Selling Higher Ed in Tough Times Is a Road Less Easily Traveled

Addressing our Sept. 8 Bethany College fall convocation audience — especially our students — Greg Jordan, chairman of the college’s board of trustees, suggested that as people look over the menu of today’s bad headlines, they hold the despair: Fluctuations in stock markets, unemployment figures and other indicators of the nation’s financial health are cyclical and normal, Jordan, a native of Warwood and now global managing partner of Pittsburgh’s Reed Smith law firm, reminded students in his address, “You Can Get There from Here.” None of those should derail a student’s plans for success.

That’s wise advice for seniors about to enter one of the toughest job markets in American history — symptomatic of perilous economic conditions that are preventing many other students from committing to a four-year undergraduate program in the first place.

At a time when higher education continues to come under increased scrutiny from the media, families, employers and students themselves, outcomes and perceived value are paramount concerns. A recent survey commissioned by the Pew Foundation revealed decidedly mixed perceptions about the value of higher education that should cause the industry to take stock. On the one hand, alumni believe their investment in a four-year college education was a worthwhile investment, and long-term salary statistics confirm that assessment. On the other hand, the public increasingly feels that a four-year college education is out of reach economically.

Families fear that student loan interest rates will skyrocket, and the continued uncertainty surrounding Pell Grants adds to the perception that a college education may not be affordable. Despite the availability of other forms of financial aid, college students are likely to find themselves in debt once they graduate.

A study by the Institute for Financial Literacy found that college graduates are not only not immune from bankruptcy, but now constitute the fastest-growing group seeking such protection. Some employers, meanwhile, point to what they see as the mismatch between needed skills and preparation of college graduates.

Bottom line? The opening of fall term this year, for me, represented the most unusual, unstable and anxious recruitment cycle I have experienced in my career as a higher education administrator. As with much else in our economy, consumer perception and confidence drive purchases.

Confronting fluctuations in enrollment, colleges and universities have had to adopt new business models. John Walden, the president and CEO of the National Association of College and University Business Officers, or NACUBO, stated in “Presidential Perspectives” that what has changed “dramatically and positively, is the way we do business. Higher education institutions have been exploring new financial and educational delivery models at an unprecedented pace... finding new and innovative ways to respond to student need, often while simultaneously cutting operating costs.”

Whether partnering with other institutions, as Bethany College does, outsourcing basic services like food services and campus security, or simply relying on bold strategic planning, colleges and universities have no choice but to manage change before it manages them.

Often it’s as much, if not more, a matter of retaining current students — the existing paying customers — as recruiting new ones. Dr. Joe Pace, a national expert in student retention, prescribes “total employee commitment and involvement” for all student retention rates. That means that every employee of a college or university — administrators, faculty, service staff — needs to be a model, mentor or monitor, especially of newly enrolled, at-risk students such as those who represent the first generation in their families to attend college. For them, the first three months of the first semester are especially critical.

For the students who make the sometimes difficult decision to enroll in college, we should make every effort to help them succeed. After his fall convocation address at Bethany, Jordan hosted an afternoon panel of top-flight business professionals for an audience packed with students. He and his colleagues covered career-wise topics such as clear communication, appreciation for other cultures, keeping up with technology and the importance of volunteering. That’s the kind of “value-added” feature that market-minded colleges are making available these days.

As in any business, if we in higher education do our jobs well in pleasing our clients, they are likely to return to invest in what we offer. A freshly matriculated college freshman may contemplate four years of college as a long road to travel. Given today’s economy, however, it is no less a formidable goal for us educators who pronounce the merits of making that journey.

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