THE BIG PICTURE

Conversations with college presidents on branding in higher education
Ologie made its first trek to the annual AMA conference for higher education marketing in 2008. It was held in downtown Chicago, and only 300 attendees joined us. This year, for the same event in Austin, we were part of a crowd of more than 1,200.

What accounts for the spike in interest? Now as never before, colleges and universities are tapping into the power of the brand to carve out a unique place in the market. Recently, it seems as though we’ve entered a new brand landscape.

But it wasn’t always so.

Twenty years ago, the average college president spent little time worrying about the brand. Applications were up. Budgets were stable. And leading a university can be as complex as running a small city — why focus on the window dressing?

But as higher ed has evolved, so have the prevailing views on branding. Today, “best-fit” students are hard to find. Donors have limitless ways to mete out their charity dollars. In the face of these and other headwinds, administrators are learning that investing in the brand is no longer a luxury.

Branding is a necessary good. And many institutions are now taking the first steps of developing a single, compelling story to rally around and share with the world.

THE NEW BRAND LANDSCAPE.

What do the leaders of higher ed institutions think about brand?

How do they make the case to their constituents?

Who manages a university’s brand?

We spoke with eight college presidents to answer these questions, and others.

Our contributors hail from all corners of higher education: public universities, private schools, smaller liberal arts colleges and trade schools. Their insights are profound and prosaic, elegant and enlightening, from high-level insights to practical advice on building consensus with stakeholders.

What follows are some of the big-picture takeaways from these conversations.

EIGHT PRESIDENTS. EIGHT PERSPECTIVES.

UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA
Ann Weaver Hart discusses the shifting landscape of branding in higher education.

COLUMBUS COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN
Tom White shares how to create and unlock the power of the brand.

HARTWICK COLLEGE
Margaret Drugovich talks about marketing that recreates the experience of attending your college.

WEST VIRGINIA UNIVERSITY
Gordon Gee says to forget rankings and focus on your institution’s capacity to change.

GONZAGA UNIVERSITY
Thayne McCulloh shares tips for getting buy-in from the most important group of brand advocates on campus: the faculty.

WESTERN STATE COLORADO UNIVERSITY
Greg Salsbury brings some refreshing ideas on putting the brand into action.

OTTERBEIN UNIVERSITY
Kathy Krendl talks about making the past relevant for students today, and building a “model community” on campus for the brand.

DEPAUW UNIVERSITY
Brian Casey lends some perspective to the many challenges of implementing a brand.
Managing multiple brands.
Sub-brands are important, but they have to be aligned with the master brand and not seen as independent. Even religions have sects and subgroups because of the differences of cultures and geographies. That’s how we see sub-brands. It has to make sense. It’s not about the institution’s ego.

A platform that resonates.
Language matters. A brand is as much about what you do as it is what you say. “Never Settle” and “Boundless” really capture the way people think and feel about this place. “Boundless” describes the spirit of Arizona, a spirit of innovation. Our horizon is boundless. Our goals are boundless. It’s both aspirational and descriptive.

No brand will resonate with everyone, and that’s okay. In fact, a strong brand should be a filter for decision-making. It helps us make the hard decisions we have to make that hold all parts of the university to the same standard.

Tapping into the spirit of athletics.
If I say “Bear Down” in Arizona, you will say “Go ‘Cats.” And to most people, that was our brand. Before I came here, the academics brand meant only two things: science and Old Main. That’s all we communicated, outside of athletics.

The big question for us as we began the branding process was, “How do we establish an institutional or academic brand without diluting the athletic or spirit brand?”

In the end, the athletics department has embraced the brand as well—in a big way. They are great partners who see the value of strong academics.

Putting everything in place.
Perhaps the biggest, most pleasant surprise during our process has been how strongly faculty have embraced our new brand strategy. They even changed tenure requirements to include innovation as well as research, teaching, and service.

We did a lot to make faculty and all constituents a part of the process. We made it participatory, through town halls and internal sites. And our CMO, Teri Lucie Thompson, deserves a lot of the credit for that.
COLUMBUS COLLEGE OF ART AND DESIGN

Tom White brings a unique creative lens — as well as 20 years of expertise as a brand strategist — to the discussion of higher ed marketing.

The importance of brand.

Your brand is your meaning. The physical mark or logo is just a flag. But the brand itself is more than just what we say and how we look. It communicates the character of who we are at CCAD.

We craft the brand around our unique DNA. Then we craft a consistent storyline that communicates our value to each of our markets in terms of what they're looking for.

By putting our story out into the market, with our DNA attached to it, it's going to attract just the right people who know they belong here. That's the real value of a brand: attracting your tribe to you.

It's important to remember that you don't have to attract everyone. You want to make sure you're getting your message to all of those who feel at home with you. At CCAD, for example, it's our responsibility to find them.

I believe the president needs to be the brand owner and champion — at least at smaller, more specialized schools like CCAD. Everyone else needs to be a brand advocate and a brand ambassador, having been through the collaborative process.

People typically look to the president to say “Have you gotten our input?” or “Do you believe in this?” But the leadership and direction of the brand to generate that collaboration needs to come from the top.

Create a strategy for sub-brands.

It's important to create an open architecture around the brand, because a college is an evolving entity. Families and individuals who are generous and want to share their fortunes sometimes would like to be recognized.

You need a strategy around it, of course. But bringing sub-brands into the school for buildings and programs is healthy. It demonstrates connectivity with the world. The values those individuals embody reflect onto your school. Every building has a name, and a history, and those individuals are still involved.

Q: WHAT BRANDS DO YOU ADMIRE?

I admire brands that own a position in the minds of the market, one that no one else can own. For example, Apple doesn't attract everyone, but I look at Apple and say that I'm home.

VOELO: Volvo is so committed to their safety ideals that by 2020, their goal is for no one to die in a car accident driving a new Volvo. That's a serious brand commitment, one of the most serious brand commitments I've ever seen. Because it's measurable. It's bold. It's ownable.

SAIJE REGINA UNIVERSITY: I love the position, “an A school for B students.” And Princeton Review ranked theirs the most beautiful campus.

RHODE ISLAND SCHOOL OF DESIGN: RISD does an excellent job of crafting a brand of authentic quality.

Measuring up.

Brands are vastly measurable. We conduct surveys and student testing, and compare ourselves to other art and design colleges. We use social media to check our numbers and see whether students are recommending the school to their friends.

But the one key metric is enrollment. The buzz you generate should ultimately translate into enrollment (not just analytics). Buzz in the market will translate that way too — positive and negative. If enrollment dips, your brand is doing something you didn't intend for it to do.

Share the work broadly.

People here care deeply about what things look like and sound like. Our faculty are professional artists and designers, so they can tell when something has been through a research process and when something is coming from the hip. They have practice reviewing creative work. They know when it's not relevant; they can spot it from a mile away.

But that also means our faculty better appreciate good work, too. And they know it when they see it. They'll say, “Thank you for caring. You really did this right.”

Build consensus internally.

The first order is to communicate that this is what we're going to do. Get people on board so they understand the vision, provide their input, and give you their blessing. Because a brand can only be effective when everyone is participating in a collaborative way.

To move quickly and effectively, leadership needs to work closely with the board. That's critical. Of course, getting your board involved and committed may prevent you from going at supersonic speeds. But with their buy-in, they'll help you get it done as quickly as you can in a responsible way. And you owe it to your board to do that.

Columbus College of Art & Design

Tom White is an award-winning industrial designer who, before becoming president of CCAD, helped position organisations large and small for growth in a range of business sectors. He has long been a strong advocate for the power of art and design to fuel economic growth.

TOM WHITE
Defining the brand.

A brand is made up of the qualities that distinguish us: the qualities that differentiate us and that are authentic to who we are. One of the challenges is that a brand is so open to interpretation. People see it through their own eyes, through whatever experience they’ve had. And there are 1,570 different experiences on campus. So keeping a brand sharp and crisp is extremely difficult.

Marketing in higher education is really only 20 years old. People are beginning to understand it now, and it’s accelerating. But many in colleges and universities want to reject it. The parallels between business and higher education frighten people, because it appears to commoditize what we do. Many also resist the label of brand—the logo or the tagline aspect. I rarely use the word brand. Instead, I say “qualities” or “characteristics” or “the values that distinguish us.” To me, those terms describe the brand.

Enforcing the brand.

The whole senior team owns the brand, but everyone plays a specific role. And someone does need to get up every day and think about this. That’s why our office of communications and marketing is our brand enforcer. They make sure we stay true to the brand by managing the logo and other visual aspects, as well as running the website and checking the voice.

Stay relevant. Be flexible.

The brand needs to be relevant and flexible—relevant for students and flexible for alumni. With students, as new generations arrive on campus, we need to stay relevant to them and their needs. With alumni, these folks had a moment in time with us, so it’s different, so we have to keep that experience fresh.

Delivering on a promise is another way to think about branding. If we are mission-driven enterprises, then we have to deliver on what we say we will do. I sometimes wish we could have a Chief Promise Officer.

You need to be careful with language. Alumni can get upset when they hear about new things on campus because it doesn’t match their experience.

For Hartwick, it was our switch from the Warriors to the Hawks. Even 20 years later, I hear from alumni at reunions about the fact that we made that change. The Warriors name symbolized something in their experience, and they can’t connect anymore.

So we need to ask, “What will people pull out from their experience that will keep them grounded?” And that’s a hard question to answer.

It’s all about experience.

A liberal arts education is complemented by experiential learning. At Hartwick, we think about this every day, because it’s our promise to students.

Our job with marketing is to recreate that experience our students had on campus. Yes, that’s a big challenge for colleges with small marketing groups like ours—to pull those threads out and highlight them for particular audiences. It takes a lot more expertise and intentionality than most small colleges can invest in.

What brands do you admire?

NIKE:
The swoosh is just brilliant. It’s simple, iconic, timeless—a textbook example of creating something that’s so unique it will never fade from relevance.

SOUTHWEST:
They have a great promise with customer service, and the ability to fulfill that promise.

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY:
Reflects the trend: many strong regional brands that work well together.

SOUTHERN NEW HAMPSHIRE UNIVERSITY:
I admire what President Paul LeBlanc has done there, and the entrepreneurial spirit he’s brought to that school.

Dr. Margaret L. Drugovich is a scholar and practitioner of transformational leadership and innovation in higher education.

In 2008, she was appointed president of Hartwick College, a liberal arts college that offers a unique experiential learning environment in Oneonta, New York.
Representing your values.

Inside higher education, branding is still a new concept. An institution’s brand needs to convey the core values and the very essence of a university. For a public land-grant institution such as West Virginia University, that responsibility is about providing access to education and being a valiant partner with our state. We need to be seen as a helping hand, not an ivory tower.

The bolder, the better.

Now more than ever, universities need to differentiate themselves from other institutions. How? We have to create academic experiences that are unlike others anywhere else in the country. We need to tell our story in a way that differentiates, but also inspires — one that motivates a young person to come to our university. If your institution looks like every other, what’s the point?

We need to be bold in the way we convey our message and mission. That means telling our story in a simple, direct way — with a sense of seriousness and playfulness at the same time. Be surprising. Be interesting. Just don’t lose sight of your institution’s core values.

Winning with athletics.

I will never persuade 70,000 people to fit into a chemistry lecture, even if I try. But they will show up to a football game. Athletics can be a powerful megaphone for the quality of our education and the unique culture of the institution. Your athletic program allows you to tell your story in a large setting. At West Virginia University, we do not have a great football team with a university attached to it. We have a great university that includes a lively and wonderful football program. It is about celebrating talent in the classroom and on the court.

Collective ownership.

Each of us at the university owns the brand — and that starts with the president. We need to have cohesive and consistent alignment around who we are. We need to sing as a chorus, not a cacophony. And it is important that you be very clear about alignment. A university must look, feel and act as one. When you’re not, the brand will suffer — as will the institution.

Dr. Gordon Gee shares a few of the insights he’s gleaned from three decades at the helm of major public, private, and Ivy League institutions.

Dr. Gordon Gee has led five separate institutions. He is known as one of higher education’s most experienced and transformative leaders, a view reinforced in 2009, when Time named him among America’s 10 best college presidents.

**WHAT BRANDS DO YOU ADMIRE?**

**OHIO STATE:** For one, I put in a lot of sweat equity there. But I think the university has a great reputation.

**PENN STATE:** It does a fine job of being elite, but not elitist.

**HOW DO YOU MEASURE A BRAND?**

**I have never believed in rankings, and I do not believe in them now. I prefer to measure an institution qualitatively — by its capacity for change and its capacity to care for its people and the people it serves.**
Dr. Thayne McCulloh has seen nearly all sides of university leadership. Here he talks about uniting a campus around a brand—and quelling the politics involved.

Getting the faculty involved.
The faculty members need to own the brand. At the end of the day, they carry the educational mission of the institution. Students pay for an experience that revolves around their academic program. So all things considered, their judgment of how effective the institution is will inevitably be attached to the academic experience—and that ties back to the effectiveness of the faculty.

To become carriers of the brand, faculty need to feel like they’re working with folks who really do believe that they, the faculty, are at the heart of the enterprise. One mistake that marketing people can make is to go to faculty and say, “We’ll get input from you, but it’s our job to create the brand.”

A better approach is to ask how the organization puts its brand together, and then go to the faculty to get their help. Say, “We think there’s a gap between how you think this institution ought to be seen, and how your marketers are trying to articulate it. Will you help us close that gap?”

Making the case.
Some faculty and staff ask me, “Why can’t we make our enrollment goals to the exact number?” And I always love that question, because it gives me the opportunity to make the case for the brand. Only by closing the gap between the lived experience and the brand message do we gain greater control over what effect we have with students, which in turn generates demand and impacts our faculty.

Many faculty members appreciate hearing it put this way, because they can understand my hypothesis. Most haven’t heard it put quite that bluntly before.

The president’s role.
Presidents need to set the respective roles of students, staff, and faculty throughout the brand process. We need to make sure our colleagues doing the hard work of marketing the university pay more attention to the education providers than anybody else.

On the other side, a president needs to help faculty understand why a brand is important. So I need to make sure they know that the better we can articulate what Gonzaga does as an institution, the more students will want to learn about what the faculty do.

WHAT BRANDS WORK WELL?

COCA-COLA: They have creative people constantly thinking about how to generate interest and sales.
EMIRATES AIRLINES: They’ve undergone a big transformation in order to claim space in their market.
STANFORD UNIVERSITY: Specifically with their campaign work, Stanford does a great job of getting faculty involved in campaign efforts.

HOW DO YOU MEASURE A BRAND?

IT HAS TO ANSWER FOUR QUESTIONS:

• Does the brand help coalesce us as an institution?
• Does it impact enrollment?
• Does it impact the number of benefactors who give?
• Does it spur alumni to get engaged with the university?

Universities are really complex places, so a brand needs to be flexible. But I’m not sure it’s an effective use of our time to force all constituencies into one basket.
The range of your brand.

I see brand as a far-reaching concept. It impacts one-on-one conversations between counselors and students in all areas. It impacts legislators as they’re deciding on funding models in Denver. It impacts parents as they think about sending their kid to this place in the mountains. It’s pervasive. It’s not just a logo—it permeates everything that impacts how you’re thought of and talked about.

In a word, it’s your reputation. That’s the simplest way I can say it. Brand is the essence of how you’re represented, and what people think of you.

The people factor.

It’s easy to talk about brand in esoteric ways. But in the end, your brand is directly related to the people in your organization. People want to work at a place they’re proud of, a place that’s respected. And so brand obviously impacts hiring.

Your people have massive impact on your brand. Even if you have a phenomenal product, it can be mugged by bad leadership and the people who deliver that brand. It’s impossible for your marketing department to put a bandage on subpar personnel.

You have to have a deliberate approach to hiring. For that, I recommend Jim Collins’ book, *Good to Great*, where he talks about making sure you have the right kind of people on the bus.

Execute, execute, execute.

Here’s the dirty little secret about brand: People often think it’s akin to strategy. I don’t really think it is. Execution trumps strategy—every time. And it’s harder.

A good strategy will not save you if you have bad execution. You can have a poor strategy, but through phenomenal execution, you can save the day. Not the reverse. Execution builds brand.

Two questions come to mind: How did you hear about us? And why did you pick the school? Then you can see whether the message you’re trying to get out there really attracted them.

Q:

WHAT BRANDS DO YOU ADMIRE?

**ENTERPRISE RENT-A-CAR:**
I think they have placed an emphasis on excellent execution and value. They’re well respected. I’ve stolen many of their employees over the years.

**L.L. BEAN:**
Their quality isn’t particularly fantastic. But the marketing and branding save the day.

**THE RITZ-CARLTON:**
Their name is synonymous with top shelf. Their book is required reading for my cabinet and direct reports—it’s the gold standard.

**CREIGHTON UNIVERSITY:**
Out of Nebraska. They’ve done a fine job of punching beyond their weight.

**SOUTHERN NEW HAMPSHIRE UNIVERSITY:**
You have to take your hat off to them. Paul LeBlanc and what he’s done: pretty amazing.

**THE BEST BRANDS**

I like the brands that communicate value. They punch beyond their weight. A lot of people think sexy stuff about Apple. And that’s fine—they have a fine brand. But think about John Deere, or Harley-Davidson. For Harley, they’ve been clever in the way they’ve protected that brand. Their reputation is so strong they can get away with a few lapses.

Before Dr. Greg Salsbury came to higher education, he worked in financial services for 17 years. This gave him a unique vantage point among college presidents, something he brings every day to his leadership of Western State Colorado University.
Taking the long view.
In the wake of the recession, many colleges were looking for short-term approaches to branding their institutions. But we looked long-term. We started with our core values and developed a brand statement. Since then, it has been about building our core values into the ways we operate.

We play up our curricular focus on experiential learning. Our founders felt very strongly that learning by doing is one of the best ways to learn, and that remains a key facet of an Otterbein education. Students once worked on a campus farm; now they learn out in the community through internships, service learning, and the like.

For us at Otterbein, the brand is an intentional process. It’s a story we’ve worked very hard to create from a real experience on campus. It’s something we live every day. We try to talk the talk and walk the walk.

Connecting to your heritage.
During our brand discussions, much of the staff felt that the school could use an affirmation of its history. It’s a remarkable history, and it’s worth sharing. We were the first school founded as a coeducational institution. Our founders saw education as an opportunity for betterment and social mobility, and they wanted to create an educational opportunity for those in need. Otterbein admitted African Americans before the Civil War, and was heavily involved in the suffrage and temperance movements. These are all parts of our past that are still very relevant.

The key is making our history relevant today: touching on those parts of history that we do well and that people care about.

At Otterbein, this typically means emphasizing our interdisciplinary approach—an approach to education we’ve taken since our founding. It’s true to us, and it’s valuable to students, who get an infinite number of educational experiences.

Engaging the whole community.
I want everyone to own the brand, not just me or a select group within the administration. Of course, in a logistical sense, brand communications are managed by those in the communications and marketing office.

But the goal is to get students and others to participate and rally around the ideas of the brand, too. Any strong brand in higher education does more than convey a message. It engages the entire campus community—faculty, staff, and students alike—through conversations, discussions about living the brand.

What does it mean to be a model community? Simply put, it means getting others on campus to be stewards of the brand. It’s creating an intentional, organic unity to what students do during their time here—their education experience—and how they talk about the institution to others.

Otterbein is a humble place, but this is no time to be humble. We’ve always been on the right side of history, and we want to keep that momentum going.

WHAT BRANDS DO YOU ADMIRE?

APPLE:
They have a succinct message and do a great job.

PURDUE UNIVERSITY:
Specifically the “Makers, All” campaign, which was an authentic, direct, and strong way to refresh a traditional message.

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY:
The “Wonk” initiative was a smart, strong statement and matched the American University brand well.

UNIVERSITY OF MARYLAND:
It’s been great to watch the lasting power of Maryland’s “Fear the Turtle” campaign as it evolved to “Fearless.”

A communicator at heart, Dr. Kathy Krendl brings a savvy PR perspective both to rallying her community and to advocating for the brand at a liberal arts institution.
Like many of our peers, we’ve chosen to make our brand promise more implicit. We talk about stories, not the brand. If you go to our website, we try to have a story on each of our three areas. There’s not an explicit brand statement. It’s an implicit statement that speaks through our stories. We’re always talking about academic life, life beyond the classroom, and the life of a graduate.

The proof is in the stories. Higher education is under extreme scrutiny. Where it once was a completely trusted part of our world, now our colleges and universities are seen with a more skeptical eye: “Are we really doing well for our students? Are we producing graduates that society needs?” This affects institutions like DePauw. We don’t do accounting courses. You’re going to come here and do humanities courses and sciences courses—and that’s going to prepare you for life ahead. But that message is hard in a society that’s more focused on ROI. The best we can do is tell the stories of our graduates who go through the DePauw experience, because generation after generation is succeeding.

Embodying the whole experience.

When I think about the DePauw brand, it’s the most concise statement of the experience of going to DePauw. It’s the promise. It says, “This is what we’re about, and this is what you will experience when you come here.”

The brand should capture the totality of the experience: academic life, life outside of the classroom, the life of an alumnus or alumna. We try to get all the elements of it and make it very comprehensive.

Strong brands get noticed.

People on campus fear that branding is reductionist—it pulls down the totality of the university to a couple of thoughts. They feel it misses subtleties, overrides complexities, and emphasizes some aspects over others.

There’s also a sense that branding, or using a brand, is in some ways anti-intellectual. It’s another step toward universities “selling themselves” and being corporatized and more transactional. We rarely use the term internally, because it means so many things to different people.

That said, I’m a graduate of three institutions, all three with very strong brands. And there are 3,000 institutions in this country, all vying for attention. So unless you distill your character in an easily understandable way, you’ll never get noticed.

How to carry it out.

The brand is not explicit. On our campus, brand is a type of discipline. It’s a way to organize our messages and our offices, which are speaking to thousands of people every day.

Overall, the communications office owns the brand. They oversee the most overt external communication tools: the alumni mag, website, and social media.

There are 3000 institutions in this country, all vying for attention. So unless you distill your character in an easily understandable way, you’ll never get noticed.

WHAT BRANDS DO YOU ADMIRE?

ELI LILLY AND COMPANY: Trusted, honorable institution, especially here in Indiana (and two of our graduates have been CEO).

APPLE: Steve Jobs framing Apple as the intersection of art and science. Creativity combined with rigor—that’s appealing.

Transformation stories in higher education: When institutions go from good to being outstanding—I’m a big fan of the transformation story DIKE UNIVERSITY in the 80s, STANFORD UNIVERSITY in the 90s, UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME right now. USC. I also admire DAVIDSON COLLEGE and WASHINGTON AND LEE.

HOW DO YOU MEASURE A BRAND?

At DePauw, we have a dashboard of 20 metrics we keep an eye on for ourselves and our peers. But we haven’t explicitly connected that to our brand exercises. It’s not part of the same strategic framework. What we measure includes admissions, applicants, acceptance, yield (outcomes), and fundraising.
Ologie is a branding agency. We help our clients define their purpose and tell their stories in engaging ways. The brands we build and the messages we craft are based on smart insights and compelling creative expressions that help people make important life decisions about their health, wealth, and education. We are researchers, strategists, designers, storytellers, and problem solvers. We create brand experiences through all forms of media: print, digital, environmental, photographic, and video. In short, we build brands with purpose.