

Delphi study of the future of marketing of higher education

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Abstract

This is the opening paper to the 2006 conference and discusses the future of higher education marketing. Taking a historic perspective the paper situates the discipline of marketing of higher education. From this grounding the paper offers an insight into what the future holds for educational marketing foundation on the view of senior practitioner in the market. The reported study sets groundwork for future research and debate. It concludes by drawing attention to what administrators and marketers will need to consider in the future. In particular, the importance of blending strategic planning with marketing and developing integrated marketing systems is developed.

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He who does not remember the past is doomed to repeat it. (George Santana)

1. Introduction

The marketing of higher education emerged in the mid-1980s as an offshoot of the field of health care marketing. Throughout the 1980s, the marketing of health care services was on the rise. The American Marketing Association and the Academy of Health Care Marketing sponsored conferences and symposiums that grew in popularity as marketers desired to apply their craft to hospitals and physician associations. Several individuals became aware of the important parallels they could draw between the health care market and that of higher education and launched efforts to expose challenges and prepare colleges and universities to meet them. Philip Kotler, who had formerly published a successful book on the marketing of health care with Roberta Clarke, issued the book, *Strategic Marketing for Educational Institutions*, with Karen Fox. James Burns of Tehila Associates became the founding editor of *The Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*. Tom Hayes, a

colleague of James Burns, worked to gain the support of the American Marketing Association to sponsor a conference on this new topic.

These individuals, among others, detected the following trends in the higher education market which mirror ones in health care.

- *Demographic changes* in the 1980s caused a surplus of hospital beds which led to the closings and mergers of hospitals. Similarly, demographic trends showed that the potential number of eighteen year olds entering the higher education market was steadily declining. In particular, the decreased population of Caucasian, middle to upper middle class students was cause for concern. This factor would force a shift to new potential markets/mergers and closings in the future.
- *Increased operating costs*, partly fueled by the cost of acquiring and implementing technology, impacted health care institutions. While newer and better diagnostic devices were entering the market, they were expensive to acquire, maintain and replace. Likewise, the computer age was affecting the costs and delivery mechanisms in higher education.
- *Resistance within the organization itself* was perhaps the greatest challenge to marketing health care. Physicians and health care providers tended to discount marketing as an

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appropriate tool for health care, equating marketing with advertising, and personal selling that degraded the profession. The same perceptions existed in higher education among faculty and administrators who feared that marketing would impact the nature and integrity of the academy. With time, marketing became an invaluable tool to ensure the survival and ultimate success of many health care institutions. Each year, acceptance grew and the field expanded. Correspondingly, many marketers were confident that this same pattern would occur in higher education (Blackburn, 1980; Dolence, 1993; Ferrari, and Lauer, 2000; Hayes, 1991; Kotler and Clarke, 1986; Kotler and Fox, 1995; Topor, 1997).

In 1988, Xavier University sponsored a conference which attracted 135 participants, all sharing a common vision of the future of higher education. This conference later became the American Marketing Association's Symposium on the Marketing of Higher Education. At the conference the greatest obstacle to marketing colleges and universities became apparent: a lack of understanding of the field of marketing. Many believed marketing to be a communication tool only. At the time, the practice was common for a new marketing director's first assignment to be the design of a view book to attract the right type and number of students the institution desired. Many marketers of higher education in the late 1980s came from industry where the focus was on a physical product. Many did not understand marketing nontangible services in general, much less marketing higher education specifically. Many came from internal public relations offices that did not understand the complete scope of marketing. This lack of understanding had existed previously in health care, but was addressed and rectified by Masters of Health Care Administration programs which included marketing courses as part of the curriculum. No similar course of study existed in the higher education field. Indeed, many challenges faced the development and growth of the field (Barry et al., 2001; Bok, 2003; Litten, 1980). Nonetheless, the pressures of a demanding environment assured this development. The questions regarding how fast the field of higher education marketing will grow and manifest itself remains unanswered.

Today, universities accept and practice marketing. The Symposium of Marketing for Higher Education is a major conference for the American Marketing Association (AMA). The Council for the Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) now calls their Communication division Communication and Marketing. More importantly, CASE offers seminars and conferences on marketing because of this developing focus. Marketing consulting firms and for-profit seminar companies offer services to an expanding market.

2. Method

In an effort to determine future development in the marketing of higher education, this study uses a qualitative research

method, Delphi. This technique employs a panel of experts to reach a consensus or convergence of thoughts on a subject. The intention of the Delphi technique is "to allow access to the positive attributes of interacting groups (knowledge from a variety of sources, creative synthesis, etc.) while pre-empting their negative aspects (attributable to social, personal and political conflicts, etc.)" (Rowe and Wright, 1999: 354). A number of researchers confirm the Delphi method as a valid instrument for forecasting and decision-making support (e.g., Gupta and Clarke, 1996; Hill and Fowles, 1975; Landeta, 2006; Linstone, 1975; Lock, 1987; Rieger, 1986; Rowe and Wright, 1999; Rowe et al., 1991).

Delphi is effective in the context of forecasting the future of higher education marketing. Landeta (2006) reports that the Delphi technique is fully valid in a context where the speed of change means the future depends increasingly less on the past and more on the will of the agents of the present. The level of competition and rapid changes in the environment fit this description perfectly. This technique is able to accommodate the wide geographic dispersion of the experts in the field. Using this technique, the study includes posing the question, "What is the greatest challenge to marketing higher education?"

The panel comprises twenty individuals from the field of higher education marketing, including practitioners, consultants and college professors.

Professional colleagues in the field submitted names of potential panelists. Cross-referencing identified potential panelists whom a wide audience perceived to be experts in the field. No incentive was offered for participation, yet evidence indicates that a panel composed of experts tends to benefit intrinsically by participating in the Delphi procedure (e.g., Dalkey and Helmer, 1963; Jolson and Rossow, 1971; Larreche and Moinpour, 1983).

Panelists considered three questions in the context of higher education marketing:

1. What role do you see marketing taking in the next five years? Ten years?
2. How and where do you see marketing fitting into the organizational chart?
3. What's the next "big thing"?

Eighteen of the original twenty panel members responded to the first email request. Researchers sorted the responses by question and removed identities of panelists to provide anonymity, then sent all responses to the panel for review. Panelists read the responses, reflected on the various viewpoints and responded a second time to the original three questions. Panelists gave each viewpoint consideration before responding the second time and were free to change or keep their original perspectives.

Sixteen of the original twenty panelists responded a second time, providing a considerable consolidation of perspectives. Ideally, this process would have been repeated a third time. In this case, time constraints limited the collection of opinions to two rounds. Past research indicates that the majority of

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