

MARKETING COMMUNITY COLLEGES: REACHING HARD TO REACH POPULATIONS

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In the haste to promote programs and services in time to impact enrollment each semester, community colleges spend more time disseminating information than on researching targeted markets, identifying their needs, and aligning programs with these needs. When results for reaching targeted populations do not correspond to the effort and cost put forth, administrators are left scratching their heads and wondering why marketing did not work. This discussion begins with defining what hard to reach means, followed by a brief history of marketing and its role at community colleges, marketing strategies for populations considered hard to reach, and challenges and opportunities. While literature abounds on marketing higher education, a dearth exists in research related to marketing the community college. Consequently, a combination of literature and practical experiences of the author offer insight into expanding access to higher education for populations that are missing from community colleges, unaware of or indifferent toward benefits of two-year institutions.

What Does Hard-to Reach Mean?

Many definitions exist for the term hard to reach, which can be described demographically, economically, psychologically, and socially. Demographic references deal with race, age, gender, or location of the population not being reached by an institution, while "low income" or "underserved" would be examples of economically hard to reach populations. Similar descriptions include "ethnic groups, geographic locations, occupation, or other demographics "that normally do not participate in research," making their voices unheard (Macro International, Inc., 2007, para. 1). A search of terminology found in community college literature revealed that "disadvantaged," "low income" and "minority" were used in reference to populations for which access to higher education was an issue (Community College Research Center, 2007).

Other phrases such as "marginalisation from education," "non-English-speaking," and "culturally" or "socially" excluded populations defined hard to reach from a social perspective (Milbourne, 2002, p. 287). Psychological definitions show hard to reach populations as exhibiting "a reluctance or inability to participate" (Beder, 1980, p.13) or representing "segments that do not usually participate" (Brackertz, 2007, p. 2). "Disaffected by

education” is another reference pointed out in *Adults Learning* magazine (2002, p. 16). While it is common to identify hard to reach groups by demographics, a more productive application may be to classify these groups by their characteristics and attitudes (Brackertz, 2007; Beder, 1980).

Beder noted there are “two defining elements” of the hard to reach concept—an identifiable population that an organization wants to reach and absence of the population unless action is taken to encourage participation (1980). If an organization is not attracting a population it wishes to serve, then that population can be considered hard to reach. Further review of definitions showed hard to reach groups can be difficult to locate and may require “knowledge of insiders” to identify them (Atkinson & Flint, 2001 para. 18). The appropriate use of marketing can improve an organization’s ability to reach hard to reach populations. In fact, Brackertz argues that if the right approach is used, there are few hard to reach groups (2007).

Defining and Understanding Marketing

The common misunderstanding of marketing, along with confusion with advertising and promotion, warrants a brief discussion on its history as well as what marketing is and what it is not before delving into strategies for reaching hard to reach populations. “Marketing thought” was developed as early as the beginning of the 20th century (Bartles, 1976, para. 6), and throughout its progression over the past 100 years, several definitions emerged. The American Marketing Association (AMA) provided the first official definition for marketing in 1935 when the organization was known as the National Association of Marketing Teachers (AMA, 2007). During that time, marketing was defined as “those business activities involved in the flow of goods and services from production to consumption” (Gundlach, 2007, p. 243).

The definition established in 1935 would not change for 50 years when it was revised in 1985 to “the process of planning and executing the conception, pricing, promotion and distribution of goods, ideas and services to create exchanges that satisfy individual and organizational goals” (Schultz, 2005, p. 8). In 2004, AMA announced a new definition for marketing that would change the focus from an individual or departmental function to an institutional one when it stated marketing is “an organizational function and a set of processes for creating, communicating, and delivering value to customers and for managing customer relationships in ways that benefit the organization and its stakeholders” (AMA, 2007). Marketing now involved more departments throughout an organization in an effort to benefit those served by the organization.

Prior to the announcement of AMA's new definition in 2004, Cutlip, Center, and Broom (2000) were moving in a similar direction when they wrote "marketing is a management function that identifies human needs and wants, offers products and services to satisfy those demands, and causes transactions that deliver products and services in exchange for something of value to the provider" (p. 7). By using the term "management function," the authors tried to show the role of decision makers across the institution. Another marketing expert, Robert Sevier, whose research primarily involves higher education institutions, wrote that "marketing is now rightly recognized as part of an organization's DNA, and individuals who do not value and support this important distinction, especially if they are in positions of authority, imperil the very organizations they try to lead" (Stamats, Inc., 2005).

Furthermore, marketing often is confused and inaccurately used interchangeably with advertising, which can be a component of marketing but is not marketing. Marketing is not advertising (Litten, 1980, p. 42). It is the "development and delivery of educational and auxiliary services for which there is desire or need...." (p. 43). According to Beder, marketing is a total approach that should not be confused with advertising (1980). Unfortunately, the limited definition of marketing causes skepticism and doubt about its potential benefits (Sevier, 1998).

While many definitions exist for marketing, the point is that it is much broader than promoting programs and services. The focus of marketing has moved from "product-centered" to "client-centered," (Beder, 1980, p. 25) and it involves participation from more areas within an organization. It goes beyond communicating information on products and services to include researching populations and perceptions, identifying needs and wants, and aligning products and services to satisfy those needs and wants.

Role of Marketing at Community Colleges

Community colleges were founded in the early 20th century to expand access to higher education and satisfy the workforce and training needs of the local community. Today, they "educate more than half the nation's undergraduates," (American Association of Community Colleges, 2007, para. 4). In fact, "most Americans have a community college, branch campus, or extension center within an hour's drive of their homes," (Phillippe & Sullivan, 2005, p. 3). While the community college historically has been flexible and swift in responding to various community needs, "growing diversity in the student body" is one of a number of significant challenges facing community colleges (p. 3). Are community colleges reaching populations most

disaffected by higher education? Are the programs and services offered meeting community needs, and how do we know?

Understanding the full scope of marketing as well as the role it plays in an organization better prepares community colleges for reaching hard to reach groups. Additionally, the role of marketing has and, in many cases, still is viewed as an individual or departmental function rather than an institutional one. Successful marketing is seen as an institutional function in which many areas within an organization play some type of marketing role in an integrated way. AMA more than amplified this point in 2004 when it changed its nearly 20-year-old definition for marketing.

The components of marketing or “marketing mix,” commonly known as the Four Ps, are product, price, place, and promotion and can be manipulated by community colleges depending upon the needs of their particular communities (Sevier, 1998, p. 30). While the Four Ps is often used to describe the essential parts of marketing, Lauterborn argued they should be replaced with the four Cs—consumer, cost, convenience, and communication (1990). The shift in definition of marketing already emphasized the focus on consumers and their needs.

Given this scope, marketing requires an institutional effort. One department or individual cannot possibly be solely responsible for altering the product (programs and services offered by the community college), price (cost to the consumer for the programs and services), place (location where programs and services are offered), and promotion (publicizing and advertising the programs and services) to meet the needs of hard to reach groups.

Defining and understanding marketing is crucial since community colleges serve many different publics. Too many times, different areas within a college work from their own mental models of what marketing is. Developing successful strategies for reaching hard to reach populations involves institutions working from a single marketing definition that is clearly articulated and that everyone understands.

Strategies for Reaching Hard to Reach Populations

Historically, community colleges have responded to the needs of communities they serve for more than a century, as they were founded on the philosophy of expanding access to higher education. Such history offers an interesting segue to marketing strategies for reaching hard to reach populations. By their nature, many community colleges already serve a variety of populations or are experiencing dramatic growth in the diversity of their student bodies.

Through literature review and practical experiences of the author, marketing strategies for reaching hard to reach populations are examined and lessons learned through examples of how community colleges can better access identified groups. One way for community colleges to determine who comprises their hard to reach markets is to ask the question, who are we not serving that we need to serve? Answering this question begins the process of the first of three strategies community colleges should consider in reaching hard to reach populations, and they include market research, segmentation of targeted markets, and development of appropriate communication or "media mix" (Sevier, 1998).

Market Research

Market research is the foundation for solid marketing plans, and knowing when and how to conduct research are key elements (Sevier, 1998). Sevier further noted that "any marketing plan that does not include research at its base is almost surely flawed," (p. 47). Market research can help identify which populations are being served and those that are not. Additionally, community colleges can use research to examine perceptions held of the institution by various groups. It was noted earlier that community colleges have experienced changes in the diversity of populations it serves. One of the most important times to conduct research is when there is a sense of change happening in the marketplace (1998). Effective marketing strategies can only be built by researching the needs, desires, beliefs, and attitudes of targeted groups (Kotler, Roberto, Lee, 2002, p. 11).

Studying people's perceptions "can help uncover misinformation and the lack of information that exists" among audiences (Litten, 1980, p. 42). In a national study conducted by Belden Russonello & Stewart (2004) on perceptions of community colleges, researchers found that two-year institutions "are strongly valued as places where individuals at all stages of life can obtain an affordable education" (Belden Russonello & Stewart, 2004, p. 46). While the study showed overall perceptions of community colleges were favorable, education experts noted that two-year institutions face "old-fashioned snobbery" from four-year institutions, particularly when referring to transfer students pursuing admission to elite universities (Capriccioso, 2006, p.1). This is valuable information that could result in the use of a marketing mix focusing on community college transfer and university faculty and staff.

In another example of using research to learn about populations that may exhibit questionable perceptions of community colleges is the study of the high school guidance counselor, one of the top influencers of college choice among high school students (Stamats, 2004). Counselors' perceptions of

community colleges have an impact on how they advise high school students and parents on postsecondary options since both rely on counselors for information about higher education. In a study conducted among public high school guidance counselors in a Mid-Atlantic state, respondents showed mixed feelings when addressing whether the community college's open access policy hurts its image and reputation (Hill, 2007). Factors likely to influence counselors' perceptions included level of awareness of community colleges, race of the counselor, type of high school where counselors worked, years of served as a counselor, and highest level of education obtained. In the study, counselors also were asked what they thought community colleges could do to better work with high schools. The marketing mix that resulted from this study included adding counselors to mailing lists for community college publications, arranging for faculty to conduct mock classroom presentations for counselors, increasing visits between high schools and the college, and increasing participation in high school and college-related programs.

Market Research on a Shoestring Budget

Two barriers to market research are time and money. The cost of market research can range from relatively inexpensive methods to very expensive ones and can take several weeks to conduct, analyze, and develop a report. Research conducted in-house is obviously less expensive than hiring an external firm. Many community colleges now have sophisticated research departments that can help identify a problem to be studied, develop research questions, design a data collection instrument, conduct studies, and analyze and report results. When resources are limited, very simple, inexpensive measures can be used to learn more about an audience.

Windshield surveys, used in health and social fields, allow the researcher to observe a population in its environment at little cost. They involve "making visual observations of a neighborhood or community while driving and looking through the windshield" (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2007, para. 7). Windshield surveys are a "time-efficient method for assessing the social environment of a community" and can help community colleges increase their understanding of the environment in which hard to reach populations may live (para. 7). When using this method of research in Prince George's County, I learned that public libraries are crowded with families and students on Monday through Wednesday evenings and church parking lots are packed on Sundays. These present possible vehicles for reaching certain populations. Specifically, one can observe "neighborhood boundaries, housing conditions, use of open spaces, shopping areas, schools, religious facilities, human services (such as hospitals and physician offices), modes of transportation, protective services (such as fire stations),

and overall neighborhood life within the community” (para. 7). Windshield surveys do not have to be conducted while driving and can be completed by walking through neighborhoods and observing situations and behaviors.

Another less expensive way to conduct research is using the “knowledge of insiders” technique, particularly when studying a hard to reach population proves problematic (Atkinson & Flint, 2001 para. 18). If you are unable to reach the population, use people who have direct knowledge of or hands-on experience with the audience. In 2001, Prince George’s Community College (PGCC) in Largo, Maryland, launched a campaign appropriately entitled, “I can do this!” which was designed to reach populations that exhibited characteristics of the hard to reach population. PGCC students and alumni were invited to participate in the campaign; interviews were conducted with each to learn details of how they moved from reluctance to acceptance to successful completion at the community college. Additionally, information on specific programs and services that attracted them to the college and successes beyond their completion at PGCC were obtained and used to develop messages. Their stories were highlighted in print and broadcast advertisements and placed in media commonly used by audiences with similar characteristics. Stories were developed into 60-second radio and 30-second television spots that aired on the stations. The strategy was to have audiences see themselves in the advertisements, relate to the experiences communicated, and realize they, too, could successfully obtain a college education or employment training.

The campaign continues to run at the college and features more than 50 students, alumni, faculty and business leaders. Each time the campaign runs, telephones ring in the college’s marketing and public relations office. Valuable data were collected using people who were already attracted to the college. Asking few questions such as, why did you choose Prince George’s Community College?, what has happened to you as a result of attending?, or asking that they describe their experiences while matriculating at the college, provided important information without conducting a massive, expensive study.

When considering the use of an external company to conduct research on populations served, use one with experience in market research for higher education. Prince George’s Community College used a marketing research firm in June 2007 to study perceptions of the college held by residents in the county where it is located. Additionally, the study examined the level of awareness among residents and their attitudes toward selected characteristics of the college. Results identified populations that could be considered hard to reach audiences. For example, residents in the northern part of the county were less likely to be aware of college programs and were

least likely to be favorably disposed toward the institution when compared to residents in the central and southern parts of the county (WB&A, 2007). Another interesting finding showed that perceptions of African American residents were more favorable toward the college than those of white residents. Findings from the study allowed the college to begin a process of segmentation and subsequent prioritization of populations to be reached.

Findings from market research reveal quite a bit about populations served as well as those not served by the community college. Additionally, conducting studies on perceptions of targeted groups show what people think about the organization, indicates their level of awareness, and sheds light on ways to reach these groups.

Segmentation of Targeted Markets

Segmentation is the division of "large, heterogeneous populations into smaller, homogeneous subpopulations," and is used primarily in higher education among fund raisers and recruitment staff (Sevier, 1998, p. 85). Traditionally, segmentation is done by geography, demographics, and economics. However, as we learned in defining the term hard to reach, psychological and sociological descriptions also can be used when segmenting groups (1998). Hard to reach audiences may have different needs than traditional college populations and may require different marketing messages and tactics. Segmentation allows community colleges to determine and monitor needs of critical groups and communicate with them more effectively. It also can save money by limiting marketing of numerous programs and focusing more on communicating specific areas of the college that meet the needs of the targeted group. One size does not fit all with hard to reach groups. Examples of segmentation at Prince George's Community College can be seen in Table 1 using the communication grid developed by Sevier (1998, p. 97).

Table 1 Example of Market Segmentation at Prince George’s Community College

Population & Characteristics	Messages	Marketing Mix
<p>High school juniors/seniors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Express concerns about image • Prefer four-year university but do not have the GPA, SAT scores or money • Unsure or not ready for a four-year school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasize image • Quality programs and faculty • Transfer to four-year institution • Affordable tuition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Web site, DVD • Radio and television • School visits • College brochure • Community college students and alumni • College fairs and workshops
<p>Parents</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek quality and prestige • Want to save money • Prefer sending children to HBCUs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Excellent image • Quality programs and faculty • Affordable tuition, financial aid and scholarships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Churches and community organizations • College and program brochures • Campus tours and mock classroom instruction
<p>Counselors</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • See community college as option for students of various abilities • Interested in transfer and career programs • Communicate postsecondary options to students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Viable postsecondary option • Quality programs • Transfer to four-year institutions • Affordable tuition 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • College catalog • Web site • Ongoing school visits • Campus tours and mock classroom instruction
<p>Working adults</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek career and employment training • Interested in personal enrichment courses • Considering going back to school but do not have money or time 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Career programs and training • Convenience and flexibility (day, evening, weekend formats, accelerated) • Distance learning programs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Radio and television • Outdoor signage (billboards, transit) • Course schedules • Newspaper

<p>Non-English speaking residents</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hispanic/Latino and African immigrants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student support services • Financial aid and scholarships • International Education Center • Language Study • Diverse student body 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Churches and community organizations • Hispanic radio
<p>Businesses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Small enterprises • Corporations • State/federal agencies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contract training and business development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meetings • Business publications • Advisory boards

Prince George’s Community College identified parents as an audience it needed to target more aggressively. While the college holds the largest market share of county first-time freshmen of any other college or university in the area, its position has slipped slightly over the past three years. Moreover, other colleges and universities were experiencing increases in their market share of county residents during the same time period. A closer look revealed institutions that were attracting students away from the community college were historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). Use of the “knowledge of insiders” technique showed county parents, many of whom are graduates of HBCUs, preferred to send their children to HBCUs. Another segmented group of parents included those of bright students who could go directly to a four-year institution, but they prefer to save money by completing the first two-years of the baccalaureate degree at the community college. Parents who did not pursue higher education, for whatever reason, and now want to go back to school would constitute another targeted group. Sevier outlined three basic approaches to segmentation—mass market strategy, concentration strategy, and multisegment strategy (1998). The mass market strategy is a casting the net, one size fits all approach, which can be effective if the market one targets is homogeneous. In this approach, “all target audiences receive the same marketing and media mix” (1998, p. 87). Targeting only one segment of a population is a concentration strategy. Community colleges attract many segments, and the example on parents reflects use of the multisegment strategy.

Development of Appropriate Media Mix

Once market research is completed and data used to identify and segment targeted markets, development of the appropriate media mix helps ensure that messages about an organization get to the targeted groups. Media mix refers to an “array of promotional strategies that a college or university uses to communicate its marketing mix” or product, price, place, and promotion (Sevier, 1998, p. 86). When data showed Prince George’s County residents rated Prince George’s Community College high for affordability and convenience, marketing messages focused on price and place. For residents who were less familiar with the college, a media mix emphasizing targeted promotion would be most appropriate. Using the product aspect of the marketing mix is suitable for audiences who are more concerned about what a community college offers than the price or place of the product.

Finding the right mix calls for having in-depth knowledge of the institution’s product, price, place, and promotion. The product for community colleges may include academic programs, faculty expertise, transfer opportunities, workforce development and contract training, continuing education programs, student support services such as counseling, advising, and tutoring, financial aid, and student organizations and athletic teams. Price would include not only cost of tuition but also books, fees, and the amount of time one would expend to reap benefits from the product. Many community colleges have multiple sites or campuses, which would be examples of place. Additionally, distance learning programs, evening and weekend programs can be considered part of place in the marketing mix. References to time could be associated with either product or place, but Sevier argues what is most important is that time be addressed somewhere in the marketing mix (1998).

The promotion component of the marketing mix encompasses strategies for using various tools to communicate product, price, and place to targeted markets. The key to developing the right media mix is to focus on characteristics of the population as well as effectiveness of the communication tool. For example, reaching parents might include a combination of strategies such as building relationships with churches and community organizations, participation in college fairs, and hosting back-to-school nights and workshops that focus on paying for college. With the number of churches in Prince George’s County growing exponentially, they were yet another way for Prince George’s Community College to reach county residents. More than 500 faith-based organizations exist in the county. The college invited education coordinators and representatives from local churches for a discussion on their educational needs and the kinds of programs and services that would most interest their congregations. The

opportunity would allow church members to experience the product first-hand and possibly transform parents into positive influencers for other county residents.

While Prince George's County is the primary market for the college, Washington, DC is a secondary market, located less than six miles from the District of Columbia line. It also is the location where many county residents travel to and from work daily, listening to radio during morning and evening drive times and viewing billboards and transit signage along the way. Downtown Washington, DC has a high level of vehicle and pedestrian traffic, which is higher in the city than in outlying areas during morning and evening rush hour. Radio and outdoor advertising, such as transit advertisements, is one way to capture segments of a targeted group traveling throughout the city as well as in surrounding suburbs.

The top media formats are newspaper, magazine, radio, outdoor, and television based on a national study conducted on consumer preferences for advertising (Dynamic Logic, 2003). At the bottom of the list were telemarketing calls, pop-up ads on the Internet, and direct mailers. Each medium compiles demographic information on its listeners, viewers, or readers on an annual basis that includes age, gender, race, residency, and income. Community colleges should review these data and compare with their school and county information to make the best decisions in developing an appropriate media mix for their institutions.

Challenges and Opportunities

Reaching hard to reach groups presents community colleges with challenges and opportunities. Challenges include limited understanding of the scope of marketing among its internal community; buy-in and support from senior leadership and other campus constituents; and funding. The primary job of the marketer is to educate those within the organization about the marketplace and report changes and trends. Who are the various audiences? What are their attitudes and behaviors? What do they need? Answers to these questions should be consistently communicated to the internal college community to help broaden their knowledge of marketing. Additionally, marketing needs to be clearly defined for everyone so that the college is working with a common definition. Failure to work with a common definition of marketing impairs efforts from the start (Sevier, 1998).

Another challenge is securing buy-in and support from leadership from the top down. While organizations are responsible for and should be involved in marketing, "senior leaders must make sure that this collective responsibility is felt and acted upon in a systematic and engaging way" (Stamats, Inc.,

2005). Marketing efforts will fail when the president “doesn’t aggressively support marketing” (Sevier, 1998, p. 39).

One of the most common challenges when it comes to marketing and community colleges is funding. Local and state funding structures for community colleges make it difficult to consistently support marketing needs. When institutions face financial difficulties due to changes in the economy and cuts in local and state budgets, one of the first areas to be cut is the marketing budget. Learning how to market on a shoestring can steer the organization through difficult times, but cutting the marketing budget is not the answer. In fact, experts would argue that the time to increase the marketing budget is during difficult, economic times.

Despite the many obstacles to marketing, opportunities provide a silver lining. For example, marketing strengthens a community college’s ability to predict the actions of targeted markets based on research of their behaviors and attitudes toward the institution. Secondly, marketing allows an organization to better position itself within the community it serves. Finally, it opens the door to using many different and creative strategies for reaching diverse groups.

Conclusion

The history of community colleges is synonymous with access to higher education. As a result, two-year institutions are better positioned to address the needs of populations considered hard to reach. However, in order to reach these groups, community colleges will need to expand their understanding of marketing; approach marketing from an institutional rather than a departmental perspective; educate campus constituents, from senior leadership to faculty to staff; and encourage senior leadership to create an environment for this to happen. Community colleges also need to review their programs and services with the intention of meeting the needs of targeted audiences and should purge those that no longer serve the needs of the community. Researching targeted groups, segmenting them and coordinating a relevant combination of communication of tactics are effective strategies for reaching hard to reach groups.

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