REPUTABLE

By Stephen G. Pelletier
Building, polishing and protecting a university’s reputation takes vigilance, hard work—and a strategy.

Every university leader knows how fragile an institution’s reputation can be. From misuse of funds and student misbehavior to sex scandals and campus shootings, any number of threats can quickly undermine years of hard work to define, promote and protect an institution’s image. The fallout might be quickly repairable—or cause long-lasting damage.

Crisis management strategies can help a university triage specific threats. But arguably more important is what an institution does before a crisis strikes. It’s when the institution is not in crisis mode that it needs to invest in defining and polishing its reputation.

Countless Angles

Examining institutional reputation is like looking through a prism: There are countless angles to consider. One common measure of a university’s reputation might be its position in national rankings. For public universities, however, a better measure of reputation might be how well the institution serves its various communities. Serving as “stewards of place,” public universities must particularly assess their reputations in terms of how they are perceived by students, trustees, legislators, alumni, the media, local and regional communities, and other stakeholders.

Arlethia Perry-Johnson, vice president for strategic communications and marketing at Kennesaw State University in Georgia, says that reputation has to do with how an institution distinguishes itself in the marketplace. “When people hear your institution’s name,” she says, “what do they associate with that in terms of the quality of your graduates, the academic programs you have that are stellar or niches of excellence, and how are your students received by employers?” Perry-Johnson says an institution’s reputation is defined by how responsive its academic programs are to community needs at the local, regional, state or even national levels.

Mark Kinders, vice president for public affairs at the University of Central Oklahoma, says that some of the factors that feed a public university’s reputation have to do with how well they enable their graduates to be socially and economically mobile. “Do we give students opportunities to step up in life?” he says. “For students who may be first-generation or at risk, do we provide them with the means necessary to be successful?” Fundamentally, a university’s reputation pivots on the institution’s vision for itself, and on its mission. Robert Moore, president and chief executive officer at Lipman Hearne, a marketing and communications agency for higher education and nonprofit organizations, says that too many institutions settle for a vision for their reputation that is insufficiently bold or distinctive. For example, he says, it’s not enough to merely tout that “we are doing a really good job at getting our students in and getting them through to graduation.” Rather, he argues, “reputation needs to be about something that has some level of distinction. You need to isolate something not that you are really good at, but something where you are uniquely or differentially good.”

Framework for Reputation

Framing one construct for strategizing about an institution’s reputation, Julia Weede, executive vice president and education sector leader at the Edelman communications marketing firm, suggests focusing on three facets: evolving reputation, promoting reputation and protecting reputation. Which facet an institution should focus on, she says, depends on that institution’s particular situation at a given time.

Research by Edelman consistently shows that one key driver of a university’s reputation is that the public is keenly interested in knowing how a college education contributes to creating personal and professional opportunities for alumni. The research also shows that the public wants to know more about how a university impacts society at large.

Borrowing a phrase from business, Weede says universities need to “live their brand.” By that she means institutions need to pursue their goals authentically and find effective ways to convince a public that is increasingly skeptical about higher education that the institution is delivering value. “I think we can no longer rely on people believing that what we do is self-evidently important to our communities and to society,” Weede says. “We need new ways to demonstrate the great work that a university does and communicate that in ways that connect with our most important audiences. It is really about demonstrating how universities live their value.”

“Learning how to tell that story well, in a media environment that is completely changed from where it was five to seven years ago, is a new art,” Weede says. “And that universities do that authentically is absolutely critical.”

Weede suggests that thoughtfully seeding an institution’s reputation during relatively placid times can pay dividends when inevitably the wolves come to the door. Universities that have learned to live their brand authentically and communicate their value well stockpile goodwill among the public, she believes, that can help an institution weather crises.

Still, Weede says, universities have to be ready to proactively protect their reputation when a crisis does strike. “Perhaps the most important part of reputation management in higher education right now is understanding and watching for how issues and crises evolve,” she says. Weede believes that
“Reputation needs to be about something that has some level of distinction. You need to isolate where you are uniquely or differentially good.” —Robert Moore

University leaders can learn a lot from studying what she calls “the anatomies of crises.” According to Weede, “Many times you can see a reputational crisis coming 24 to 48 hours in advance if you are listening, and in many cases much longer.”

**Enterprise Reputation Management?**

Some institutions strive to protect their reputation on an ongoing basis through strategic or enterprise risk management. In that regard, for example, William T. Wiseman, the assistant vice chancellor for enterprise risk management and military programs at East Carolina University, views reputational risk in context with four other risk categories: strategic, financial, operational and compliance-related.

Wiseman quotes Mary Schulken, ECU’s executive director of communication, public affairs, and marketing, who says that in order to be effective, reputation management needs to be systematic, not episodic. “You cannot manage reputation just through public relations,” Wiseman says. “It has to be integrated into the university’s operating principles, so that actions align consistently and over time with desired outcomes.” Wiseman advocates for an enterprise-wide risk management framework that includes information and communications on a regular basis, not just during or after a crisis. “When emotions are running high and you’re trying to respond and react to questions and partial information,” he says, “that is not the time to build your framework for managing the risk associated with crisis events.”

**Assessing Institutional Reputation**

To be able to manage its reputation, a university needs to thoroughly understand what its reputation actually is. That’s sometimes easier said than done.

“It is hard for an institution to objectively assess whether its reputation is great or good,” says Gary Langsdale, who has served as university risk officer at The Pennsylvania State University since 2003. “We tend to believe our own press releases.” Langsdale advocates that a university reach intentionally “beyond its own good PR” to understand as objectively as possible how it is perceived in the community and by the media.” Part of that process, he says, is to discern what all of the institution’s varied constituents think—parsing the differences in how potential students perceive an institution, for example, versus the perspectives of parents or alumni. Sometimes too, Langsdale observes, “you need a reality check from somebody who is more objective.”

To triangulate and manage input about its reputation, risk management staff at ECU regularly convene meetings across the university’s operational functions, pulling in expertise from such areas as communications and the university counsel’s office. Part of the agenda is to review ongoing risks and emerging areas of concern and bring as much perspective to bear in assessing risks, including threats to reputation. The meetings create a means for ECU to take a holistic look at reputational threats and a channel for sharing critical information across departmental silos, Wiseman says. That’s important because it enables the university to strategize broadly about risks, weighing implications that can get overlooked when individuals are reacting to immediate crises. Moreover, collaborating when crises are not imminent helps prepare staff to work together effectively when trouble strikes.

Overall, Wiseman says, the process “can help us get upstream of negative risk events and intercede early in the process while time is on our side, rather than waiting for a reaction to an incident or crisis mode when you really don’t have the luxury of time for some thoughtful analysis.”

Sometimes, though, there is no substitute for hard data. Perry-Johnson strongly argues that research is a fundamental tool for plumbing the true perceptions of an institution. Campus administrators often get so caught up in their day-to-day responsibilities, she says, that it becomes difficult to assess where an institution stands with its various internal and external audiences. “In order to truly be effective and not push marketing money down black holes,” she says, “you have to at some point pause to say, let me talk to my stakeholders.
Ask them a set of critical questions. Find out what the true perceptions are about your institution, then engage that against what it is you are trying to do or how you are trying to present the institution.” Such research, she says, provides invaluable intelligence both about an institution's perceived “warts,” which can then be addressed, as well as feedback about what the institution is doing right. If institutions find a disconnect between how they are being perceived and how they wish to be perceived, she says, “you can create effective strategic communications to help close those gaps.”

**Impact of Social Media**

A key factor in managing reputation today is that thanks to social media and electronic communication, information can travel fast. Social media particularly changes the calculus in that it enables loud voices, including ones that may espouse contrary opinions or erroneous information, to quickly find a prominent bully pulpit.

Institutions and their leaders need to be proactive about managing those fast-moving communications channels. From his office at Penn State, for example, Langsdale has a unique perspective on the dangers of getting behind in the flow of information. “There are many who would say that Penn State didn't adequately communicate at the time that Jerry Sandusky was indicted and that as a result of that, the media got ahead of the university in terms of the story” he says. “And that our reputation was impacted by our inability to communicate our message.”

One potential upside of social media is that it can help universities mine information that can help them better understand what constituents think about an institution. Kinders, for example, says that “students will speak truth to power through social media, so if we really want to know what our students and others are thinking, keeping an eye on social media helps us get a sense of any problems.” The challenge, of course, is to wade through all the input to separate what is valuable intelligence from what is merely chatter.

“One of the things that many institutions in higher education are doing right now to manage reputational risk is to try to get out in front of some of the headlines that might come from certain events and put them into perspective,” Wiseman says. “I call it ‘expectation setting.’” To that end, for example, ECU monitors social media and chat sites that are popular with university constituents. The university will actively step in when needed to clarify what people might be saying about the university, particularly when ECU believes that misinformation or partial information is starting to build an inaccurate picture of the facts. “We try to engage in a respectful manner but proactively provide the additional factual basis that would put things in context,” Wiseman says. “We can no longer be silent and let the general public or stakeholders in the institution’s future arrive at conclusions that may or may not be based on the full facts in a given situation.”

**Role of Leaders**

Experts say that while operational details can be delegated, university leaders must play a strong ongoing role in shaping and advancing the institution’s reputation. “It’s up to the president to set the tone, but also to empower the entire institution so that everyone understands what the message is so that everybody’s singing the same song,” Langsdale says. Equally important is that university leaders invest time in representing the institution in public settings—in essence serving as the public persona of an institution’s reputation.

Another imperative is that institutions develop both a well-honed sense for what its different constituencies want to know and effective channels to communicate with those audiences. “Governors, legislators, Main Street, nonprofit organizations, our partners in K-12—we have to be very astute in understanding what matters to them,” Kinders says. To those ends, he says, “having clear data and being transparent and showing that we’re very willing to be accountable will go a long way.”

Ultimately, maintaining a strong institutional reputation takes consistency and constant effort. “Stay on message,” Kinders says. “Be very clear about who you are as an institution and in what ways you are unique and in the ways you express that through your branding platform. What is your personality as an institution? What is the promise that you are going to deliver every day? You need to be very thoughtful about that and you need to say it over and over and over again to everyone.”

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