

Addressing the Decline in Higher Ed's Reputation

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Research shared at the recent NAICU meeting shows a “listening gap” between what the public wants from higher ed — and what higher ed thinks is important. This shouldn’t be big news to any of us. But while private college presidents rightly worry about families’ ability to pay for education, they should also be inspired to focus on the overall reputation of their institution — and of higher education as a whole.

Cost Continues To Be A Concern

Not surprisingly, many independent college presidents are laser-focused on their institution’s bottom line. A [survey](#) conducted by The Lawlor Group, Inc., and RHB, Inc., confirmed the top two external challenges for these presidents are families’ ability to pay (63 percent) and families’ willingness to pay (47 percent).

Simultaneously, of course, the public at large is really worried about the costs of higher ed — a [recurrent theme](#) in surveys of public attitudes about higher education since 1993.

In a [blog post on his website](#), John Lawlor wrote, “Sticker shock affects even families with the ability to pay. Most undergraduates attend a four-year institution with tuition and fees of \$11,730 or less, but the average sticker price at private colleges is almost three times that—and has doubled during the past 27 years, even after accounting for inflation.”

But current challenges to the overall reputation of higher ed go beyond concern about costs.

Two Disconnects Between Higher Ed and the Public

At NAICU, Charles Bakaly and Julia Weede from Edelman identified two big gaps between what academics value and what the public thinks is important. According to Edelman’s 2015 University Reputations and the Public survey:

- 71 percent of academics thought it was more important to provide a well-rounded education vs. tools for a successful career. In contrast, 44 percent of the public thought the well-rounded education was more important.
- Inversely, 56 percent of the public valued “providing students with tools and resources they need to succeed in a specific career,” vs. a well-rounded education, whereas only 29 percent of academics thought career tools were more important.

In each case, there’s a 27 percent gap between higher ed and the public.

Of course, many institutions do recognize that a well-rounded education and job-related skills are not mutually exclusive and they’re working diligently to bring them even closer together. And it’s important to point out that [data indicate the considerable value](#) to a liberal arts education, as opposed to one that is more career-focused.

This disconnect between academics and the concerns of the general public, or the public’s lack of knowledge about the real outcomes of higher education, is linked to other worrisome trends, including:

- Public anxiety about the future in general, exacerbated for many by the current political climate.
- [Provocateurs seeking to further their own agendas](#) instigating confrontations that harm the reputation of specific institutions and our sector as a whole.
- [Politicians using higher ed as a foil for their own agendas](#).

- The trust gap widening between the public at large and elites in the institutions of government, business, media and NGOs. In just five years, Edelman Trust Barometer has recorded a 15 point gap in trust in the institutions of government, business, media and NGOs between elites and the general public, a gap which explains the global growth of populism as the public loses faith in “the system.”

What Can Institutions Do?

The Lawlor/RHB research indicates that presidents are paying attention to challenges such as building a brand, conveying their institution’s value proposition, and positioning against their institution against competitors. And they are focused on addressing their “product”: it was the top marketing priority. But presidents and marketing communications teams should bear reputational challenges to our sector in mind as they prepare to market their institutions in the year ahead.

Telling better stories about what colleges and universities do and how they do it will help immensely. I recalled what I wrote in my [last post](#) when I heard a president at NAICU share a number of statistics about his college with others in the room. I can understand why he’d use data to inform his peers. But I couldn’t help but reflect how much more impact his words might have had if they’d been coupled with a few brief stories to reinforce what the data showed.

And while prestige and the value of research and scholarship drive peer reputation (and make institutions feel good), Bakaly and Weede pointed out that the general public is more concerned about other issues. Among these are: preparing students for leadership after they graduate; helping students to gain access to top job opportunities; solving long-term, real-world challenges; creating things that work in the real world; developing solutions relevant to real-world challenges.

Presidents can use stories that illuminate these themes in conversations and speeches — even those at professional conferences. And they should be highlighted in institutional content strategies for 2017.

These aren’t big steps. But powerful stories reinforce the point that presidents and other higher ed leaders are indeed listening to public concerns and their institutions are responding.

Another form of engagement is more radical: institutions and presidents can wade into public conversations about some of these issues. Julia Weede noted. “I think too often leaders shy away from the sensational and sometimes ill-informed conversations in the media about higher education. That often means those with the best understanding aren’t in conversation with the public and that impacts everyone over time. We need to take the case back to the critics. We need to talk to the public where they are and show in new ways how we impact their world.”

That’s a way to close the “listening gap.” Though it’s not without its risks, some presidents have begun to do just that and their voices are now part of the national conversation.