The Opportunity is Now!

A National Call-to-Action for America’s State Colleges and Universities

By Karen Doss Bowman

Ever before have state colleges and universities (SCUs) faced such urgent challenges. Increased scrutiny of state higher education budgets has led to diminished funding, even as tuition costs have escalated. At the same time, survey evidence suggests that the role of SCUs are not well understood, even though perceptions of these schools are generally favorable.

To address these collective challenges—and in response to member requests for support with SCU messaging—AASCU is launching Opportunities for All, a national communications campaign with the central message that SCUs are “the higher education choice that creates brighter futures for all.” AASCU member institutions are urged to participate in this important effort to tell their story.

As a body of nearly 420 public colleges, universities and systems, the AASCU membership can make great strides working collaboratively to increase awareness among prospective students and other key stakeholders about the high-quality, accessible and cost-effective education SCUs offer to an increasingly diverse student population.

“Our collective opportunity lies in defining what it means to be an SCU, so that individuals assessing college options—or state funding allocations—clearly understand the value our institutions bring to students and to our states,” says AASCU President Muriel A. Howard. “As such, 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.

“We are asking our members to work with us as we lead this collaborative, long-term, national initiative to demonstrate the role SCUs play in providing Opportunities for All.”
“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.” —Muriel Howard

Building a Campaign
The Opportunities for All campaign emerges out of planning and research that began in 2013, when AASCU commissioned a survey to assess the general population’s understanding of AASCU institutions and to determine what messages would resonate with target audiences. While the study revealed that the public generally knew of and appreciated AASCU institutions, it also revealed that the role of these institutions is largely misunderstood.

The survey gave direction to the Outreach Initiative Pilot Program, a communications program developed in partnership with Sage Communications, an integrated marketing and public relations firm. Launched in the fall of 2014, the pilot program engaged AASCU members in a two-phased effort to create and test common language. Their efforts helped develop a unified SCU messaging framework targeted to key stakeholder groups, including prospective students and their families, community leaders and state legislators.

Involved in the first phase of the pilot project were the University of Central Oklahoma, Henderson State University (Ark.), Morgan State University (Md.), Northern Kentucky University, and Western Washington University. The second phase added Governors State University (Ill.), Indiana State University, James Madison University (Va.), University of Massachusetts – Dartmouth, University of West Florida, and Sam Houston State University (Texas).

“We felt this campaign was important because there’s been a very subtle—sometimes not so subtle—fundamental question being raised about the importance and value of higher education today,” says Glendell Jones, president of Henderson State University (HSU). “This campaign at its core is tied to promoting the values and educating people on the value of an education that’s delivered by state colleges and universities.”

Positioning State Colleges & Universities (SCUs)
The pilot phase has resulted in a messaging framework with a central theme that promotes SCUs as a “smart investment, offering a high-quality, accessible and affordable option” for those seeking a college degree. The four core equities, or characteristics, are: high quality, accessible, affordable, and responsible. (See core values statement.)

“The fact is, these are not new concepts—they are directly related to what’s always been the soul of our institutions,” says Mark Kinders, vice president for public affairs at the University of Central Oklahoma. “It’s just that [with the core equities], we have come to better language, more consistent language to deliver our message to our key stakeholders.”

Standing United
Over the course of 18 months, the 10 institutions involved in the pilot phase of this communications project found many creative ways to integrate the campaign message into their individual brands to help broaden public awareness of their value as an SCU. Northern Kentucky University, University of Central Oklahoma and Western Washington University, for example, added webpages devoted to describing their status as AASCU institutions and describing the benefits of SCUs. The campaign messages also were integrated into videos, admissions recruiting materials, op-ed pieces and social media platforms. Western Washington University also engaged state lawmakers by devoting a page in its Federal Legislative Briefing Book that identifies Western as an AASCU institution and describes the difference that SCUs are making across the country.

“I went into this pilot project a little wary, because we were trying to strengthen the HSU brand, and I was concerned that throwing in other
“If we look for ways to weave this language into our messaging, then suddenly it becomes a national expression of who we are.” —Mark Kinders

Implementing “Opportunities for All”

An important lesson gleaned from the SCU pilot program points to the importance of sustained commitment from institutional leadership and the involvement of representatives from many departments and disciplines across campus. These stakeholders should be educated on the SCU brand and the Opportunities for All Campaign, ensuring that they understand the objectives of the campaign and how it is to be implemented.

“We’re talking in part here about cultural change [on campus],” says Bruce Shepard, president of Western Washington University and a past member of AASCU’s Board of Directors. “That makes it important to incorporate and bring on more wide representative groups. If you don’t do the groundwork of getting buy-in across the campus, in the end you’re either not as effective or you have to step back and do it again—that takes even longer. So it really works to bring people in at the get-go.”

Steve Swan, Western’s vice president for university relations and community development, adds: “It’s the people across the campus who live and breathe what we do on a daily basis who need to have an understanding of what we’re trying to accomplish and the reasons why. This wasn’t an isolated effort of our communication and marketing shop—it was a campus-wide effort. That creates a greater value and helps us to better understand who we are and the difference that we make.”

To begin implementing the Opportunities for All campaign, pilot participants recommend doing a communications audit to identify opportunities to integrate the campaign’s message. That information can be used to develop an implementation plan. There’s no need to reinvent the wheel—use existing efforts along with some new initiatives.

“It will not be one size fits all,” says Kinders. “Not all the messages will apply to all institutions equally because of our unique environments. But there are plenty of messages in this campaign that any AASCU institution should be able to draw from. If we look for ways to weave this language into our messaging, then suddenly it becomes a national expression of who we are. By staying on message and repeating the message, hopefully those decision makers in our state capitals and in Washington, D.C. will begin to recognize that there is a difference and a real value to AASCU institutions.”

Karen Doss Bowman is a writer and editor based in Bridgewater, Va.