Between the Lines

Where Challenge and Opportunity Meet

There is much lost ground to be recaptured in the current climate of mistrust for higher education institutions. Fortunately “Opportunities for All” provides us with a great launching pad to achieve a common ground appreciation for our invaluable contributions to our students, our states, and American society.

—Don Betz, President, University of Central Oklahoma

This quote is from EndSights—page 28—in which Don Betz makes the case for AASCU members to embrace the Opportunities for All campaign. Don has been the president of three AASCU institutions and brings knowledge, commitment and passion for addressing the circumstances in which state colleges and universities (SCUs) find themselves. Many SCUs face financial struggles; research suggests that the role our schools play in American public higher education is neither well understood nor appreciated by key stakeholders—opinion leaders, lawmakers, prospective students, parents, and the public. During the next two to three years our goal is to change this perspective.

Readers will find an article beginning on page 14 that describes how this campaign originated: the environment in which public higher education—and AASCU institutions in particular—find themselves, members’ request for help in communicating their distinctiveness, subsequent research, and pilot projects that involved AASCU members. These actions were followed by the decision to move forward with a national communications campaign that focused on a strong messaging component.

You will continue to hear about Opportunities for All. (If you go to the member portal on the AASCU website you will find background information, an overview of the initiative, benefits of participation, and implementation resources.) We currently have a small cadre of institutions who are enthusiastic about the campaign. Our goal is for every member of AASCU to commit. As President Muriel Howard said in her opening remarks during the May 4th national launch, “It is paramount that we take a unified approach. A single voice can easily get lost in the crowd. When many voices join together, they become hard to ignore. Our collective opportunity lies in defining what it means to be an SCU.”

We know there will be institutional leaders who think the campaign has no relevance for them. They are wrong. In a discussion about the campaign, Mark Kinders, vice president for public affairs at the University of Central Oklahoma, said, “If we look for ways to weave this language into our messaging . . . it becomes a national expression of who we are.” That is the long-term view we encourage our members to take—for themselves and their colleagues around the country.

The article Playing to Your Strengths, beginning on page 10, focuses on differentiation and how it matters. The story looks at purpose, brand and culture for these SCUs. Author Gayle Bennett talked with several presidents and other institutional leaders to find out how the differentiator was determined, the value of community involvement, and the role marketing considerations play. There also is a sidebar that explains the value of incorporating high-impact educational practices in differentiation.

We are always pleased to highlight our members; we are particularly interested in those schools that are addressing their institutional missions with innovation and creativity. If you have ideas to share, we want to hear from you.