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**5 Marketing Questions**

July 23, 2010

By [Elizabeth Scarborough](#)

In these tight budget times, colleges and universities are intensely focused on protecting and growing their revenue sources. This is drawing increased attention to the marketing function. Marketers with a successful track record inside higher education or from the corporate world are being considered for "chief marketing officer" positions. I have spoken with lots of candidates for such positions, and those who already hold them, and many worry that the institutions they are considering working with do not yet fully embrace the fundamental principles of marketing. Moreover, there is often an inherent bias against marketing due to the lingering impression that marketing "cheapens the academy." Here are the questions I'd advise a candidate ask to find out if they can truly be a successful marketer at an institution.

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**What makes your institution special and unique in relation to its competitors?**

What you don't want to hear is, "We offer excellent academic programs." "Excellent" is a lame and meaningless word to marketers. The knee-jerk response to this from any marketer worth his or her salt would be, "Well, what makes the institution so excellent?" I would estimate that about 10 percent (if that) of U.S. colleges and universities are able to answer this question about differentiators in less than 30 seconds. And, if you can't articulate and prove what makes your institution "excellent," clearly and succinctly, you'll never be able to develop an effective marketing plan. A reasonable and realistic answer to this question for many presidents would be, "We are not really sure and I am committed to figuring that out." An institution doesn't have to be completely differentiated from every other college in the country, but you need to be substantially differentiated from your top five competitors. Some institutions are further along down the path of committing the time and money required to uncover and develop these differentiators. For example, Steve Briggs, president of Berry College, in Georgia, would say, "Berry is building the premier work experience program in the nation. Every student has the opportunity to graduate with a first-rate resume that combines a challenging academic program with four years of meaningful work experience."

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**What is your vision for the role marketing should play on this campus?**

What you don't want to hear is a lot of talk about taglines, logos, marks, brochures, ads, media relations, the Web, and the latest social media opportunities. What you do want to hear is genuine interest in understanding and proactively managing the identity of the college coupled with a willingness to embrace the distinctiveness of the institution. The cherry on top would be interest in aligning the institution (and its organizational structure) around its brand strategy and a strict stance on how to deal with "renegade marketers" that commonly exist in each division, department or unit of the institution. Having a president who believes your internal constituents need to be on that proverbial "same page" in terms of understanding and promoting the institution's unique identity is critical to your success as a marketer. A president who supports the role of his or her chief marketing officer as the overseer and enforcer of a consistently defined and promoted "brand" is the president that you want to hire you. St. Edward's University president George Martin would answer this question by explaining, "Marketing is critical to the success of the university's vision and strategic plan, and the VP for marketing and enrollment management is one of my four direct reports. Having her as part of the senior leadership team helps ensure that the work of the marketing office is integrated with the academic, advancement and other areas of the university."

**Where does marketing best fit within the organizational structure of the institution?**

What you don't want to hear is, "in advancement" or "in enrollment

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management." These are signals that your potential future boss does not embrace marketing as its own discipline. More and more, institutions are lifting the marketing function out of these divisions so that it can operate independently with a chief marketing officer leading the charge and sitting on cabinet. The marketing of an institution should impact the attitudes, opinions, buying, and fund-raising decisions of a variety of stakeholders that cross through, but go beyond, the advancement and enrollment divisions. Neil Kerwin, president of American University answers this question by saying, "Marketing is a strategic function. We put the chief communications and marketing officer at the president's cabinet level for one reason: Participation in the strategic decisions of the institution, as well as communications and marketing guidance about them, is indispensable."

#### What are your marketing goals?

What you don't want to hear is, "To become the premiere liberal arts college in the Midwest." Or, "To become a nationally recognized public research university." These are "visionary goals" that can effectively rally the enthusiasm of a campus. But you can't build a marketing plan around them. How would you chart your institution's progress towards attaining that "premiere" status? Instead, you want your interviewer's response to be along the lines of, "By 2015, we want to increase enrollment of traditional-age students by 30 percent, increase alumni participation in the annual fund by 15 percent, double the number of partnerships we have with area businesses, and increase the extent to which adults in our state identify our institution as "excellent" from 28 percent to 40 percent." This response would be music to any marketer's ear because it allows for the development of a focused marketing plan with tangible goals. Good marketers are not scared off by quantifiable goals. They relish them, partly because they provide the beacons necessary to create a realistic budget. If you want to increase name recognition 300 percent, you are likely to need a lot more money than if you want to increase it by 20 percent. This might not be a fair question, though. I couldn't even find a President with a good answer to this one.

#### What is your comfort level with taking risks with regard to marketing?

The tools being used to market institutions of higher education are evolving rapidly. One of our primary target audiences (high school students) is typically among the "early adopters" of new technologies. This forces us to live on the cutting edge as well. Successful higher ed marketers learn to live in a world of constant testing of new strategies. Some work and some don't. A good president supports a culture of testing these new strategies and understands that only some will be "home runs" that wind up generating visibility, shaping the image of the institution, and leading to wild success in enrollment and fund-raising. You don't want a president who thinks a printed brochure or a Web page is the answer to every marketing opportunity or problem. A president who has at least a moderate risk tolerance, who encourages her chief marketer offer to pursue new tools, who understands marketing should bob and weave based on the preferences and habits of the institution's target audiences is the kind of president you want to work for. You want to work for a president like Brian Rosenberg at Macalester College, who recently appeared [in a hilariously self-deprecating video](#) that was posted on YouTube, viewed almost 50,000 times in the first month, and exposed Macalester to a new, worldwide audience.

*Elizabeth Scarborough is CEO of SimpsonScarborough.*

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