



MARKETING A GREAT COLLEGE: GRINNELL

Summary

In this document I chart a course for the College to better promote itself. It has three parts. First, I argue that promoting colleges and universities is unique because the nature and geographic fixity of each institution and the relationships they create are lifelong and multifaceted. Second, I suggest that a college must specifically describe the goals it is seeking to achieve by better marketing and in that regard I state that the goals should be more and better prospective student applicants, enhance public regard for the College to help our alumni, continued strong appeal to prospective and continuing faculty, and increased fundraising success. Finally, I lay out the following specific components of this plan: 1) continue to use Mark Edwards for message shaping and also large events, 2) engage an external media firm for advice and support of our media efforts, 3) add internal staff and improve current overall performance, 4) develop metrics to measure performance, 5) hire an external website consultant/advisor, and 6) work on changing internal attitudes to marketing.

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I. Background: Marketing Undergraduate Higher Education Institutions

Marketing in higher education is different than in most arenas. Why? Higher education is a mix of market participants. Indeed, it is almost unique in that there are hundreds of mostly geographically focused market participants. When I spoke to a group of Des Moines high school seniors recently, some were going to research universities, some to liberal arts colleges, and some to comprehensive public universities. The number and geographic fixedness of market participants in higher education is very different from most product market participant groupings. And the marketing employed depends to a considerable degree on which niche a college operates in but participants also must compete against others not in their exact niche. For instance, the University of Chicago emphasizes its various graduate units as contributing to the undergraduate experience. It is also important to remember that a fairly large number of consumers do not understand either at all or well the major differences among market participants, but they decide occasionally based on claims about those differences.

The diffuseness of the higher education market and its geographic fixedness makes word of mouth (parents, alumni, friends, neighbors) more important than in most markets. These unique market characteristics also mean that national marketing through dominant media may be less effective in attracting new people than in most markets but effective at reassuring people who have already bought in to one school. We want our “customers” to become “members” for life, including giving, visiting, talking up, and helping in other ways. Finally, higher education more than most enterprises uses defining events to catalyze support and reinforce message in part because of the geographic dispersion of each institutions’ constituents.

Grinnell exists in a group of older, historically well-known and well-regarded colleges that offer a traditional liberal arts curriculum (although our individually mentored approach to liberal education is uncommon). Marketing by schools within this overall group has existed and worked in the following ways that I have observed.

A. Use of Print and Television/Radio Advertising Media Aimed Mainly at Outsiders to the Institution

This has been tried by relatively few institutions and it is generally believed to have had modest results.

B. Heavy Investment in Message Shaping and Significant Internal Marketing and External Marketing

This has been the successful strategy employed by at least one peer. Colleges that have heavily invested in this form of marketing usually have faced major challenges (how to change a negative perception after a bad event) or, like us, they wish to achieve a quantum jump in public perception. It is worth noting that when the peer I referred to above started aggressively



marketing itself it needed to jump much farther (judged by overall reputation) than we need to as of this moment. It is also worth noting that it is located in one of the fastest growing and most economically vibrant areas of the United States when it started to develop a stronger public profile. Message shaping is the main skill/service offered by Mark Edwards.

C. Marketing Based on Singular Focus in Program or a Few Programs

This was the original impetus for some of the newer members of the Claremont Group (CMC (leadership in government and business), Harvey Mudd (science)) and it has also been a strategy of Davidson and Middlebury. The strategy usually has initial success but then commonly there are second thoughts followed by an effort to re-brand the college as a broader liberal arts college.

D. Marketing Focused Around A Capital Campaign or an Annual Award or Scholarly Event

This has been used in various forms by most institutions. Colleges use campaigns as a way of continuously marketing themselves not just to raise funds but to establish and fix their message. Gettysburg College has an annual Lincoln/Civil War prize event in New York with a scholarly component but also to honor major donors and other friends of the College. Kenyon's humanities' focus has been epitomized by the success of the *Kenyon Review* over the years. Mark Edwards has done successful work around crafting the messages and significant materials and kick-off events for such campaigns/events.

E. Internet/Web Marketing

This is a newer and rapidly changing area for most colleges and their efforts have been focused for the most part on using the Internet to locate and maintain contact with prospective students and alumni. A number of colleges have invested in slicker Web sites than ours, typically providing less information than we do and focusing on prospective students and to a lesser extent internal communication. Our web site needs redesign and we are moving forward first in the admissions area. There are some related efforts by less well-known schools to use *YouTube* and Facebooking media for recruiting. It should be noted that higher education has seen a number of high cost failed technology efforts involving alumni outreach and interaction.

F. Hiring of Media Consultants/External Media Firms Versus Internal Staffing

As I have called around and spoken with people at other institutions recently, I have discovered the following: 1) well known colleges rarely hire an external firm and when they do it is primarily to seek advice at a particular moment or in connection with a capital campaign, 2) internal media staffs are typically similar in size to ours (some are bigger), 3) the concern most colleges have is that outside firms are well versed in marketing new, discrete products (or dealing with disastrous events like the burning down of a college's buildings or a drop of 30 places in



the *US News* rankings) but because they are not on campus they fail to ever tap into the college or university effectively enough to produce authentic and effective marketing, and 4) faculty at better colleges uniformly resist both internal and external sophisticated marketing efforts.

G. Constant or Pervasive Marketing

One of the greatest strengths of our outgoing dean was his inveterateness in going on the road to talk and consult about science education, technology initiatives, and the unique qualities of a Grinnell education in the liberal arts world. The sum of these activities far outweighs single-shot targeted efforts in national media. Everyone should understand that higher education is almost unique as an arena in the degree to which it revolves around face-to-face meetings, organizations, and events each year and a key, maybe *the* key marketing technique for a college seeking to change market perception is to be visible and effective in these person-to-person venues. Perpetual and comprehensively integrated marketing also has an on-campus component in the face we present to visitors and also longer-term denizens of our communities. Our extensive on-campus welcoming and other yield activities (which consistently draw heavy attendance and praise from visiting prospective students and parents) focus on the president, other key administrators who are accessible, faculty panels, and extensive student involvement and other in-person events and interactions. Enhancing perpetual marketing also means that we should continue to push and encourage our faculty, students, and staff in their external endeavors including scholarship, performances, leadership opportunities, and conference participation. Our dozen Grinnell Corps positions which focus on service and contribution around the globe are one component of this.

H. Emblems, Signs, Symbols & Logos

Since the start of the implementation of the campus plan we have followed a steady course of developing and *consistently* using professional campus signage and resonant symbols. We saved the Darby torch and put it on the front wall of new Darby. We revived the laurel leaf logo and have put it on all stationery, the Web, and our publications. Our *No Limits*-themed signs, publications, and other materials look consistent visually, are more professional than what was used in the past and hammer consistently at the themes of the unlimited horizons aspects of our location, and our program. Our campus building signs produced a large number of comments about how they made the campus look more “established” (a word used by one parent). We need to do more of this. Our better-marketed peers are relentless in the development and consistent use of generally-themed materials. Part of any effort to market an excellent school is to hearken back to and emphasize the school’s history and the importance of its place and people. We have a great story to tell (and a uniquely important story due to our perceived remote location) so we are developing a series of published occasional papers focusing on historic figures in the College’s history, including Joe Rosenfield, Edward Steiner, Edward Burling, and Jesse Macy. The Center for Prairie Studies and CERA are important components in this overall effort.



II. How to Move Forward

A. Aim

Most people are of two minds about marketing---when we try it they say we are too slick and when it does not happen (or is not focused on their favorite programs or ideas) they are dissatisfied. Like everything else we do we have to forge ahead even in the face of some doubts. Our students are interestingly the most open to the idea that this place needs better marketing although typically they initially react negatively to any formulation of a marketing effort (like they disliked the idea of the Joe until it was built). They (the vocal few) opposed the master plan, p-cards, the strategic plan, EKI, etc., etc. New and prospective faculty members frequently say that they like our web site better than our competitors from which they had job offers. Why? It has lots of information which comes from the dispersal of responsibility for creating and caring for it and they like the daily substantive news changes. But this dispersal of responsibility also has costs: failures to update corners of the web-site, unevenness in quality and scope, and clunkiness in appearance. I think we need to tip the balance a bit more towards controlling the scope and information-updating by the web master after a comprehensive review and if necessary re-working process.

B. Why Marketing? Why Now?

From the point of view of the Board of Trustees and the campus community the short answer is that we said we would do it in strategy six of the strategic plan and it was right then and is right now. From the point of view of other groups the answers are multiple: 1) the number of high school students is beginning to drop and more aggressive marketing will be needed even to stay even, 2) the better known Grinnell is the better it will be for the careers of our faculty and our ability to attract and retain great faculty in the future, 3) from the point of view of alums as the school prospers reputationally, their degrees will be worth more and they will have enhanced entrée to more successfully aim higher in doing good in the world, 4) we have a wonderful College and it deserves to be better known, and 5) to create a better climate for future philanthropy and meaningful alumni engagement. And as all of you know if you fail to define yourself through your marketing you will be defined by the market itself.

C. The Core Message/Positioning Statement

One Trustee sent me a number of positioning statements from various business enterprises and also a few colleges. The difference between them was immediately obvious and instructive. Except for very narrow pre-professional colleges, colleges and universities describe in more general and aspirational terms their positions. Their goals are much broader and less specific than most enterprises. Simple product-focused businesses are trying to position themselves



generally in much more articulated markets with relatively short term objectives (a new product, a new method.) Interestingly, older and more successful companies have (if you can even find them) positioning statements that resemble college and university positioning statements. These differences reflect the fact that colleges and universities and big successful companies have a durable, more general reputation for quality and reliability frequently without reference to narrow programs/products/ideas. Their brand is this aura of quality wrapped around general language about their focus. This is not to say that positioning statements even for very fine places like us can not and do not have some specificity but they are inherently more likely to be general.

D. Foci of Marketing

Good marketing requires specific identifiers and also proof points. Looking at our history and our current place in higher education, we have six clear identifiers that support our overall mission. Combined, these strengths form the distinctive identity of Grinnell College.

We articulate our enduring strengths as follows:

- 1) Grinnell College is deeply committed to *achievement collectively and individually of the common good*;
- 2) Grinnell College inherits a powerful history of *transforming the future through innovative experiment* (Iowa Band, Social Gospel, New Deal, Peace Corps, Intel);
- 3) Grinnell College pioneers *new methods of teaching*, both in our campus life and academic programs. We offer many small classes where we instruct students through active practice in the techniques of a field, versus more passive content-delivery methods. We offer opportunities at each curricular level (from First-Year Tutorial to Mentored Advanced Projects) for students to learn directly from their professors and faculty advisers in an individual, intensive format;
- 4) Grinnell College minimizes general-education requirements to give each student *guidance and responsibility for designing a unique liberal-arts program suited to individual interests, needs and goals*;
- 5) Grinnell College maintains a *need-blind admission policy*. We serve the common good by making a Grinnell education accessible to all who qualify. Grinnell College is one of a small handful of institutions of higher education committed to meet the full demonstrated financial-aid need of every admitted U.S. student;



- 6) Grinnell College has built connections over decades at several off-campus sites, such as our academic exchange with Nanjing University and Grinnell programs established in London, Washington, D.C., and Namibia. Most Grinnell students study abroad for a full semester, not just a few weeks. Grinnell College is both comfortably *rooted and shaped by our place* (as illustrated by Prairie Studies, Ricker House, CERA, and many points of engagement in our local community) *while globally diverse in our view, programs, people, and interests.*

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In the next few years we plan to highlight a series, going forward, of specific College programs whose strength can be traced to the distinctive Grinnell qualities identified above:

- 1) Science and science education in the liberal arts (Noyce dedication and an effort led by Jim Swartz to focus attention of the unique strength and quality of science taught in the liberal arts setting)
- 2) Mentored Advanced Projects as a springboard for alumni achievements
- 3) 150 Years in Grinnell (CERA, Prairie Studies, Ricker House, Community grants/collaborations, the Observatory, Grinnell House, local alumni) (2009)
- 4) Athletics, wellness, facility design accessibility and inclusiveness in a diverse egalitarian campus community (Athletics and fitness center dedication in 2010)
- 5) The Expanding Knowledge Initiative – how is Grinnell changed?
- 6) In-depth academic engagement of Grinnell students and faculty members across national borders and cultural boundaries (Internationalization task-force)

III. What are our Goals and when should they be achieved?

As one Trustee mentioned when I spoke with him after the April meeting, before one starts a marketing effort there needs to be a clear understanding of the precise goals in undertaking accelerated marketing. An alumnus who is a marketing executive said that a realistic time frame for a major marketing effort is three to five years. In listening to various people on and off campus I have heard references to the following goals: a) a need to improve our generic reputation among the groups with whom they live and work, b) *US News* rankings, c) attracting excellent faculty, d) more or better student applicants, and e) improve philanthropy and alumni engagement. These are very different objectives. I believe we need to identify what it is we intend to accomplish as we embark on this effort. For me there are two goals: first, we aim to raise the profile of the College across the nation; and second we intend to increase the pool of prospective student applicants and our yield of them. To that end we will in the next year move forward



in the directions I bolded in Section IV. B. below and will continue to work with the Development Committee, the full Board, and various on-campus groups. I propose that our goals should be over a five year period: a) increase the overall applicant pool to 5000 and increase the number of applications from domestic students of color by 50%, b) increase alumni Pioneer Fund participation to 50% of our alumni, c) increase the number of planned gifts each year to an average of 20, d) increase capital and endowment gift receipts to an average of \$10,000,000 a year, and e) continued strong faculty recruitment measured by a basket of indicators including top Ph.D. programs, post-doctoral fellowships, diversity, and commitment to teaching in the liberal arts setting.

IV. What We Should Do in Particular

A. Message Shaping

Our main task is to shape and then uniformly telegraph an authentic, attractive, and uniform core message. Mark Edwards' *No Limits* focus and all of the materials that we have produced were designed to do that. The materials, as opposed to the bare tag words, have been successful and are well regarded by faculty and staff and apparently have contributed to our increase in student applications and improvement in yield (including significantly stronger appeal to diverse students). I also think that our new buildings, which better deliver and fit our programs and the way modern students and faculty interact, also have affected our appeal. Our new faculty and faculty candidates regularly note the high quality of our facilities compared, we assume, to what they are used to.

B. A Multi-Year Overall Marketing Program

We have done well in the past five years but could have done better. The way to do better is to put together a series of initiatives, tied together thematically. Specifically, I think we need:

- 1) to **continue to use Mark Edwards** to help shape the core message and to do big events/media materials including a major event surrounding the science center dedication (we have engaged Mark Edwards to design and stage this event), followed by our anniversary of 150 years in Grinnell in 2009 (reemphasizing the importance of our location including a focus on the Center for Prairie Studies and CERA), and also followed by the dedication of the completed athletic center in 2010,
- 2) **retain and use an external media relations firm for two years** to help us implement a program (It is fair to ask why, if media-heavy publicizing efforts on behalf of colleges are, as discussed above, of limited value, we are going to hire a media firm and the answer is that it is useful particularly when a college intends to take a whole new look at its message and its effectiveness in promoting itself, to engage a professional firm of high repute to help advise and then execute such an effort.) We have hired on a provisional basis a firm in New York



run by Andy Cooper, an alum and a former trustee. Andy and members of his staff have just visited the College and are shaping earned media emphasis points and efforts,

- 3) **add internal staff and improve current overall staff performance** to ensure that our efforts are more uniformly professional (but authentic), more frequent and more timely, (Everyone should understand ---we learned this at Cornell after several media searches---that top media people do not like having one client only or being located far from major media markets and, therefore, that recruiting is a major challenge.)
- 4) **develop metrics to measure performance,**
- 5) **hire a high level marketing person for a limited period of time reporting to me who will mobilize, coordinate across divisions of the College, and spearhead our efforts in this area, and**
- 6) **work on changing internal attitudes towards marketing.**

A multi-year marketing program is a major undertaking and needs to fit with and **work together with our development initiatives**. We need to raise \$25M for the athletic center, keep increasing alumni participation and gift size, and improve the number of planned gifts. We can not drop immediate and important fund raising goals and focus solely on marketing, and likewise, marketing must work with and not blow out of the water fundraising efforts. Everyone I spoke with at other schools has said that Trustees tend to want to emphasize one of these two and then react badly when the other suffers. They have to work together. And friends at other schools say that Trustees (and leading alumni) must be visibly engaged in both significant, high-level giving and prospect assessment and solicitation for the College.

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As I mentioned above, marketing is not intended to change a great college like Grinnell but rather to convey its essence consistently and authentically. Our mission remains the same, our core values are the same, and our curriculum, although evolving some as is always the case, remains a broad and deep approach to the major areas of human knowledge and inquiry. Ours is a story that is not changing but needs to be told well to the wider world.

Russell K. Osgood
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