A New Marketing Culture in Higher Education

How Leaders are Making Marketing a Strategic Imperative and Driving Digital Transformation
It’s a gross understatement to say that today’s higher education marketers are facing an entirely different landscape than their predecessors. The near and long-term impacts of a global pandemic on higher education have been well-documented. In the pre-COVID-19 higher education environment, achieving enrollment, retention, fundraising and other revenue goals was already a challenge. Unfortunately, today’s marketing leaders are forced to think differently, accelerate decision making, and take immediate action on how to best deliver for their institutions with even fewer resources, staff and budget.

Pre-pandemic, connected and personalized digital experiences were standard in the eyes of most consumers and were quickly becoming an expectation for higher education. According to the Chronicle of Higher Education article, *The New College CMO - How and Why Institutions are Expanding the Role of the Chief Marketing Officer*, the most impactful higher education marketing leaders were already focused on the broader student lifecycle. They were driving innovation and leading digital transformation efforts that impacted the many experiences of prospective and current students, alumni and donors.

Today, the traditional face-to-face education experience is as uncertain as ever. Virtual instruction and engagement has quickly become the standard for all institutions. Even if higher education marketers didn’t play a major role in innovation or transformation, they certainly do now.

In this new normal, the institutions that have treated marketing as a strategic imperative will be far better equipped to rapidly innovate their strategy and operations as needed. They have executive-level leadership who treat marketing as an investment rather than a cost center, they value the role of marketing as strategists, not order takers, and, they have recruited the best marketing talent from the business world to give marketing a seat at the table to influence and drive strategy institution-wide.

We spoke to a series of higher education marketing leaders to better understand what they are doing to innovate, drive change and instill a new marketing culture at their respective institutions. These are their stories.
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Building a Brand House and a New Marketing Culture

Transforming an institution’s brand is no small task, but it was the one handed to Dan Dillon when he joined Arizona State University (ASU) as Chief Marketing Officer in 2013. At the time, ASU’s President, Michael Crow, understood that ASU critically needed a shift in its public perception away from its “party school” persona that defined it for many years and towards its academic excellence and contributions to research and innovation. According to Dillon, now CEO of ASU Enterprise Partners, that brand shift could never truly happen without strategic alignment across ASU and a change to the institution’s marketing culture.

“When I came into ASU, marketing wasn’t a central function,” he says. “We were really a house of brands with each one operating differently and we lacked one unifying brand platform that could guide the university toward a common understanding of who we actually were.”

Dillon and his team took a unique approach to unifying all of the brands across the institution—they built an internal marketing agency. That agency, now known as the “Enterprise Marketing Hub,” operates in a “franchise” model, versus a “federated” model, where

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Dan Dillon, Arizona State University CMO
business units, schools and departments across ASU can leverage consultative services free of charge as long as they agree to a level of governance around key marketing elements, such as messaging, aesthetics, segmentation, channels and more. “The Hub has really helped us to build relationships with marketers and communicators across campus that don’t report into our team,” says Dillon. “It also gave us the opportunity to build brand on behalf of all academic and administrative units while guiding the university towards a more common way of collaborating with the central marketing organization.”

One of the primary outputs of the Hub was the establishment of a Core Brand Group. Now in its fourth year, the Core Brand Group leverages an annual “brand tracker,” which measures brand perceptions across every constituency the brand is trying to impact. The key was to use data insights to change the culture in how they spoke about the brand, report on brand health, and where to place their focus. The success of the brand tracker has taken on a life of its own where ASU now offers brand consulting to other universities.

The Hub has also helped to improve best practices around how the institution communicates with constituents and the public. In the past, Dillon says marketing was challenged by sweeping campaigns that weren’t personalized to their audience and fostered a sense of apathy. Thanks to the shift in strategy and culture and in part to their use of Salesforce technology, ASU is now driving greater affinity and brand loyalty by targeting the right constituent with the right message on the preferred channel at the right time.

With the success of the Enterprise Marketing Hub and other initiatives, the role of marketing has grown significantly at ASU, where it is now a critical component of strategic planning at the institutional level. In the case of ASU, this cultural shift along with its forward-thinking leadership has led to a perception of higher quality, increased prestige, and greater brand affinity.

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For many marketing leaders, elevating the role of marketing to drive strategic conversations at the institutional level is a top priority. So, what happens once marketing gets a seat at the decision-making table? That’s what Kerry Salerno, CMO of Babson College is navigating. In her position, Salerno is focused on balancing priorities, building out marketing expertise within her team, and staying aligned to the strategic goals of the college.

“Having the opportunity to drive strategy makes us much more efficient, effective and innovative,” says Salerno. “Instead of getting something handed to us, we’re driving the conversation and not letting hesitation get in the way of us getting to market.”

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KERRY SALERNO, BABSON COLLEGE CMO

Despite the ability to drive direction, Salerno says that there is still a lot of pressure to serve a wide variety of voices and interests internally. This constant consideration of where to place resources can be a delicate balancing act, but keeping institutional goals top of mind typically helps make decisions easier. “We’re always looking to the data to help us make the decision on whether the investment of time or resources will have a return,” says Salerno. “Fortunately, anytime I feel like we need to make priority decisions, we can fall back on the fact that we’re trying to meet really aggressive goals.”

The biggest current challenge for Salerno is boosting the marketing expertise of her team. She says getting the right people with the
right skills in the right roles to support the goal of consistent, lifelong constituent engagement will set her team up for success for years to come. That all starts with building more understanding of the world of marketing technology, digital engagement and personalization across the institution.

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When it comes to engaging alumni, Jamie Manning knows that trust, affinity, and willingness to donate are closely aligned. As the Senior Associate Director for Advancement Digital Marketing at Boston College (BC), Jamie has spent the better part of three years leading a fundamental shift in BC’s alumni digital engagement strategy to improve understanding of what motivates alumni to donate and how to make it easy for them to do so.

The first step was to study how digital fundraising was currently being done, which led to the realization that a new, multi-channel approach was needed. “We were pummeling our constituents with digital communications and squeezing everything through one channel—email,” he says. “This turned people off, which led to higher-than-average unsubscribe and complaint rates.”

Transforming the university’s digital fundraising strategy focused on three key objectives: First, they needed to restore trust from an alumni base that was receiving too much email. Second was to upgrade their digital technology and tools to introduce modern, multi-channel, journey-based digital communications. Third was to evangelize internally and show the value of moving away from an over-reliance on email. Jamie and his team needed to demonstrate that campaign-based digital fundraising was effective, relevant, and measurable. They made this happen by leveraging the full power of Marketing Cloud. Using tools such as Einstein Predictive Analytics, Journey Builder, and...

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\textbf{JAMIE MANNING, BOSTON COLLEGE SENIOR ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR FOR ADVANCEMENT DIGITAL MARKETING}
Audience Builder, the team has been able to gather and analyze the right data to make informed decisions on their outreach and determine the efficacy of each campaign.

A fundamental part of the transformation was to align content around three foundational concepts—content, intelligence, and delivery. This was the beginning of transitioning from email only campaigns towards coordinated multi-channel efforts (email, website, digital advertising and social media). Using Einstein’s predictive analytics, the team studied their constituent’s online behavior, allowing them to “micro-segment” it’s constituents by affinities (e.g., athletics, arts, financial aid, etc.) and preferred digital channels. Combining this behavioral information with attribute data from CRM, the team can now create relevant content and target it to different micro-segments, which improves engagement. The team also uses the Social Studio platform to listen and enable greater understanding of their constituents and how the BC brand is being discussed.

Another key concern for Manning and team was that their campaigns needed greater emotional connection in order to remind alumni of why they were connected to BC. Traditionally, communication from the advancement team was overly transactional. Too many donation-only emails can alienate constituents and remove the emotional connection. Manning notes that, “By moving to a balance of inspiring, story-based content along with financial appeals, constituents have a better sense of the ‘why’, not just the ‘how’.”

While these changes are working, Manning and his team are also excited about what’s to come. They’re building new content and launching innovative campaigns that help to build a more reliable feedback loop to inform future efforts. But perhaps most exciting are the opportunities for greater personalization and personal connection with BC’s alumni, parents, and friends.

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Chapman University is riding a wave of positive momentum. Having recently moved into the Carnegie R2 Classification and ranked as a national university by US News and World Report, these milestones represent the institution’s growth in research, scholarship and doctoral studies among other areas.

For Jamie Ceman, VP of Strategic Marketing & Communications for Chapman, the goal is to leverage that success to drive improved marketing operations and technology across campus. With just over a year in her current position, Ceman has a seat at the leadership table to help drive strategy along with the support of campus leaders that have rallied around the institution’s recent successes.

“Culturally, the challenge is keeping up with momentum,” says Ceman, “People are excited and we have more support than ever in marketing to do the things we want. Now, we just have to deliver.”

As a way to map out where that momentum will take the campus’ marketing organization, Ceman just published Chapman’s first marketing maturity model, which will define what the KPIs are for developing a sophisticated and high performing marketing, technology and operations team. Eventually, the model will help leadership understand how Ceman is measuring operational efficiency, strategic alignment to institutional priorities, how her team is approaching risk management,

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Jamie Ceman, Chapman University VP of Strategic Marketing & Communications
compliance issues and much more. “Deans are knocking on our door wondering how they can help us to innovate,” she says. “The biggest struggle is managing expectations, because it will take time and we’re just not there yet.”

Perhaps one of the biggest areas of investment for Ceman and team has been Salesforce Marketing Cloud. Campus-wide interest in the platform has helped to spark collaboration between different schools, departments and units around an integrated audience journey. Ceman says that providing a consistent, centralized platform will help to drive a consistent experience and KPIs that measure the effectiveness of that effort.

“The Marketing Cloud platform represents the potential of marketing campus-wide,” she says. “We’ve had the most fun talking to the campus community to understand what kinds of communications our audience is getting from every corner of campus.”

While Marketing Cloud might be popular, Ceman said there are still significant hurdles to overcome. The biggest are ensuring campus-wide alignment on strategy and building digital marketing skill sets across campus that might not have been there before. While she admits that there are varying degrees of expertise and some areas of campus need a lot of help, Ceman views it as a great opportunity for professional development and growth.

“Training is important not only to build a common language, but to evaluate the skillsets we have and understand where we need to build expertise,” she says. “It’s also a good opportunity to remind everyone that this will be a progression.”
Who said making the shift from traditional to more digital marketing had to be super difficult? For some marketing leaders in higher education, ushering in such a transition might even be fun. Tia Gerdsen, Assistant Vice President of Strategic Marketing for Colorado Christian University’s College of Adult and Graduate Studies (aka CCU Online), is one of those leaders.

Recently, Gerdsen has been focused on a variety of digital initiatives to improve recruiting, admissions, and enrollment. These initiatives include growing adoption of their central marketing automation platform Salesforce Pardot, enhancing their strategies to find and enroll right-fit students, and even exploring the potential of artificial intelligence to optimize engagement. “Most of our focus right now is on how we can improve the way we meet people where they are,” she says. “The other piece is telling a more compelling student story and inspiring folks to take action through the funnel.”

In terms of meeting their audience where they are, CCU Online currently relies on a variety of channels, including social media, geo targeted web and mobile pay-per-click (PPC) advertising, dynamic email and nurturing campaigns, and strategic website optimizations. Gerdsen says a big focus of that is making communications more seamless between channels to deliver a better experience and make it easier for prospects to connect with the enrollment team. As for telling the student story, Gerdsen says a lot of that is driven through partnering with students and alumni, which gives them a

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ASSISTANT VP OF STRATEGIC MARKETING
COLORADO CHRISTIAN UNIVERSITY

bigger opportunity to share their perspective and makes the institution’s message more authentic. “It’s all about making it more ‘them’ and less ‘us’, focusing on how we can help support the student in becoming the hero in their own story.”

For Gerdsen, the most exciting aspect of her digital initiatives is the addition of Salesforce Einstein, a layer of artificial intelligence (AI) that helps optimize email engagement within Pardot by tracking prospect behavior and email performance and offering new insights, recommendations and even predictions. She says that having this new data will not only improve their visibility into what efforts are really resonating with prospects, but how to improve those that aren’t and help her team be more strategic in the future.

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When it comes to evolving a marketing organization, a lot can happen in a short period of time. Just ask Karen Ferguson Fuson, Chief Marketing Officer at Indiana University. Since joining IU in mid 2018, Fuson has led an institution-wide effort to develop a marketing maturity model that would evolve the marketing function at IU, impacting a coalition of hundreds of marketers across nine campuses in eleven locations, and ultimately, the more than 90,000 students and other constituencies it serves.

Fuson says the changing landscape in higher education coupled with growing constituent expectations and innovations in marketing, media and technology has really created a “perfect storm” that enables higher education marketers to think differently about how they’re reaching their constituencies and delivering a memorable experience across every touchpoint. “Today, constituents expect a digital experience that’s much different than what it has been in the past,” she says, “The next generation of college students expect us to be as funny as YouTube and as easy to deal with as Amazon Prime.”

Fuson says the IU marketing maturity model, which focuses on six key disciplines, was born as a way to create a common language among marketers across the institution and to

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Together we can deliver better results than on our own,” she says. “And with a shared vision, we can use scale to our advantage to deliver an experience that constituents need, want and deserve.”

Those six key disciplines outlined in the model—culture, insights infrastructure, messages and creative, channel and campaign management, success measures, and the integrated constituent journey—are regularly assessed on a scale of one to five from undeveloped to fully integrated and optimized, or, as Fuson and her team refer to it, “The nirvana of top tier professional marketing.” She says most of the teams at IU self-assessed in 2018 as “developing” or a two on a scale of five, but are steadily progressing.

In terms of priority, Fuson says culture was the first area she and the central marketing team (now called IU Studios) addressed, due to it being the foundation of a healthy marketing organization. In the past, the central marketing team’s “fee for service” model, which would grant marketing support to deans, schools and other internal constituencies through a charge-back model, perpetuated silos and prevented IU marketers from working together. Now, the IU central marketing team has moved to a “brand studio” model where constituents can freely access marketing support. Additionally, Fuson and her team have organized 90-minute marketing “academies” or workshops to help IU’s marketers and constituencies understand the maturity model concepts, goals and vision.

The maturity model is designed to help develop the professional marketing skill set and technical expertise across IU. Fuson says her team has referenced the maturity model to identify skill gaps and guide the hiring of some of the best and brightest marketers across different industries, not just those with a higher education background. Since joining IU, Fuson has reinvested in building and hiring a strong data insights team, a new digital campus team, and a CRM and marketing automation team. She says IU’s adoption and use of Salesforce technology campus-wide helps to anchor these new teams and initiatives as outlined in their maturity model and will play a pivotal role in the success.

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In October 2019, Purdue University concluded its 150 Years of Giant Leaps campaign, a celebration of the institution’s legacy and 150th anniversary. While some are reflecting on accomplishments of the past, many are focusing on the future.

Ethan Braden, the Vice President of Marketing for Purdue, is looking ahead. To Braden, the Giant Leaps celebration represented a new frontier for the university — a coordinated brand and messaging platform that the entire institution embraced and supported. “With the Sesquicentennial celebration coming to a close, the big question is, ‘Are we going to the after-party together, or will we retreat to our disparate corners of messaging?’”

The “after-party,” as he puts it, is a reference to Purdue Marketing’s new focus: to cultivate, excite and unite a world class marketing community together. That includes recharging central marketing as the driver, not the driven; building great positioning, promotion and preservation of the Purdue brand; growing awareness and affinity; and as Braden puts it, “embracing the same level of innovation in marketing as Purdue University is known for otherwise.” As for those disparate corners, Braden says it’s a recognition of Purdue’s previous “house of brands” that has been unintentionally perpetuated by a decentralized approach to marketing operations.

“In such a precious and strong brand as Purdue, we must and we are investing in a world-class marketing engine, and a big part of that is focused on a culture of enthusiasm, courage, and ‘mojo’ coupled with marketing fundamentals, frameworks, disciplines, and intentionality, instead of the random acts of marketing that we often see,” he says.

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ETHAN BRADEN, PURDUE VP OF MARKETING
“We are starting with central marketing and then extending it to the more than 400 communicators across Purdue who speak to the world on Purdue’s behalf each day.”

This shift toward more strategic marketing is a collaborative process. Braden and his team regularly study peers from other institutions to better understand the relationship that higher education central marketing teams have with an institution’s major schools, departments and units that communicate directly with constituents. By leveraging that insight, Braden and team can build better relationships and rapport with Purdue’s communicators, which will “help bring everyone onto the same song sheet,” grow the broader community of marketing at Purdue, and strengthen the consistency of the brand.

“With a strong central brand team and resources, the university’s schools and departments can be affiliates to that brand and become hubs of audience understanding and execution,” he says. “Instead of worrying about logos, photo shoots and claims, they can apply the brand with localized understanding and move a lot faster in serving their direct audience. If we can get that right, it’ll go a long way.”

Improving relationships with communicators across Purdue’s schools and departments also helps Braden’s team better understand different marketing goals across the institution, make sure marketers have a voice and a critical seat at the table, build a common language, and help create a baseline in the tools and technology that schools are using to communicate. While he admits that standardizing strategic platforms such as CRM or marketing automation will help marketers across the institution realize their goals, he admits that he isn’t interested in consolidating every piece of technology.

“We’ve seen some wild tactics here and there, but generally, people are trying to do the very best with the resources they have,” Braden says. “Using a corporate analogy, thinking that every school or department needs to operate in the exact same way is like saying that a brand should be marketed the exact same way in two different countries.”

While Braden admits that institution-wide change is aspirational and will take time, he says the near-term goal that he’s most excited about is growing a truly empathetic understanding of Purdue’s primary audiences – students of tomorrow, today, and yesterday (alumni). “The more we genuinely listen and the more we learn about how to deliver value and delight rather than think we have all the answers, the better we’ll be,” he says. “Building that understanding at scale will require a change of culture, and the best time to start is now. This will pay dividends in the decade to come.”