

# THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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ADVICE

## Stop Playing It Safe: The Peril of the Generic College

Far too many institutions try to look like everyone else, when differentiation is the secret to success.

By *Aaron Basko*

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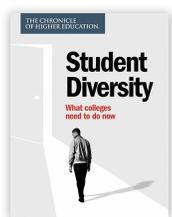
Why does higher education have so much trouble with differentiation — that is, with spelling out precisely what makes a college unique from its competitors? It seems that trying to be [all things to all people](#) is our fatal flaw. And everyone sees it but us.

When families hear us saying that what makes our institution special is “a sense of community, small classes, and great faculty members who care,” they hear the voice of Charlie Brown’s teacher saying, “Wah wah wah wah wah ...” They sense inauthenticity when we say that all of our programs are equally strong and will lead to job opportunities. They know life doesn’t work that way.

A recent conversation drove this point home. I was speaking with Bill Fahrner, the president of Credo, a higher-education consulting firm. “It is so rewarding to assist colleges with the really biggest questions of mission and strategy,” he told me. “But the biggest challenge is helping them embrace differentiation.” I knew instantly what he meant. In my 25 years in enrollment management, I’ve run into that very issue at every institution that I have either worked at or advised.

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Differentiation is the secret sauce of success for institutions. In the current higher-education landscape, most colleges seek the safety of trying to look like everyone

else. We conform to the image of the category in which we have been labeled, or we reach upward to try to be like the institutions we envy. Public flagships want to be like the Ivies. Public regionals want to be like flagships. Private regionals want to be like national liberal-arts colleges. What if we had the confidence to be ourselves, but the best version of ourselves?

One of the most powerful concepts in enrollment is that of leverage — the idea that a small amount of energy, applied in a strategic way, can have a disproportionately large outcome. We leverage financial aid to attract the largest possible number of students with the most efficient use of limited dollars. We leverage alumni and parent volunteers to help us reach a larger pool of students. We leverage data to show us how students should be prioritized within our outreach efforts in order to bring the best result.

But the ultimate leverage is differentiation. When you differentiate as an institution, instead of having to chase students, students come to you, and so do dollars and prestige.

Higher education tends to get lost in the morass of the word branding, which has a lot of baggage around it. We get caught up in tag lines, color palettes, and elevator speeches. Those are important, but branding as a concept often does not engage the academic areas of our institutions, nor is it easy for frontline staff members to use in everyday ways. The best way to differentiate is to discover a compelling story that is true to your institution but also makes sense to the market.

Think of differentiation as a large umbrella narrative — the story under which all the substories of your college or university can thrive and find shelter. Academic programs can differentiate themselves and become more attractive to students when aligned under this umbrella. Staff members find purpose and serve students better when this narrative is woven into their daily work. The college then invites

each prospective student to bring their individual story under this umbrella and share in the institution's larger narrative.

Often, the most-successful differentiation comes out of an institution's history. Fifteen years ago, I worked for a college that was on a list of the country's top 50 liberal-arts colleges. It was an amazing place that prided itself on the rigor of the education it provided for students, but I could never figure out why it would not embrace its unique history. It was founded more than 200 years ago as one of the first inland colleges, to meet the needs of a young nation for leaders — especially doctors, lawyers, and clergy. Its clear message was “liberal arts equals leadership.” For decades, it fulfilled that mission admirably, drawing students from across the country and sending them to the best medical schools, law schools, and seminaries. The success of its graduates was jaw dropping.

But something changed. With the start of the rankings culture, this college found itself sitting toward the bottom of the list of the best liberal-arts colleges. Looking to climb the rankings, the college began to de-emphasize the preprofessional programs that had fueled its success and pitch itself as an all-around “great” liberal-arts college. With that shift, it lost its edge. Instead of becoming a household name for something highly valued, it has remained in basically the same position in the rankings and struggled in attracting enrollment. Instead of playing its own game, it bought into the myth that there is only one vision of “greatness,” which is being equally good at everything.

Sometimes, an institution's distinction is less about a long history, and more about the way it has evolved to meet a need. I recently completed a consulting project for a relatively young university in the Midwest. It's doing great work for adult students, recent immigrants, and students from many ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. People on the campus are living diversity, true diversity, but they are not boldly talking about it. They are too close to their own experience to see what is

clearly visible to outsiders, and even to their current students. In a focus group, one student from an immigrant family said, “I love this university. It represents America to me in how it embraces everyone. It meets students where they are and helps them achieve their dreams.” No marketing office could write a better narrative than that. If this university chooses, it could become the face of true diversity in its region, and attract students from even further away who identify with its message and values.

Perhaps part of the reason why higher education drops the ball so often on differentiation is because the concept always attracts its share of critics. Some are very practical thinkers, who don’t realize how important identifying with a narrative is for most people. They often think that enrollment success will come from adding as many programs as possible or building better buildings than everyone else. Those are very expensive approaches.

Other differentiation skeptics are just strongly risk averse, and see any attempt to specialize as limiting and potentially dangerous.

But I think most of the resistance stems from discomfort with the idea that an overarching, specific narrative would spotlight some areas of the campus at the expense of others. These critics fear that their discipline or program would be less important and less influential in this equation. Aligning with an overall story threatens their independence and makes them beholden to others.

Imagine two large outdoor party tents. The first is set up with every pole four feet tall. The second has three 12-foot poles in the middle, surrounded by four-foot poles on the sides. Which would you choose to have your party in? The first tent keeps everyone equal, but it also keeps everyone from standing up. The second raises the roof to accommodate greatness and invite others to stand up and achieve. Which one would attract others to the party?

All of an institution's programs benefit when it achieves visible greatness in a certain area. I think of this as the Johns Hopkins principle. That university is renowned the world over for its medical programs. Because of that, it has no burden of proof to convince us that its programs in, say, psychology or political science are also excellent. Its differentiation creates an overflow of greatness to other areas.

In fact, it is the vulnerable programs that gain the most from an institution's commitment to differentiating. Most nursing programs could stand on their own without an overarching university narrative because the demand for nurses is so great. But why would I choose a nursing program four states away from me when the offerings in my home state look basically the same? I might make that choice, however, if I knew that the nursing program four states away was oriented to help me explore a value that was important to me — for example if it was known for its commitment to overseas experiences.

Likewise, in the examples above, I might be attracted to a history program at a university with a strong reputation in preparing students for professional schools or a sociology program at a college that was famous for its work on diversity.

Many colleges struggle to discover their differentiators, but they *are* there. Review your history. Ask your students. Look for what symbols your campus holds dear. That symbol can be something as simple as a popular spot on the campus. My current university is a good example of this. If you have traveled to Virginia, you have probably seen the [large "LOVE" signs](#) scattered around the state in places that invite a photo opportunity. We have one [right in the middle of the University of Lynchburg campus](#), decorated in the university's colors. All of our tours stop so that we can take pictures of prospective students and their families at the sign.

At other places, that sign might be perceived as a gimmick, but it is actually a really

good match for our history. We were founded by a branch of the Christian Church that focused on service to the community and breaking down the barriers between denominations. Although the church is not as central to the university's identity as it once was, its values have remained. Service is a huge part of what we teach students to do. The university focuses on expanding the classroom to the campus, the community, the natural beauty of central Virginia, and a world that needs a lot of love. It seems only appropriate that the LOVE sign would act like a beating heart at the center of our campus.

That is what families are seeking — authenticity. They are attracted to institutions that stand for something. They are waiting for someone to have the courage and self-confidence to say, “This is who we are and what we do, and we believe that there are students all across the country who share our values. We invite them to join us in the story we are writing.”

If you want to find true success in recruitment, enrollment, and retention, plant your flag clearly and let the world come to you.

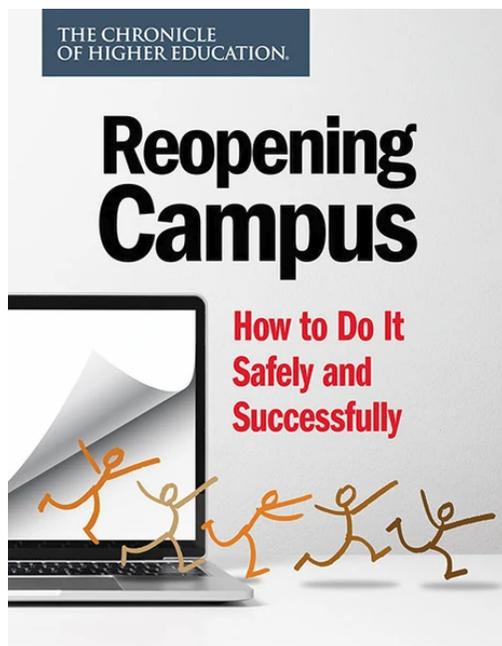
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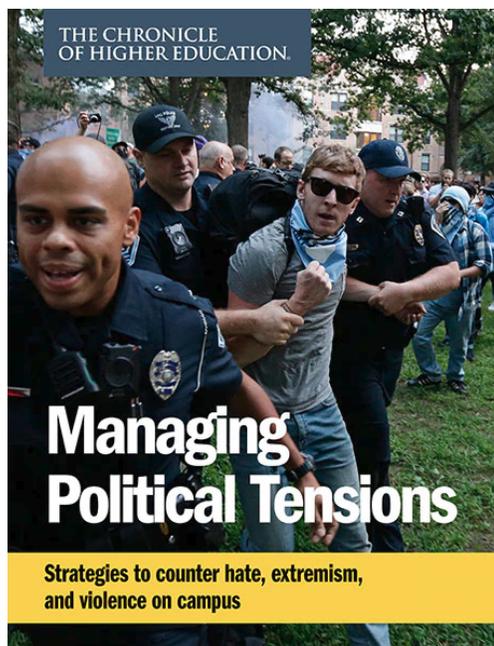
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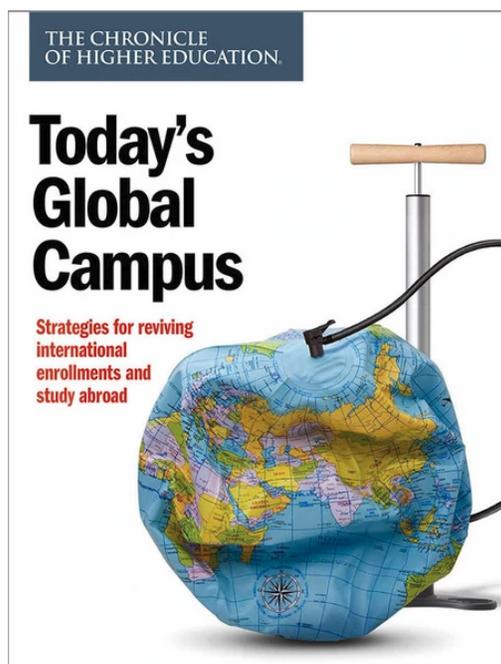
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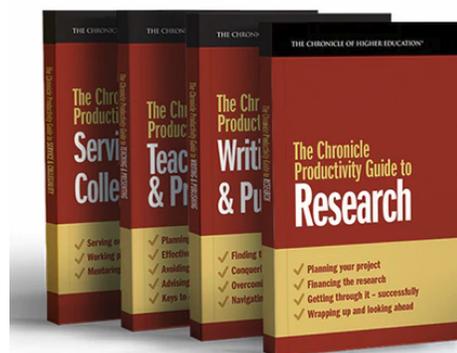
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