

Right Time for OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL

Three presidents share their experiences implementing AASCU's branding initiative for state colleges and universities

By Cherise Carrera

Emblematic of changing times, the newly elected presidential administration and legislatures will surely bring with them possibilities as well as challenges. However, without an extensive education outlook from the administration to reference, the specifics as they pertain to higher education can only be surmised.

What is clear is that communicating the true value of state colleges and universities (SCUs) is paramount in helping to secure and improve the future of SCUs nationwide, despite (and because of) this uncharted political landscape. As AASCU's vice president of government relations, Michael Zola, stated during an AASCU webinar in November, "A new administration means new people. And it's our burden to explain [who we are]." Honing and streamlining that message, in addition to making it stronger by creating a unified voice, can ensure that communicating with these "new people" is productive.

That is the objective of AASCU's *Opportunities for All* (Opps4All) messaging campaign. Launched in 2016, this national SCU branding initiative aims to heighten the general public's and lawmakers' knowledge and awareness of SCUs and their overall value by conveying consistent messaging about SCUs at both the national and local level. The program's messaging points focus on four core SCU attributes: quality, accessibility, affordability and responsibility (i.e., places of public purpose).

More than 60 schools have formally committed to the *Opportunities for All* pledge this year. *Public Purpose* asked presidents from three of those institutions—**Vic Morgan, University of Houston-Victoria (UHV) in Texas; Jim Borsig, Mississippi University for Women (MUW); and Linda M.**

Bleicken, Armstrong State University, Ga.—to share how the campaign has been implemented within their schools.

Public Purpose: How would you describe your school's surrounding community—socioeconomics, education, etc.?

MORGAN: *We are among the least expensive institutions in Texas. Our region of Texas is below the state average (which is below the national average) in the number of adults with college degrees. There is also a high number of minority, first generation and economically disadvantaged families.*

BORSIG: *Our enrollment reflects Mississippi's wonderful diversity—and both first generation and non-traditional students are successful here. Expanding educational opportunity was an explicit reason for this institution's founding and remains one of our cherished values.*

BLEICKEN: *Access to quality education [in Georgia] is broad. The state has a racially, ethnically and religiously diverse population, and is especially well positioned with various economic drivers in place. Local businesses compete on a global scale,*

supported by a solid manufacturing base, strong business development systems, a booming tourism industry, military bases, and key access to highway and rail systems.

Public Purpose: How does *Opportunities for All* fit into your institution's established messaging?

MORGAN: *Our main message is access and affordability. I think the public in general, and our region in particular, has lost faith in higher education accessibility and affordability. And legislators seem to think that education is now a private good, and this pushes the cost to*

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families at a time when parents don't understand how they can possibly send their students to college. Those obviously are key concepts of Opportunities for All, so the national campaign resonated with some of our key initiatives.

BORSIG: The potential of Opportunities for All became apparent as we engaged our stakeholders. The campaign's messages are consistent with those developed following structured campus conversations that led

to defining new strategic priorities. Among our broad institutional priorities are regional stewardship; focusing on partnerships that improve health outcomes for the region; and emphasizing quality academic programs that lead to degree completion, especially for a diverse student body. The campaign fits both our messages and our region's demographics.

BLEICKEN: The Opportunities for All mission naturally aligns with Armstrong's mission, which is to offer teaching-centered and student-focused learning, as well as diverse academic experiences and professional programs grounded in the liberal arts. The university's values also parallel the campaign's efforts, as we promote scholarship, leadership and stewardship in an environment that embraces diversity and cultivates student success.

Public Purpose: What did the planning process to implement the initiative entail?

MORGAN: Our marketing and communications staff took the lead on reviewing campaign materials and planning how we would get the word out about it. That process took a week or two.

BORSIG: Our university relations office has taken the lead on embracing the campaign. Initial planning took several months as the office prepared to roll out the campaign, and it involved discussions with campus constituencies and a news release announcing that MUW was joining this national effort. Staff members have also participated in AASCU's Opportunities for All webinars to learn about practices on other campuses and to become more familiar with the overall goals of the campaign...and they frequently refer to the Opportunities for All member portal on the AASCU website.

BLEICKEN: With similar initiatives already in place, our process required coordination with our marketing and communications department. Marketing tied the campaign's messaging to Armstrong's social media calendar and communications plan.

Public Purpose: What actions have you taken as a participant in Opps4All?

MORGAN: We started by putting up a [page](#) on the UHV president's

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— Linda Bleicken



website to describe the principles of the Opportunities for All campaign. A press release was written about the importance of the campaign. Later, I wrote a [column](#) about it for our local newspaper and was invited to a newspaper editorial board meeting to discuss

the issue more in depth. We've also incorporated campaign language into our presentations and other press releases.

BORSIG: The messaging now is being used in a social media campaign that incorporates the Opportunities for All logo, and features both non-traditional and first generation students on Facebook, Twitter and YouTube postings...It provides a human face to the opportunities provided at our university. The [Opps4All] message also has been incorporated into presidential communications and news stories.

BLEICKEN: A visual series for Twitter resulted, with a diverse selection of students appearing alongside inspirational or thankful quotes about their education at Armstrong. The accompanying copy stressed the student's unique or challenging situation while showing how attending a state college like Armstrong allowed that student to shine in ways they never before thought possible.

Public Purpose: How did the stakeholders within your school work together during Opps4All activities?

MORGAN: UHV marketing and communications worked with other departments to gather information and create materials. I think all of our schools and departments understand the importance of promoting accessibility and affordability, so it wasn't difficult to get people on board with the campaign.

BORSIG: We are in the initial stages of the campaign, and work will continue with individual colleges to encourage incorporating messaging into their communication efforts. Each college has been polled to identify students whose stories are appropriate for the campaign's messaging, and all have been responsive and enthusiastic. The campaign appears to resonate with our campus community, alumni and friends.

BLEICKEN: The marketing department has been the sole implementer. There is currently an administrative audit being done by our Opportunities for All liaison to pinpoint social media coordinators within the university's various departments.

Public Purpose: What resources or media were necessary and utilized to inform or to implement the campaign?

MORGAN: We promoted the website, press releases and column on UHV's social media sites. We also shared Opportunities for All news from AASCU. We used our media contacts to further encourage dissemination of this news. And we participated in the first generation stories project that AASCU organized.

BORSIG: A news release announcing participation appeared on the university's website, in the university's internal newsletter and on social media. A brief about the campaign is also being included in the university's magazine, Visions.

BLEICKEN: Twitter and Facebook were used for this campaign, with an #Opps4All tracked tag feed set up for Twitter, allowing Armstrong's official account to monitor and interact with other campaign posts from fellow SCUs. Additionally, the AASCU online campaign hub, monthly newsletters and frequent webinars helped to provide useful information.

Public Purpose: What have been the outcomes of the initiative implementation so far?

MORGAN: We are very encouraged by our spring applicant numbers. We think it may translate into enrollment growth in the spring, and hopefully, next fall and beyond. Another important impact has been more people in the community are championing the cause. Our local newspaper held an event aimed at the importance of postsecondary education. A partnership of education, business and nonprofit organizations had a Way to Pay Day event on campus to help students and their families learn about different options to pay for college.

BORSIG: Students, in particular, are appreciative of having their stories shared. Some have contacted university relations to ask to be featured. All who have shared their stories have spoken of the individualized instruction, the affordability of their education and the sense of having a "home." The campaign clearly is showing that this institution is having a profound impact on lives.

BLEICKEN: So far, the reach has been minimal, but it is a new initiative on campus. Our institution's social profile was most impacted, as we featured current students and alumni, and repurposed articles highlighting Armstrong's excellence. And all of our campaign posts have been tagged with #Opps4All. By the end of this semester, we will measure metrics (engagement and reach).

Public Purpose: What plan do you have for using Opps4All in the future?

MORGAN: We want to continue to highlight the themes of accessibility and affordability in our publications and presentations. We also plan to highlight some success stories of first generation students

and alumni who have gone on to do great things with their education.

BORSIG: We will continue to stay involved. Opportunities for All has great flexibility and will help us to continue to tell the stories of our students and demonstrate the impact of our faculty and academic programs on the region and state.

BLEICKEN: We plan to expand our university's involvement. We will continue to reach out to internal academic departments, government relations officers and educational directors, as well as their regional and national counterparts.

Public Purpose: What would you like to share with your fellow senior leaders about integrating and implementing Opportunities for All?

MORGAN: The initiative is important for all institutions since a larger and growing percentage of the population will need encouragement about both the value and accessibility of higher education. If we as AASCU institutions do not rise to the challenge, it seems to me we are neglecting a vital part of our mission.

BORSIG: State colleges and universities change lives, strengthen families and power regional economies. Opportunities for All is a dynamic framework capable of extending any one institution's reach

by linking to the national conversation about the value of America's state colleges and universities. I strongly believe that telling our story one student at a time demonstrates that SCUs deliver America's promise. Opps4All links SCUs together into a brilliant national

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— Jim Borsig

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BLEICKEN: I would encourage senior leaders to create a detailed communications plan in advance and utilize resources already available (previous student interviews and photos, relevant news articles already posted to their website or in the local community, etc.). Having structure in place will allow them to focus on expansion in the community. It can be difficult for state colleges and universities to illustrate their value. This collaborative effort allows us to join forces with similar institutions and inform communities of opportunities that exist.

For more information on how to participate in Opportunities for All, visit www.aascu.org/Opps4All/. **P**