

STATEHOUSE ADVOCATES HAVE KEY ROLE IN ADVANCING OPPORTUNITIES FOR ALL

By Mark Kinders

Few things in legislative advocacy are a slam dunk. The *Opportunities for All* (O4A) campaign is one of the few, and its impact extends far beyond the confines of the Capitol: to Main Street, to regents, and to other critical influencers and decision makers.

O4A is an excellent encapsulation of the four core values that set state colleges and universities (SCUs) apart from the other major categories of higher education institutions: high quality, accessible, affordable and responsible. Below, I'll discuss these core values and why they are so relevant to legislators.

Responsible: From an accountability standpoint, O4A is pure gold with legislators and others because it so clearly indicates that as four-year institutions, we are focused on being stewards of place for our service areas. At the University of Central Oklahoma (UCO), which is a metro-serving institution to the 1.5 million residents of the Oklahoma City Metro, we often serve as the agenda setters for the regional conversation by defining our purpose as making the Metro a great place to live, learn, work and play. We enhance community capacity through spurring economic development, promoting resource sustainability, resolving sociological issues, and improving quality of life.

High Quality: Marry that message to the needs of Main Street, and businesses become our staunchest advocates. AASCU institutions excel at teaching, and great teaching produces highly competent professionals who perform well in their disciplines. Further, UCO—like all SCUs—emphasizes a liberalizing, general education that provides the 21st-century skills employers prize: critical thinking, the ability to work in teams and take direction, the capacity to articulate a position, and an appreciation for diversity and globalization. Our intense attention to active, inductive learning experiences between faculty, staff and students provides intense daily mentoring that is a distinct bragging point for SCUs.

Affordable: Okay, so we sometimes seem to be our own worst enemy by always doing more even as our budgets are being cut—witness the progress toward Complete College America objectives in 33 states. But everyone responds with an understanding nod when we sell the message that SCU leaders, faculty and staff state forcefully, that the reason we come to work everyday is to help our students achieve their dreams. We are the educational tier that does an extraordinary job of providing upward social mobility opportunities for all.

Accessible: Whether onsite, blended or online, we teach. SCUs set an admissions threshold that balances preparation for

college with taking a chance on academically underperforming students who hold promise. For SCUs, accessibility, progress and completion is an amalgam of standards, instinct and a commitment to meet our students where they are at.

At UCO, we encapsulate these values customized to our environment in our continual conversations with the 40 legislators who serve the Metro, and the same for our congressional delegation.

O4A works into all of these messages as bridging language. We've incorporated it into our conversations with legislators and critical advisors to UCO, to Main Street, in media op-ed pieces, in **legislative backgrounders**, and in so many other ways.

Communicators know that repetition of the message causes receivers to yield to the message. When those audiences eventually gain top of mind awareness, they begin to repeat it back to you. They end up defining you. It becomes their idea.

At UCO and in Oklahoma, that day is drawing continuously nearer. O4A is working. **P**

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