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With liberal open enrollment policies, most two-year colleges need not expand their applicant pools. Plus, tight finances and scarce resources make it difficult to focus on improving a college's image. So why bother with branding?

Two-year colleges often suffer from an inferiority complex. Stereotypes of undemanding classes, undereducated faculty, and under-achieving students abound. Many two-year institutions provide a strong foundation in core academic requirements, essential vocational training, economic educational choices, and more, yet they struggle to convey these benefits to potential students and the greater community.

Although two-year institutions face unique marketing challenges, their branding needs are the same as those of four-year colleges and universities. Creating an institutional brand—the concept that identifies your school—is about perception, not reality. What an audience believes about your college becomes your brand. If they believe your institution provides a mediocre education, then that is your brand, even if that perception is untrue. On the other hand, actively branding your institution with clear, confident, and consistent messages allows you to control what an audience understands about you.

The success of your marketing program hinges on the development of a brand that controls audience perception while overcoming the prevailing stereotypes.

Over the course of our 16 years of marketing for higher education, we have identified five key characteristics of an effective brand.

1. A successful brand is a unique signature that distinguishes your institution from your competitors. Standing out takes courage, because we are often more comfortable blending in with the crowd.
2. A successful brand stands for something. Always use meaningful visual elements to reinforce your identity. Obscure squiggly lines or trendy symbols distract from your message and should be carefully avoided.

3. A successful brand is easy to grasp and understand. Take the FedEx logo in its various color combinations. Even when the name is written in Arabic, the logo is recognizable because of its typography.



4. A successful brand is an authentic expression that connects to the mission and vision of the institution. The brand should be rooted in hard data and should evolve from solid research.
5. Finally and most importantly, a successful brand makes an emotional connection with audiences. You build the brand on the data, but it's not all about numbers, facts, and figures. As Einstein says, "Not everything that counts can be counted."

A brand is more than just a symbol or logo. It's an ongoing process of research, marketing, PR, and design. Branding includes everything an institution does to communicate its identity to prospective students and their parents, to alumni and friends, and to the greater community. The brand has to be continually managed in order to protect its integrity. Colleges must live and be the brand.

In the educational arena where everyone is offering a college degree, communicators must find fresh ways to deliver the branding message. It is possible—and essential—to take the universal experience of getting an education and talk about it in a way that's so different and so personal that the resulting message really connects with the audience and has a better chance of being remembered.

Challenges Specific to Two-Year Institutions

Community colleges often wrestle with the belief that they provide 13th grade for students who are not ready for a "real" university. The majority of two-year colleges offer a lot more than that. However, it's the audience perception that counts. Changing that perception is hard work, but it can be done with creative publications and web design based on the reality of each institution's personality.

Sometimes it's the perception of the internal audience, rather than the external audience, that stands in the way of effective branding. A new brand must gain institutional buy-in before it can be shared with external audiences. Tight budgets at two-year institutions present two challenges to achieving internal acceptance: administrators, while dedicated, may be overworked and may not be open to an edgy new image, and marketing dollars must be used cost-effectively. The key to overcoming these two obstacles is basing a new brand on solid, well-researched data. If the marketing team can demonstrate that a new brand concept represents the true identity of the college, then administrators will be more easily convinced and the dollars needed to create new communications will be well spent.

But since most two-year colleges don't need to increase admissions, why spend money and resources implementing a new brand? Aside from improving their image, if two-year institutions are successful, they'll benefit from the legislative level. As most of the state and local educational dollars are given away to four-year colleges, legislators become a key audience. A successfully branded two-year institution that has a strong reputation of excellence and meeting community needs is more likely to receive its fair share when the state decides where to distribute its education funds.

Case Study: Wisconsin Indianhead Technical College

WITC is a four-campus, post-secondary technical college that offers a variety of career-oriented programs and courses, including associate degree programs, technical diplomas, short-term certificate programs, and customized business training. Its single strongest trait is its ability to prepare students for the modern workplace. WITC attendees value their quality of education, knowing that their time and money is well invested and likely to result in a good job that pays well.

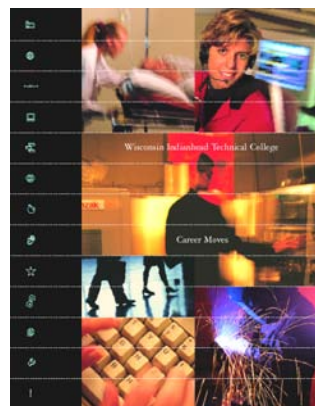


WITC existing design

When GCF partnered with WITC a few years ago, the college was struggling to change the market perception that it was an inferior institution of higher education. Existing materials did little to portray the rich, dynamic nature of the WITC experience. In some instances, the publications even reinforced the vocational/technical school image that WITC was striving to shed. Overall photography did not convey the value or attractiveness of the college, and the images suffered from a generic look

that could have represented any institution. Efforts to cite the career benefits of technical college education were used with some regularity, but even those were fairly commonplace and could have applied equally well to any technical college. In other words, existing materials did little to promote a brand that distinguished WITC from its competitors.

We knew that effective marketing communications materials had the potential of broadening awareness while helping shape impressions in the minds of those who knew the college best. GCF worked with WITC's communications personnel to create marketing materials that positioned the college as an equal, if different, educational option for students of all age levels. Together, we developed a strong theme for the entire WITC system, within which they could promote the particular strengths of the four individual campuses. The theme "Career Moves" revealed the common denominator of the institution's mission: to prepare people for jobs and careers. A new viewbook aimed at prospective students emphasized this career orientation, showcasing students whose educational experiences embodied the opportunities available at WITC. New cluster brochures—13 in all—were produced for each general area of career interest (such as Manufacturing Technology, Agriculture, Professional and Legal Support Services, and Health and Child Care). Design, layout, visual appearance, and copy all



GCF redesign

emphasized the theme and supporting marketing messages to position WITC as the smart choice for those who seek a dynamic, responsive, flexible, and affordable college experience that will prepare them for a demanding workplace.

According to Mimi Crandall, Dean of Student Services, the new family of publications has increased WITC's visibility and helped them overcome their own sense of inferiority. "We take ourselves more seriously now," she says. "We have a consistent look that has stayed basically the same. This gives us longevity and consistency, which are important in the market." She says that, like most educational institutions, "word-of-mouth is still our strongest marketing tool, but now the materials are there to support it." As faculty, staff, administrators, and students have come to associate WITC with the "Career Moves" theme and supporting messages, they have become more effective communicators, enhancing their word-of-mouth recommendations. In this way, WITC is actively managing its brand, and marketing efforts have made them stronger contenders in the arena of educational choices.