Some ideas make so much sense that we often wonder why we didn’t think and act on them before.

Such might be the case for AASCU’s new identity campaign, “Opportunities for All.”

The University of Central Oklahoma was among the handful of early participants in formulating the campaign through identifying the audiences, messages and proof points. Vice President for Communications Susan Chilcott and Sage Communications were astute leaders and listeners in collaborating with our institutions to frame this campaign.

We found common ground in defining ourselves to numerous critical audiences, including prospective students, their families, elected officials, and social influencers and decision-makers.

Now we are at the point of implementation, and I hope as my AASCU presidential peers you will fully join with President Howard and me in embracing this campaign. “Opportunities for All” does an excellent job synthesizing what state colleges and universities do better than any other category of higher education institution. We are accessible as we provide upward mobility for our students. We are responsible through our commitment to being “Stewards of Place” by serving our regions in close partnerships in civic engagement, service-learning, internships, and faculty consulting. Through intimate collaborations between faculty, staff and students, we provide a high quality education that prepares our graduates to live happy personal and professional lives.

We know why we come to work every day: to help our students achieve their dreams.

The proof points identified in the campaign to support these claims are distinctive to regional, public state colleges and universities. Among them are that we:

• Place students at the heart of each school—in values, programs, facilities and community;
• Provide a viable higher education choice for all state residents who are ready and willing to work hard to be successful;
• Ensure a diversity of students, experiences and ideas;
• Ensure a skilled workforce where it is needed and where our graduates make an immediate and positive impact; and
• Create a place of public purpose—we add value and contribute to the intellectual, cultural, economic and social advancement of our community and region.

In this current environment of increased accountability, too often our success is measured primarily by retention and graduation rates. This creates false echoes on quality versus access. A diploma equates to a commodity whose value is substantially based on the return on investment through salaries at graduation. The mere awarding of a degree becomes a proxy for being considered to be an educated person who is prepared for the workforce and life.

We know these performance assumptions are simplistic, untrue—and pervasive. To succeed as institutions in this challenging time for public higher education, we must embrace those messages and proofs that are common to all of us—and uncommon for other categories of institutions.

They can become the foundation for realizing the basics of any communication campaign:

• Clearly define a unique message;
• Stay on message to cut through the marketplace noise of competing ideas; and
• Convince audiences to attend to and yield to your message.

Fortunately, AASCU institutions constitute a critical mass to accomplish this task. With 420 institutions enrolling several million students—and our recognized value to those we serve locally—we have the momentum to reshape how state colleges and universities are defined by and valued by critical decision-makers.

This won’t be an easy task. 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.

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