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Competitive Marketing and Planning Strategy in Higher Education

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Academic Leadership Journal

[Competitive Marketing and Planning Strategy in Higher Education](#)

Introduction

With growing business markets, an increasingly large pool of nontraditional students, company implemented diversity initiatives, and a dire need for a well-trained workforce; American institutions of higher learning are facing a huge challenge. When it comes to the nuances of sales and marketing, most people do not consider the relevance to colleges and universities. Many colleges and universities are facing some daunting financial challenges. These schools are facing some tremendous perplexities in attracting new students because they tend to cost more than state colleges and university. Liberal arts colleges charge tuitions that range from \$15,000 to \$25,000, which is lower than an Ivy League institution but much higher than what is charged by public universities and community colleges (Zhao 2002).

This challenge, even though qualitative in many respects, has had and will continue to have a huge financial baring by which all colleges and universities must stand ready to confront head on if they are to remain in operation. Frederick Balderson (1995) wrote in *Managing Today's University*,

Alert faculty members and university leaders need to determine which opportunities must be pursued out of the precious margin of internally available resources; which ones should be initiated if new external resources can be attracted; and which ones are not of high priority or not truly appropriate to the university's self-funded mission (p.36)

The overall implication here is that strategic planning is a critical piece of ensuring the viability of many colleges and universities. Whereas many institutions already have a visionary plan in place, it is important for college and university administrators to have a realistic grip on the institution's strongest position, academic and financial, as well as any foreseen weak point that has potential to be a threat to current and future operations (Higher Education Review, 2004, 10). To that end, colleges and universities are strongest when they independently assess its vulnerability with respect to its current academic and financial goals relative to its desired global competitiveness.

Over the years, institutions of higher learning have become key players in today's global economy. Higher education is now big business by which all institutions must be willing to play hard in order to produce and succeed. Adopting a Social Darwinian frame of mind is not the train of thought being advocated. However, American colleges and universities must adjust to meet the needs of an increasingly global economy or expect to perish to its competition.

The board of trustees and university presidents should require strategic and marketing plans for each academic department and program each year. The use of business paradigm methods of strategy and strategic planning is very necessary to the growth and survival of all colleges and universities. This paper discusses the concept of adopting business paradigm methodologies of strategy and strategic

planning as guard for operation and survival.

History

Historically, colleges and universities have been extremely slow in adapting to societal change (Smith and Tamer, 1984). Because marketing and strategy are not at the top of the administration's things-to-do list, many institutions find themselves in reactive positions to repair damages left from their inability to adjust. However, in a more proactive position, colleges and universities can better serve their student body, faculty, and the community at large by having a clearly defined strategic plan that includes both a solid mission and a vision for the future (Smith and Tamer, 1984). Having such not only allows the institution to address the needs of its academic community, but also demonstrate to the world that it is a premier institution that has a clear understanding of who it is and where it wants to be in the future.

Colleges and universities are not the first types of organizations that come to mind when the topic is marketing and strategy, and indeed it is rather new to many colleges and universities themselves. Tuition has never covered all expenses in modern times but has been an important contributor to schools' bottom lines, of course. In the height of the baby boom years there was little concern over attracting students to campus and in fact the onus was on students to construct a personal and academic portfolio demonstrating their ability to contribute to the quality of the schools to which they applied.

The times of anxiously awaiting an acceptance letter from the institution of choice are largely done now that the first of the baby boomers are beginning to enter retirement. Those that still can command such pursuit by new high school graduates – stalwarts such as Harvard, MIT and those well-known in specific fields – collectively represent only a small percentage of all institutions of higher education currently operating in the nation. Others are obliged to actively woo high school seniors. Tuition receipts carry more weight in the balance sheets of these institutions, and they also must actively recruit those who may feel led to contribute to their alma mater in the future (Ingram, 1994).

Strategy and Planning

According to a 2005 mixed method study investigating the perceptions of higher education leaders, researcher, Pamela Cress, found that of the most problematic areas impacting the achievement of institutional benchmarks visioning and strategic planning were highly common (p.112). With respect to these findings, the lack of a holistic vision and strategic plan has a significant and extremely negative impact on an institution's future financial and academic plans. In order for an institution to expand on its mission while meeting market and budgetary demands, there must be a strategic plan in place; one that allows administrators to individually assess important entities of the institution's operation while lending a holistic view of current and opportunistic trends.

Strategic planning a hot topic, but many organizations' strategic plans can be found in the same bottom drawers as last year's budget, having arisen from agonizing meetings that result only in a restatement of the company's goals, rather than in any real strategy for out-competing the competition. Though "everyone" talks about strategy, there are an amazing number of managers and organizations that apparently are confused in the word's and actions' meanings (Michel, 1993). Strategy is a set of options based on sound assumptions, but Michael Porter holds that too many confuse its concepts with management tools, expecting them to be able to substitute for sound strategy.

The problem in higher education is that most colleges have never done a yearly SWOT analysis or never spend time determining their competitive advantage or strategy in the market. Most colleges do not use strategic planning as a means of setting priorities or assessing how resources will be allocated.

In today's business environment that changes so quickly and dramatically, Harvard's Michael Porter argues that the purpose of strategy for the future is not so much that of determining where the organization is headed based on what the organization wants, but is a method of coping with competition in a manner that will allow the organization to overcome obstacles to achieve its goals (Rowley, Lujan and Dolence, 1997). In order to assess competitors' strengths as well as the organization's strengths in light of industry conditions and trends, it is necessary for organizations to evaluate more than simply what competitors are doing.

Porter's Five Forces emerged from his analysis of this realization. Competition in any industry, including academia, does not arise from differences between competitors in that single industry. It also is dependent on the underlying economics of the industry, as discussed above. Porter's Five Forces provides a practical model that also addresses economic principles.

Porter maintains that strategy is not found on a direct line from point A to point B, that it is not the pursuit of a single ideal position. Intel's Andrew Grove supports this when he speaks of Intel's history and the surprises that have arisen in the past. Had Intel remained doggedly adherent to its stated strategy in place at the time that some of its past opportunities arose, there is a strong possibility that it could be nonexistent today. At the same time, neither could it chase after every fad that came along during its 30 years of existence (Birnbaum, 2000). Many universities have done just this, as have many corporations. Those that have often later rue their earlier decisions, particularly if the organization pursued the management fad without attempting to find a point of integration between it and the organization.

Pursuit of the latest management fads also can steer the organization away from its stated strategy, often surreptitiously and without great awareness on the part of senior management. For this and other reasons, assessment of stated strategy is critical, for without measurement, no organization could determine whether its strategy is working.

Of course there are alternatives available to every organization, as there are alternatives available to every individual. The sticking point for the organization is determining which of the possibilities for the future that it has identified are most likely to be realized. In identifying trends and working from the information provided through them, then of course it is critical that those trends be properly identified. Effective strategy includes first identifying emerging trends and then working to enhance the organization's competitive advantage both in the present and in the future, when the industry will have reached the point that is currently beginning to be recognized.

The need for properly identifying trends is obvious. If the organization fails to do this, there will be competitors in the industry that do not. Because of this, strategic planning can provide an organizational mandate by which institutions can meet and perhaps exceed institutional goals (Kono and Antonucci, 2006). When others have correctly identified the likely future based on current information, they of course will be working for building their own competitive advantage. That

organization unable to correctly identify emerging trends will not be in a position to take full advantage of them as they continue to emerge. Of course strategy can be changed, but any delay in pursuing competitive advantage for the future allows competitors to gain advantage for themselves. Given the speed at which business moves today, there is no margin for error.

Academia traditionally has trailed business in its grasp of trends. It must be and remain aware of trends – not fads – in business so that it continues to be relevant in its “production” of graduates who will be seeking employment after finishing their degrees and leaving the institution (Montgomery and Porter, 1991).

In addition to the need for correctly identifying currently-emerging trends and planning according to the paths those trends are most likely to follow in the future, the organization also needs to find ways of competing in its industry that sets it apart from the competition. Achieving operational effectiveness is critical today, but many organizations confuse working for increased effectiveness and strategic positioning.

Strategic positioning amounts to choosing to compete in a different way than do competitors. This is the best way to economically achieve future organizational plans because it provides systematic approach to addressing current trends (Heim, 2002). Those organizations confusing achieving greater operational effectiveness with strategy risk placing too much emphasis on internal procedures and processes. While this needs to be a goal for any organization, the one that emphasizes efficiency over strategic positioning risks competitive convergence, resulting in institutions that look all too similar to prospective students and their families, causing them to make their choices based on cost alone. Moreover, trends show many institutions that have strategic plans in place fail to continually assess success achievement and adjust according to their findings (Zuckerman, 2004). While having a strategic plan in place is a positive move for any organization, not following up to assess progress makes the effort of producing the plan a complete waste of time.

Leslie and Fretwell (1996) address the issues of media attack on universities while providing insight on methods of and reasons for changing mission, organization, focus, teaching methods and learning assessment. Educational institutions that operate outside the commercial market but nonetheless are directly affected by them must learn to be resilient in their own direction and cognizant of what competitors are doing (Leslie and Fretwell, 1996). They must be aware of changes in their markets and financial patterns both those changes that have been realized and those predicted for the future.

The latest US Census data indicates that the Hispanic segment of the general population is the most rapidly growing, both in numbers of individuals and in their economic standing within the country. While this is news to many, it is only confirmation to those aware of the predictions made in the mid-1980s that such would be the case by the turn of the century. Those institutions cognizant of demographics predictions are in much better strategic position to take advantage of that change. The same patterns will apply to changes for the future as well. While institutions must not engage in Balderston's (1995) fad-chasing, they still must remain aware of the changes in the world outside their walls (Borden and Banta, 1994).

The problem with many institutions today is that they are so tied to the original history and mission of the institution that they have a hard time adopting a business paradigm that requires rapid change and market response. Many academic traditionalists get very upset when you start referring to students as

customers and education as a business. This is a shortsighted view if often what causes the death of many small private colleges.

“The Death of a Small College,” written by Martin Van Der Werf, May 12, 2000, issue of The Chronicle of Higher Education, draws attention to the need for strategic planning and a management structure in marketing management in small private liberal arts institutions of higher education. The article focuses on the closing of Bradford, a small college located 35 miles north of Boston, due to problems with poor strategic planning on the part of the faculty and the administration, which is opposed to what Balderson recommends. The article centers on the struggle of small colleges to attract new students. It focuses on how small colleges are losing to the competition in the marketplace to win students away from the large public universities that offer more degree programs and have more resources for support. Today, only 17% of all students enroll in small liberal arts colleges compared to 50% in 1960.

In the article, George C. Dehne, a New York based consultant specializing strategic planning at small colleges says, “In order to survive, colleges must identify a clear niche, endorsed by everyone on campus, and must market it relentlessly.”

In “Death of a small college,” the writer, talks about how all colleges are going to have to engage in strategic planning and develop clear goals that address things like positioning, pricing, distribution, and strategy. Many small colleges will continue close until they can develop or hire leaders with strategic planning and marketing expertise. This situation represents a significant change from the way that colleges and universities have operated in the past. Until now, colleges have never really had a competitive environment where they have to go out and sell students on attending their institution. Many schools are realizing the biggest untapped market is working adult students, with corporate tuition assistance and reimbursement programs. The problem is that these schools are lacking individuals with the leadership and planning skills that are necessary to capitalize on this opportunity.

Higher education will change dramatically, according to the October 27, 2000 article in the Chronicle of Higher Education. Arthur Levine’s article, “The Future of Colleges: 9 Inevitable Changes” describes an environment where several forces will transform the way colleges and universities will look, operate, and deliver education. These forces include shifting demographics, new technology, and the growth of for-profit institutions. (Levine 2000)

The first change raised in the article is that higher education providers will become even more numerous and more diverse. Competition from national and global universities has dramatically threatened the survival of small, less selective private colleges with small endowments. Many of these schools face grow challenges, especially if only offer programs for traditional undergraduates on a traditional campus community. The most successful institutions will be those that can do strategic marketing planning, carve out niches, and develop new programs that will drive students to the institution. Part of this planning will include investment in advertising and marketing initiatives aimed at developing institutional brand names and student prospect leads. Growth in this climate will be hinged on organizational changes that support environment that is market driven and sales oriented. Because today’s students have so many choices, enrollment personnel will have to become more skilled at selling prospective students on the benefits of their institution over another. (Levine 2000)

Higher education leadership should begin to think and act more like an entrepreneur. Because of its

practical nature, possessing an entrepreneurial frame of mind would give the institution an advantage over its competitors. Whether it is higher education or business, the strategic framework should be underpinned by the same characteristics: reflective, innovative, brand supportive dominant logic, and exceptional capabilities (Beverland, Napoli, and Lindgreen, 2007).

- Business operations should always be reflective. This allows organizations to continually assess its progress as relative to its strategic plan. It allows institutional leaders to question whether or not it is operating in the desired position.
- Business should be innovative. In order to maintain an advantage over competition, institutional leaders must implement programs that are not only desirous of the general academic population but also prevent the institution as progressive and innovative as an incubator of new knowledge, new research, and new learning concepts. For instance, instead of teaching management by theory, most progressive business schools have implemented the pedagogy of teaching business students critical problem solving thinking skills by the use of real world case studies. This allows business students and opportunity to get a realistic idea of the business situation and how to apply their knowledge to solve the situation. Cases may be roll-played in class or used as an interactive module via computer software.
- In today's competitive markets, it is extremely important for colleges and universities to operate with a brand supportive dominant logic. That is, organizational operations, including degree programs, should be performed with a market oriented knowledge approach. Instead of operating under general circumstances, institutions should tailor its operations and degree programs toward its desired consumer. For example, many colleges and universities are offering programs and services geared toward working adults. Because they know that time and flexibility are of essence for this desired demographic, college administrators have implemented processes that make enrolling and attending class more appealing. Because many working adults are attending school to advance their career, the need for theory is little. Instead, there is a greater focus on practical learning; knowledge that this demographic can apply right away to their current working environment.
- In order to remain productive, organizations must exhibit to its current and future consumers that it is capable. However in order to meet future goals, this capability may need to be shown as exceptional. Doing so shows that the organization is well aware of the consumer's needs and aims its operations around those needs. This is why the overall idea of student-centeredness is so important in higher education. Students want to feel confident that they are getting the best product and service for their dollar.

Strategic planning is a good procedure for future growth. However, it is also a good plan for survival. Many colleges and universities are slowly moving from a position of comfort to one of survival. The criteria listed above can provide institutions with a competitive edge; however they are highly contingent on the institution's culture, structure, and decision-making processes, which help determine the organization's overall outlook on the importance of strategic planning.

Value of Strategic Planning

Many higher education administrators perceive strategic planning as an expense whereas millions of important dollars are wastefully appropriated from the annual budget. On the other hand, many

institutions have a strategic plan in place but neglect to revisit it periodically to assess the organization's progress. In light of this potentially fatal neglect, having a strategic plan is more of an investment that can extremely fast forward an institution's future. This is because strategic planning affords a company the opportunity to better manage its operation: build competent teams, control finances, define program success factors, and increase accountability.

Strategic planning is a tool used to holistically develop an institution. Inasmuch the body needs holistic treatment to cure an illness, organizations need a holistic approach to curing many of its ills and prevent future occurrences with a very strong prognosis (Gouillart, 1995). Strategic planning provides this cure. It helps create a progressive organizational culture that many administrators can use to promote teambuilding faculty and staff and a positive work environment. By having a flexible and motivating strategic framework on hand, organizational leaders have a good opportunity to reposition the institution and perhaps maximize its potential.

Institutional leadership oftentimes find themselves putting out unnecessary fires in the workplace. Many, if not most, of these fires ignite due to poor planning, a lack of communication, and a lack of a defined vision for the organization (Johnson, 2007, 88). Without these major players, administrators and the operations they run are completely crippled. Strategic planning can help curve this because it provides a clear direction for business operation. Strategic plans help administrators to not only build strategy, but also help prepare and empower individuals who are capable of making good decisions. Throughout history, the value of a strategic plan has been a heavily debated issue. Many productive administrators swear by them while many moderately, or perhaps unsuccessful organizational leaders see them as an overly prepared waste of paper. Regardless of the latter, there is indeed value in strategic planning; especially in terms of managing a well-trained and empowered workforce. Having an empowered workforce not only helps build a competent organization, but also allows all stakeholders to share the overall responsibility and governance of the organization.

Shared Governance

Shared governance is a process whereby students, faculty, university administration, alumni, and perhaps the immediate community share in the decision-making process for the institution. Instead of a chosen few administrators carrying all decision-making power, defined stakeholders have a voice in matters that may impact the academic and residential communities. This contemporary approach to higher education administration is one that has shown positive results because it employs a holistic approach to decision-making. One thing to remember, however, is that structured guidelines that define how the shared governance decision-making process is carried out are a determining factor in the program's success (Ecung, 2007). This is because when dealing with a communally representative body, many personal ideas and agendas can cloud the goals of the entire decision-making process. To that end, having objective guidelines, including parliamentary practices for meetings, can have a positive impact on shared governance in higher education. Furthermore, collaborative decision-making, when performed under an umbrella type set of guidelines provide university administrators with a tool to assess issues that impact academic and financial trends: various campus cultures, student enrollment, accreditations, and student and professional populations being served (Ecung, 2007).

Expansion of Programs and Services

The days in where academicians could disappear into some remote corner of campus, spend their lives

in satisfying and intriguing – but possibly irrelevant – research while letting the world go its own way are long past. Most institutions have recognized that the four years following high school is not their only chance to affect students' lives, that there is an adult contingent that can provide a secondary market for their services (Ingram 1994).

Thus institutions need to have programs that are responsive, not only to young students, but also to the needs of working adult students. The adult student no longer is the bored housewife whose children have gone off the school and who needs something to do during the day. S/he now is more likely to be a busy professional with full time job and family responsibilities around which pursuit of an additional degree must revolve (Rowley and Sherman, 1998).

The higher education marketplace has changed dramatically. Those undergraduates that the institution successfully recruited educated and released to the corporate world often return for an advanced degree. Often wanting in a manner or fashion that does not conflict with their work and family obligations. There is also a huge market for students that never completed their undergraduate degrees and are looking to complete their studies as a working adult. They are on campus for only one purpose and have no need for the extraneous extracurricular activities that the institution likely has invested much effort into creating for undergraduates. Rather, they need classes offered at times that produce the least conflict with job and family responsibilities (Schnidtlein and Milton, 1990). The institution offering its introductory MBA classes only at 10 am three days a week is unlikely to attract the best candidates for the degree.

Duke University was one of the pioneers in attracting successful adults to its School of Business when it began offering weekend-only classes nearly 20 years ago, with the addition of an intensive single week of study during the summer months. Designed for the working professional seeking to expand professional opportunities, it was able to greatly increase its numbers of enrollees in its MBA program, one of the country's most prestigious and one of the university's most profitable departments. Duke's development of a weekend program was similar to how a business develops a product that caters to market niche. Without the use of some type of strategic planning, the Duke weekend MBA program would have probably never been developed.

Distance Learning

For at least 30 years, distance learning has proliferated the education industry carrying various modes of education accessibility to a higher echelon. It has managed to answer the call of the steadily increasing nontraditional student demographic. It also has been a thoroughfare to a better quality of life for working adults because they are now more able to get an education while maintaining employment as well as a standard of living.

Distance learning programs have caught a negative wrap over recent years, more particularly from traditionalists who advocate on the behalf of traditional institutions of higher learning. Many may argue that this vastly growing trend is causing a gap in the quality of instruction of students versus the almighty dollar desire of education corporations and larger universities. Is this really the case? Regardless of an institution's outstanding reputation, student satisfaction, graduate success rate, and regional accreditation, these types of programs have shown to be just as successful, if not better than traditional programs and are increasingly breaking stigma established by concrete academic traditionalists (US Department of Education, 2004). Many institutions are also finding distance learning as a way to

manage a larger student body without necessarily spending millions of developmental funds on building facilities such as classrooms and administrative offices.

Distance learning can be the answer to many academic institutions' financial issues. It provides colleges and universities an opportunity to not only increase local enrollment, but also increase the overall potential of its product by reaching a more diverse and perhaps higher qualified demographic. Distance learning also gives institutions an opportunity to gain much needed worldwide corporate partnerships by training an increased number of students by use of corporate integrated case studies and training programs with an international focus (O'Brien and Deans, 1996). This helps build a more global prospective for the institution as well as a better image and brand name.

Better Student Retention with Distance Learning

According to the Distance Education Demonstration Program implemented by the U.S. Department of Education (2004), there is not a significant difference in the persistence and completion for cohorts of learners who are enrolled in solely distance education or mix-based programs (mix of distance education and onsite courses). However, relying on the premise that distance education is not necessarily for everyone, the demonstration found that there is a greater success in completion in programs at the mix-based program enrollment level. The twist here is that there is a greater rate of retention of those enrolled in distance education programs than on-campus in graduate programs. To add there is a dramatically less rate of retention of learners enrolled in lower level programs both distant and on-campus. In fact, graduation rates have been known to reach 90% respectively (US Department of Education, 2004).

Post-Secondary Education

Slumping financial markets, a stagnant national employment rate, and an aging demographic has caused a great demand for post-secondary education (Laureate, 2007). Whereas there is a rise in middle class citizenship and a need for a well-educated, well-trained workforce, colleges and universities have not been able to adjust to meet this demand due to financial constraints. Much of this is due to many institutions of higher learning having a dependency on fully funded academic and training programs (Laureate, 2007). To that end, more and more colleges and universities are finding they are turning to private investments or become privatized in order to remain competitive.

Overall, "universities have scrambled to sustain access and quality by diversifying revenues, streamlining costs, and adopting technology" (Lyll and Sell, 2006, 3). This has allowed them to address demands for higher education while meeting demands of an ever-shrinking budget.

A Global Approach

In this day and age, colleges and universities should operate with a developing more global approach. Doing so aids in achieving a global academic community, which helps recruit a diverse and highly qualified student body and faculty. This is because both highly qualified students and faculty are more drawn to the benefits of a professional community than the overall affiliation of the institution (Clark, 1980). Retrospectively, this is what helps create a strong brand for institutions, which will eventually aid in its financial sustainability and academic competitiveness. Competing globally allows colleges and universities to maintain higher placement rates for its graduates, an increasingly important factor for

stakeholders such as faculty, students, and employers who plan to succeed in the real world. Of importance and most relative is the notion that more global higher education centers “require graduates to develop a philosophy about scholarship, education and leadership accommodate diversity; and understand how to continue to learn and adapt to changing situations” (Austin, 2002). This derives from the well rounded and practical educational experience the more global approaches to higher education can bring.

Conclusion

Institutions must be responsive to demographic shifts that have occurred in higher education by engaging in ongoing strategic planning similar to that which is done in the business world. Taking such steps will allow schools to be viable in the market in the future and will allow the development of competitive marketing strategies. Strategic planning is not only a tool for the future, but also one of survival. The use of these planning methods are critical to identifying the market segments most likely to assist the organization in achieving its goals and then design programs and schedules that will best meet the needs of those market segments (Hill and Jones, 1997). Colleges and universities must reposition them selves in order to meet increasing demands. Having a comprehensive strategic plan is the best way to bring about this new positioning.

The days of relying solely on an institution’s reputation and word of mouth to recruit students are long gone. The most successful institutions today recognized the importance of strategic planning. They look for clear gains that will increase their chances of academic and financial sustainability. University presidents and university trustees should require strategic plan each year for each academic department and program. The use of these processes must become a vital part of the management and the governance of all colleges and universities. There is value strategic planning. When used properly, the benefits can be overwhelming.

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