. The studies of students will tell you why students who apply don’t attend, how students perceive you and compare you with other institutions, why some students withdraw, and how current students evaluate and appraise various aspects of your institution.

The studies of donors and alumni will tell you why people give and will help you define the programs and opportunities they will support.

Of course, you should modify these lists depending on the characteristics and needs of your specific institution. The key is not so much these exact studies, but the regular collection of strategic data, data that will give you confidence in your decisions. Without it, you will lack certainty in your conclusions and course of action.

There are several other datasets that should be routinely collected. First, detailed retention data. Most of this data is presented in the aggregate, and this often masks important trends. I would strongly encourage you to organize this data by academic department or division and by the academic abilities of your withdrawing students. This will allow you to determine if retention problems are clustered by major, and it will allow you to focus on students of ability who don’t persist.

Second, examine how much money each academic program and individual course generates and compare this figure with the cost of operating that program. Factor the number of students and their tuition dollars and juxtapose this revenue against how much it costs to offer that program or course. These revenue/cost ratios are extremely important. While dollars generated or lost should not be the sole determinant in whether programs are expanded or canceled, they should be considered.

Third, look at the percentage of alumni that contribute to the annual fund and at the size of the average fund gift. This information speaks volumes about the relationship that alumni have with their institution.

One final note: because many of your decisions are likely to have budgetary, personnel, and ultimately political overtones, make sure the data you collect are rock solid. Anything less, and your findings and conclusions will be challenged at every turn.

### **Breakthrough strategy # 2: Undertake a marketing evaluation of your academic majors**

The second breakthrough strategy is a marketing evaluation of your academic programs. The purpose of this evaluation is to determine:

- The academic programs you offer that are most attractive to prospective students
- The academic programs you offer that are not offered by a majority of your competition
- The academic programs you do not offer but, based on student demand, should be offering

This critically important information will allow you to:

- Direct resources into program areas that are most likely to grow
- Segment prospective students
- Take advantage of unused or underused capacity
- Focus fund-raising and donor appeals
- Prioritize your facilities plan

It is important to state clearly that this evaluation is not a traditional evaluation of your academic programs. Rather, it is an evaluation of their marketability—the interest they generate among prospective and even among current students.

When we undertake this evaluation for clients, we typically begin with a detailed environmental scan of the recruiting and marketing geography. We then look at regional employment and job trends to determine which job categories and types are on the ascent and which are on the descent. We also undertake a competitive/comparative analysis that looks at how you are compared with regional competitors. And finally, we survey a statistically valid number of prospective students to ascertain how they perceive you, to compare you with competing institutions, and to determine which academic programs are of most interest to them.

### **Breakthrough strategy # 3: Shorten time to degree**

One of the most important breakthrough strategies to consider is to shorten time to degree, which will achieve

four important goals. First, it effectively lowers the cost of your program. Suppose that tuition, room, and board cost \$15,000 a year and that the average student graduates in 4.5 years (9 semesters). The cost for tuition, room, and board would be \$67,500.

Now suppose that you lower the time to graduation to 8 semesters—three academic years and two summer terms. The cost for the same education is now reduced by the cost of the additional semester, to \$60,000. In addition, students will enter the workforce one year earlier. Assume a starting salary of, say, \$25,000. This effectively reduces the annual cost of the program from \$15,000 per year to \$9,142 per year before aid.

Second, shortening time to degree will help you attract better students—students who come from high school with more advanced placement credits and students who are more clearly focused on their career path.

Third, you will enhance retention. The students who enter these programs are outcomes oriented, and they are committed to moving through their programs as quickly as possible.

And finally, you will enhance the image of your institution. Word-of-mouth and media attention will increase your name recognition.

Shortening time to degree may take several forms. At the very least it means that students will assume more control over when they graduate. Second, it means that bachelor's degree students should consistently graduate in four years. Third, it may also mean that some of your programs may be completed in three. And finally, it may mean that you offer four-year BA/MA programs.

Of course, not all programs—and not all students—are suitable for accelerated degrees. Education degrees, for example, because of state requirements and certification usually cannot be managed in three years. Accredited programs in social work often require more classroom hours. However, programs in business and science are generally strong candidates for these types of programs.

It should also be noted that students who participate in these programs are generally better students, more likely to be residential, and able to take classes without having to be overly distracted by the need to work.

A commitment to shortening time to degree is likely to have a significant impact on how you operate. Chances are, more faculty will have to teach during the summer. Your academic advising program will have to be of high quality, and advisors will have to be accountable for the information they give. You will need to exercise more control over the scheduling of classes, especially prerequisites. There is the likelihood that the size of the core

curriculum may have to be reduced. And finally, you must be willing to spend dollars to promote these innovative programs. Having them without letting people know about them would be short-sighted.

Let me conclude by noting that shortening time to degree will have three secondary, though enormously advantageous, benefits. First, it will have a positive impact on retention. Second, it will reveal opportunities for strategic liaisons with businesses and other entities. And third, it will increase the opportunity to capture the interest of donors and foundations.

One final reminder. Shortening time to degree should not be construed as reducing programs or academic quality. Every commitment, as we will discuss below, must be made to create, preserve, and demonstrate academic quality at all times.

#### **Breakthrough strategy # 4: Emphasize academic quality**

One significant breakthrough strategy involves the need to both offer and demonstrate academic quality at all times.

The first challenge is to make sure your academic programs are of the highest possible quality. A quick read of almost all recruiting viewbooks and campaign case statements would have us believe that high academic quality is the norm: that every faculty member is fully credentialed, every lab fully equipped, and the hallways and dorm rooms are chock-full of the latest computer technology.

However, we all know that at many institutions, particularly those that are financially strapped, this simply is not true. Departments feature only one or two faculty members, too many 386s can be found in the computer labs, the library holdings are dated and declining, and roofs leak.

It is always dangerous to make blanket recommendations, but since I am already out on a limb with almost everything else I have said in this White Paper, one more general recommendation won't hurt. It is my contention that one reason why retention continues to be a problem is that students' initial high expectations, generated by communication with the institution and a quick campus tour, are increasingly not being met. In response, I suggest that small institutions, especially those that are having financial trouble, decrease their range of offerings so they can allocate more resources to increase the likelihood of high quality in fewer programs.

As part of the need to highlight academic quality, colleges and universities should consider identifying

academic "centers of excellence" and promoting those programs aggressively. "Centers of excellence" programs generally fit the following criteria:

#### Internal variables:

- Feature demonstrated academic quality
- Utilize up-to-date teaching and learning facilities and labs
- Feature outstanding faculty
- Are well resourced
- Have high or increasing enrollment
- Have positive revenue vs. expense ratios
- Have unused capacity

#### External variables:

- Include opportunities for internships
- Feature opportunities for student research
- Have limited competition
- Have great prospects for increased enrollment
- Have potential for high visibility within the marketplace
- Feature natural links to the surrounding community
- Demonstrate success in graduate school
- Lead to high-income jobs

Instead of marketing all programs the same way, the "centers of excellence" should be marketed and supported much more aggressively. Students interested in these programs should be segmented so they receive special communication. Extra financial aid should be available. Internships and opportunities for student research in these programs should be enhanced. Alumni from these programs should be organized. Fund-raising appeals should be made to provide more resources available to these centers of excellence.

One last thought about the need for academic quality. I constantly run into academic chairs and department heads who insist that their programs are high quality. While they may have an outstanding faculty, great resources, and a solid curriculum, I remind them that high quality without students is an extra expense that most institutions cannot afford. In times of tight budgets, academic quality must increasingly be validated by enrollment. While not all programs are designed to attract more students, most institutions cannot afford too many programs that do not.

Not only must academic quality be assured, it must be demonstrated. When asked to demonstrate quality, most colleges and universities focus on four elements:

- Quality of the faculty
- Quality of the facilities
- Quality of the curriculum
- Quality of the students

While these are extraordinarily important components of academic quality, they only tell part of the story. Students of all stripes are interested in outcomes—particularly jobs and graduate schools. In other words, they want to know what your alumni are doing. They want to read about the jobs they have, the graduate schools they are attending, and the interesting and exciting things they are doing. They want data, and they want anecdotes.

Surprisingly, this isn't news for one segment of higher education—community colleges. Perhaps more than any other type of college or university, they have long understood the need to collect and use outcomes data. They know where their graduates are working and what schools and graduate schools they are attending.

### **Breakthrough strategy # 5: Raise dollars**

I am not a fund-raising expert. And while I don't profess to know a whole lot about how to raise money, I fully understand and appreciate the margin of excellence that successful fund-raising programs often provide.

Based on most funding patterns, it is widely accepted that tuition and fees will provide an adequate flow of resources to keep your doors open. However, if you want to provide excellent programs and have excellent facilities, if you want to recruit and retain the best faculty, and if you want to offer scholarships, not merely loans, then you need other dollars—often unrestricted dollars—to provide that extra margin. In a nutshell, this is the case and the rationale for an expanded fund-raising effort.

My colleagues in advancement tell me today's fund-raising climate is extremely competitive. But they also tell me three other very interesting things. First, today's aging alumni are asset rich and cash poor. Second, more money—trillions of dollars by some estimates—will move from one generation to another in the next 10 years than at any time in history. And third, more alumni than ever before are interested in estate planning.

Recently I read a small, though excellent, booklet from the National Center for Nonprofit Boards entitled *Fearless Fund-Raising*. The booklet noted that people tend to give for highly personal reasons and that the best match between donors and colleges is when the needs of the institution closely dovetail with those of the donor. The writer noted, "Consciously or not, people give to something." The writer also noted that donors like to give to:

- Make a difference
- Share their good fortune
- Express their beliefs in a tangible way
- Invest in a worthy cause
- Demonstrate their commitment

- Respond to an invitation from someone they respect
- Join with others they know and trust
- Accept an opportunity to change the status quo

I know that it will take more than a snazzy case statement and a couple of banquets to raise money. Like anything worthwhile, raising dollars is hard, hard work. But even as you calculate the costs, consider the benefits. CASE (the Council for Advancement and Support of Education) tells me that it takes, on average, about 18 cents to raise a dollar. Frankly, the notion of yielding 82 cents on an 18 cent investment strikes me as a great return.

I strongly believe that quality programs cannot survive, much less thrive, on tuition revenue. The dollars need to come from somewhere else; the dollars need to come from outside. Consider ramping up your fund-raising efforts. Hire the best people. Give them the resources and encouragement they need. And support their effort.

### **Breakthrough strategy # 6: Write and fund an image-enhancement plan**

Of all the breakthrough strategies that I have outlined, this is the one that is almost guaranteed to have campus-wide support.

Whereas breakthrough strategies 1-5 were designed to help you deal with sometimes complex program and price issues, strategy # 6 has but one simple objective: to make you known in the marketplace. It does little good to have solid programs and great resources if no one knows. While quality is always important, quality that is appreciated, valued, and known by your target audiences is even more so.

To survive in today's marketplace, you must be known. You must have a reputation for qualities and characteristics that your students and donors value. You must hold an enviable market position. Your name—your brand—must be romanced, leveraged, and promoted.

It is not my purpose at this point to present a step-by-step overview on how to write an image-enhancement plan. I have addressed this topic at length in numerous seminars and articles, including a previous Stamats White Paper. I do, however, want to touch briefly on some key plan components. Generally, sound plans include the following components:

- *Target audiences:* The people in whose minds you are trying to build an image
- *Vivid descriptors:* The words and phrases that you want your target audiences to think about when they hear your name. In general, these descriptors represent values that the institution and target audiences both value

- *Target geography:* The geography in which your target audiences live
- *Image action plans:* Specific plans and strategies that describe the activities you will undertake to affirm your vivid descriptors in the minds of your target audiences
- *Time lines:* When you do what you do, a master calendar of activities
- *Budget:* Dollars that will be spent

As the president or senior administrator, your job is to empower and support the planning process. This includes designating a qualified leader, providing financial resources consistent with the image goals you have established, addressing internal issues of territoriality, moving the planning process forward, and assigning clear accountability.

One word of caution. This final breakthrough strategy is built on the presumption of quality. If you have poor programs and facilities and launch an image-enhancement plan, two things will happen. First, more people will be aware of your poor program. And second, whatever recruiting gains you might achieve will be countered by increased problems in retention.

### Conclusion

My purpose for this paper was to present a handful of breakthrough strategies that will significantly increase your ability to recruit students and raise dollars.

These strategies are not presented as a panacea or a cure-all, and I realize that this isn't a one-size-fits-all proposition. Individual circumstances and needs will make some breakthrough strategies immediately more attractive—and suitable—than others. Furthermore, I am in no way proposing that these are the only breakthrough strategies you should consider. There are myriad others relating to financial aid, off-campus programming, distance learning, and other issues.

In many respects it is not so much the individual strategies that I am endorsing but the need to think and act strategically. Tactical responses to changes in the marketplace are generally short-lived, expensive, and deceptive. They generally don't deal with problems as much as delay their impact. It is only through realistic vision and appropriate strategic actions that our colleges will move ahead significantly.

I realize that it is sometimes very hard to separate sound strategic-management principles from personalities. The same faculty member or administrator who has served the institution faithfully for 25 years is too often the person whose department or skills are either declining or no longer up to the tasks at hand. Thinking strategically requires you to balance the very real and sometimes

painful issues of tenure and governance on the one hand and issues of compassion and concern on the other. Sometimes the same people and practices that give life and character to a college or university are the ones who now stand in the way of meaningful change.

None of these strategies is pain free, and I would be misleading you if I implied otherwise. However, the realities of the marketplace are even more painful. What are tough decisions now will only become excruciating or even impossible decisions later. It is time to act strategically.

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