On Brand:

STRENGTHENING YOUR MARKETING THROUGH AASCU’S NATIONAL CAMPAIGN

By Victoria Markovitz

Each state college and university (SCU) has unique traits it wants to share with key stakeholders, such as current and prospective students and the community. However, SCUs in general have core tenets that make them stand out from other higher education choices. By working together, SCUs can continue to tout their individual strengths while also widely promoting their common benefits.

AASCU, following member requests, launched the Opportunities for All (O4A) campaign in 2016 to bring heightened awareness to the value of SCUs in general, while providing leeway for individual SCUs to highlight their standout features. The campaign’s intent is to complement and strengthen institutional messaging while allowing SCUs to amplify the reach of their marketing efforts by joining a national campaign. Together, SCUs can serve as force multipliers that extend messaging to student populations and other target audiences that could not be reached by one institution alone.

AASCU talked to senior communications professionals at four SCUs that are actively involved in the campaign—California State University, Sacramento (Sac State); Framingham State University (FSU, located in Massachusetts); Mississippi University for Women (The W); and the State University of New York at Oswego (SUNY Oswego)—to discuss how O4A helped them enhance their individual branding campaigns, and why they choose to include O4A in their marketing efforts.
KEY TRAITS OF SCUs

The O4A campaign is built around four core attributes that SCUs share: They are high quality, accessible, affordable and responsible.

As high quality institutions, SCUs have a student-centered focus, support different learning styles with a broad range of education opportunities, and are committed to increasing the number of baccalaureate degrees awarded to protect our country’s future. SCUs are accessible by providing a viable higher education choice to a diverse cross-section of state residents, including serving non-traditional groups that are underrepresented in our communities. SCUs are also affordable; they offer a greater value for the money than other higher education options, reducing the likelihood of burdensome student debt. Finally, SCUs are responsible: They add value and contribute to the intellectual, cultural, economic and social advancement of their surrounding communities and regions.

The O4A campaign contains language that targets this messaging to key audiences for SCUs: prospective students and their families and high school counselors, SCU talent (i.e., faculty and staff), community leaders, the local electorate, and public officials. However, individual SCUs are typically already highlighting some or all of these qualities in their marketing campaigns. The key for each SCU is to pinpoint exactly what it wants to amplify and strengthen it by implementing O4A—using the campaign’s messaging and tools to bring the conversation to the national level.

USE THE CAMPAIGN TO REINFORCE EXISTING MESSAGING

Institutions are finding that when their individual campaigns align with O4A, the national campaign is an opportunity to further elevate their messaging and to reach additional audiences.

The W’s communications team has found O4A helps them showcase their first generation and nontraditional students and the benefits The W provides.

“The Opportunities for All campaign focuses on accessibility, affordability and quality education,” said Anika Mitchell Perkins, the interim executive director of university relations at The W. “The campaign reinforces our messages to students and gives The W an opportunity to be more visible through a national campaign.”

At Sac State, the Made at Sac State campaign promotes the accomplishments of prominent alumni to showcase how the university produces successful students who make a difference in the local community and throughout the nation. It also highlights how Sac State provides an accessible, high-quality and affordable education.

Phil Garcia, vice president for public affairs and advocacy at Sac State, who oversees government relations and formerly oversaw university-wide communications and marketing, recognized that the campaign dovetailed with O4A. This made O4A a great opportunity to further strengthen Sac State’s campaign.

“It reinforced what we were doing and was very encouraging to us to continue to hit these themes and core attributes,” he said.

Similarly, Dan Magazu, director of communications at FSU, found that O4A complimented the university’s efforts as part of its My Way campaign, aimed at letting students know about opportunities at the school and how they can tailor their education. Additionally, FSU reaches out to traditionally underrepresented students, and its messaging already highlights the university’s affordability and accessibility. With Massachusetts facing a decline in the number of high school graduates, clearly communicating the value of the university is crucial.

“We’re really focused on reaching underrepresented students, low-income students and minority students, and showing them the dream of a college education is possible due to SCUs like Framingham State,” Magazu said. “We focus on our university, but want to talk to them about all SCUs. I think we’re all stronger when we work together on these efforts.”

When the governor of New York introduced the Excelsior Scholarship, which would provide tuition-free college at New York’s public colleges and universities to families making up to $100,000 this past fall, and eventually $125,000 a year, SUNY Oswego saw this as a prime opportunity to stress the benefits of SUNY Oswego as an SCU.

“The Excelsior Scholarship aligned with SUNY Oswego’s and AASCU’s efforts to market access and opportunity for the next generation of students,” said Wayne Westervelt, SUNY Oswego’s chief communication officer. “By marketing and incentivizing full-time enrollment and college completion—both of which are proven game changers in students’ success—and referencing AASCU’s Opportunities for All campaign in the process, we were able to highlight the role SCUs play in delivering America’s promise to our promising youth.”

First generation student Thalia Jimenez highlighted how FSU was more affordable than other schools and had a welcoming and diverse community.
SHOWCASE STUDENTS AND ALUMNI

SCUs have also found O4A helps them showcase their students and alumni.

In 2016 and 2017, The W produced videos that featured first generation students, and shared these videos on its social media channels. The communications team used the main O4A hashtag—#Opps4All—in addition to the school campaign’s hashtag—#TheBlueforYou—to extend what audiences saw the videos. The student videos ended up getting a higher reach than the university’s average social media posts, with one particularly popular video garnering over 22,400 views.

“We have found that videos really work well. We’re able to get footage of students in the classroom studying and engaging in activities that are a part of their studies,” Perkins said. “It’s an opportunity to hear from our students and tell their stories in a compelling way—more than just using words.”

FSU has a group on campus called GenerationOne, which produces student profiles, videos, and Facebook and Twitter content for first generation students on campus. Students focus on what they enjoy most about college and the challenges they face, as well as why they chose FSU (e.g., its affordability, high quality of education). On its website, FSU has a “The FSU Difference” section that includes a GenerationOne profile. Under this profile, the school links to information about being an AASCU institution and its involvement with the O4A campaign.

“The Opps4All aspect of it plays really well into some of the themes we’ve always talked about: affordability, accessibility, and the power of education to really help people,” Magazu said.

The Made at Sac State campaign features alumni and the success they have found by attending Sac State. Their stories are timely and compelling, and showcase the strengths and priorities of the university. This helps drive pride and loyalty.

“Made at Sac State has been transformative in raising pride among alumni and current students,” Garcia said. “We serve first generation students, low-income students, students from traditionally underrepresented groups—we fit the profile of a campus that is the target of the O4A campaign.”

The Made at Sac State campaign is also being extended to include exceptional students and the faculty who are “making it happen” on campus right now.

GET CREATIVE

While many schools share O4A messaging on social media or on their websites, there are many ways to promote the value of SCUs.

In addition to featuring stories and videos on its website and sharing them on social media with the hashtags #MadeAtSacState and #MakingItHappenAtSacState, the Made at Sac State campaign profiles alumni on an electronic billboard that can be seen from a highway just south of the campus. The campaign also is promoted on T-shirts and other items, such as stickers and lapel pins.

“It’s really resonated with people. More and more people say they are Made at Sac State, on campus and off, versus ‘I’m an alum,’” said Becky Repka, Sac State’s director of marketing. “There is a real groundswell of enthusiasm.”

FSU highlights the O4A campaign and the value of SCUs during presidential commencements and addresses and in meetings with government officials.

SUNY Oswego incorporates SCU messaging in its press releases, interviews with media, speeches and remarks at campus events, student feature stories and magazine articles.

“When the O4A campaign aligns with what we are already doing to promote student success at SUNY Oswego, it’s natural to incorporate—it’s seamless to refer to and carry the marketing message of access and opportunity forward,” Westervelt said. “At SUNY Oswego, it strengthens our existing efforts to create and promote a culture of diversity and inclusion.”

No matter how an SCU chooses to integrate the O4A campaign into its messaging, the key is for the communications team to really think through what they want to elevate to a national level.

“The basic advice is to tell your story in your voice,” Garcia said. “The most effective messaging is authentic and genuine, and you know best how to tell your story.”