

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES 2015-2020

Part III

This portion of the Strategic Planning memo focuses on the last two of the identified priorities – Marketing and Evidence-based Decision Making. Again, it is important to remember that all four of the priorities are inter-related and many of our desired outcomes are dependent on more than one of the priorities.

MARKETING

We need to approach the concept of marketing holistically, understanding that it includes our curriculum, academic rigor, support services, campus life, and outcomes. It is not just advertising or recruiting.

ESTABLISHING OUR DEFINITION OF MARKETING

Sometimes it seems there are as many definitions of marketing as there are people you ask. It is not uncommon in academia to equate marketing with advertising or having a good brochure. But even a basic marketing textbook outlines a more holistic concept focused around the four Ps: product, price, place, and promotion. Over the past 20 years, with the emergence of integrated marketing, some definitions of marketing focus on the four Cs: customer, cost, convenience, and communication. The shift to the four Cs reflects increased awareness of the importance of customers and their desire for convenience, and the power of targeted or even individual communication as opposed to mass communication. Advances in technology have fueled this shift.

In academia, we often bristle when we hear words like “customer” and “product.” But our discomfort with those words should not lead us to dismiss marketing as a valuable and holistic concept for our college. Let’s explore this further.

The American Marketing Association (AMA) defines marketing as:

“...the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large.”

This definition can be untangled and applied directly to our work:

- What “offerings” do we “create, deliver, and exchange”? *Curriculum, support services, and a campus life experience* to name a few.
- What do we offer that has value? We know that the educational process has value and, more tangibly, from a student’s perspective, there is value in *knowledge, skills, and a pathway to employment or a four-year degree*.
- “Customers” and “clients?” Despite our discomfort with the vernacular, *students and prospective students* interact with us as customers and clients.

University Business Magazine made three key points about the AMA definition of marketing:

- Responsibility for marketing lies at the organizational level, not within a single department or two. Everyone has a role in marketing. It is part of our institutional DNA.

- Marketing is integrated and focused on shared goals. There is very little difference between a college’s strategic plan and its integrated marketing plan.
- Value is a key goal. Our students and prospective students play a critical role in defining value.

Building on the AMA definition and the bullets above, we can develop a strategic, holistic definition of marketing for TC3:

“Marketing at TC3 is the strategies, initiatives, and processes for creating, communicating, and delivering curriculum, support services, and experiences that have value for students, prospective students, and community stakeholders.”

At the core of this definition: student success.

MARKET RESEARCH

In December 2014, the College engaged SimpsonScarborough to conduct a comprehensive study to guide us as we develop an authentic, research-supported brand. SimpsonScarborough is the leading market research firm in higher education, with more than 200 clients that include a wide range of institutions, including large publics like the University of California system and the University of Michigan, to liberal arts colleges such as Mount Holyoke, Albright, and Ithaca, as well as numerous community colleges. A key member of the research team will join us on Fall Day to share results and recommendations from the study, which concluded in Summer 2015.

The study surveyed TC3 applicants, prospects, and former students. It also included focus groups with faculty, staff, and current students, and in-depth interviews with more than 20 community leaders from Tompkins and Cortland counties. A primary purpose of the research was to identify the aspects of the college that are both particularly strong and authentic, and resonate with students, prospects, and stakeholders.

A significant finding of the study is that we are perceived to be academically strong and unexpectedly challenging. Among survey respondents, the most important things in selecting a college included affordability, quality academics, and successful graduates. The research also showed that we differentiate ourselves from our competition on these points:

- Challenging academics
- Strong sense of community
- High quality faculty
- Having desirable academic programs

Each of these four differentiators includes several components that will be shared in more detail on Fall Day.

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Embracing a holistic approach to marketing and applying the SimpsonScarborough research findings deeply connect to the Strategic Priorities outlined in Part II, namely our focus on the first semester and ongoing support for all students, particularly those at risk. It will help us to identify the most effective student success/retention strategies to achieve our retention and completion goals.

From a marketing perspective there are three critical questions:

- *How do we build on the key strengths identified in the SimpsonScarborough study, particularly around our academic strength and community of support?*
- *What is the comprehensive visual brand that expresses our authentic core strengths?*
- *What recruitment and communications strategies will best build enrollment?*

ENHANCED EVIDENCE-BASED DECISION MAKING

In many ways this priority is the broadest and least specific of our four, but is integral to how we make the decisions necessary to move the other three priorities forward. Addressing each of the priorities and its critical questions must include use of comprehensive internal and external evidence.

Just as marketing is often thought of narrowly, so is evidence and data. When we think of the information that should inform our planning, we cannot be limited to quantitative data. While quantitative information does sometimes give us an answer we're looking for (or that others are looking for), just as often it serves to identify questions that need further investigation.

We do produce a wealth of information now, including:

- Department plans
- Students surveys (Community College Survey of Student Engagement, Student Opinion Survey, department surveys)
- Focus group results
- Annual program assessment
- Academic Program Reviews
- Student Life Program Reviews

When assessing our initiatives, department work, and organizational outcomes, we must continue to integrate quantitative data with qualitative evidence and learning outcomes, both inside and outside the classroom.

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

- *What is the meaningful evidence of success that will tell us that what we are doing is working, at the initiative, program, and institutional level?* Throughout the institution we need to assess our assessment, ensuring that we're integrating appropriate evidence in all of our planning and decision making. I charge each group working on the critical questions identified throughout this memo to intentionally identify the evidence they will use to assess current initiatives, develop new initiatives, and assess them in the future.
- *How can we make information more accessible to the college community?* We create a lot of data and information that is not always readily available and known to all who could use it. Information is to be shared and used by all, not kept for the exclusive use of any group or persons in the college. The more informed we all are, the more informed our opinions and decisions will be.

A web-based dashboard is under development to provide easy access for all staff and faculty to a core set of indicator data related to retention, completion, and student, academic program, course, and initiative success, to be updated semiannually. We will disaggregate the success and completion data to help recognize and track where persistent gaps are occurring.

Initially, data will include multiple cohorts, including under-represented minorities, students with disabilities, low income students, and residential students. As information is collected that allows us to identify other cohorts, e.g. first generation students, we will include them as well.

The dashboard will also link to available qualitative data and more extensive assessment of programs and initiatives, providing a single on ramp to a broad array of information.

SUMMARY

Individual student success and the institution's ability to fund the services and supports needed for that success are both dependent on students coming to the college and students staying at the college until they achieve their academic goal. Enrollment and retention must each be critical elements of our planning and are each dependent on making progress on all four of the strategic priorities identified in this memo.

I challenge us to reverse our negative trend related to core enrollment and I will present specific goals related to new student and continuing student enrollment on Fall Day.

I challenge us to increase, over the next three years, the Fall-to-Fall retention of FTFT students from our current 51% to 61%, the SUNY community college average

During our time together on Fall Day, our consultants will help us learn more about our recent market research and what other colleges are doing that appears to be having an effect on their students' success. We will have the opportunity for dialogue and reflection about the critical questions raised in this memo, including whether there are others that also require our immediate attention, and we'll learn more about some of our recent initiatives. Following Fall Day, I will specifically charge work groups to address the critical questions and develop specific recommendations/initiatives.

As I said in Part I, "This is a pivotal time for us as a community college. We must develop clarity of direction, continue to nurture a culture of transparency to foster a sense of trust, and find the energy to move forward in as much harmony as possible with our external pressures and requirements. We must examine the assumptions behind our current policies and practices and assess whether they are achieving their intended outcomes. We must engage in change that will improve the potential success for all of our students."

The strategic priorities and critical questions discussed in this memo are intended to help us begin to do just that. They are broad, inter-related, and support all elements of our organization. I look forward to our work together as we create the changes needed to improve outcomes for all of our students.