

WHY #OPPS4A



OPPORTUNITIES — FOR ALL —

America's State Colleges
and Universities

ALL



MATTERS, AND WHY YOU NEED TO JOIN THE EFFORT

TWO CASE STUDIES

By Brenda Alling and Steve Swan

As state college and universities, we often wrestle with how best to tell our stories.

In today's political climate, one of the most important stories we can share is about the value of a college education. We're getting beat up. Legislators question our value. State funding is falling off. In the media, article after article bash us for rising tuition rates, student loan debt that is too high, and they speculate about whether the value of a college degree has fallen off.

But they don't know what we know—that the payoff of a college degree is more than just income. They don't know that degree holders live longer, or that they are less likely to be unemployed or incarcerated and more likely to be civically engaged. And they underestimate our passion and perseverance in making a college degree—and all the benefits that come with it—a reality for more people.

So how do we share this story with prospective students, parents, legislators and our myriad other stakeholders? Together, that's how. And *Opportunities for All* gives us the tools to promote a unified brand and message for our state colleges and universities efficiently and effectively. So let's take a quick look at our two institutions and our efforts around the campaign so that you can understand how it benefits your institution already—and how it will pay even bigger dividends with your participation.

Western Washington University

It started with an opportunity. That is not unusual, most good things in life usually do.

For Western Washington University, opportunity came in 2015 in the form of an outreach to serve as one of the five pilot institutions from across the country in developing a marketing campaign to raise the profile of AASCU member institutions. A quick conversation with our then president, Bruce Shepard, and we were on our way. And we are so glad we seized the opportunity.

For us it simply made too much sense not to be involved. Western and the 400 other member institutions are AASCU, and collectively, we have so much potential. But potential means little if

it is not developed and realized. The fact is that AASCU schools have suffered from an identity crisis both at home on our campuses and nationally. We have gifted and talented leaders and staff at the AASCU national office, but we haven't had the collective commitment of its members to create real awareness of the great difference we make as AASCU institutions.

Now, more than ever, we need to differentiate ourselves with prospective and current students and employees, alumni, donors and with our elected officials at the state and federal levels. Higher education is under siege in many ways, and we need to stand up and be heard and seen.

Welcome to *Opportunities for All*. Welcome to an easy and impactful opportunity to strengthen the state college and university brand and, in doing so, to strengthening your own institutional brand. It goes hand in hand. As they say, "A rising tide raises all boats."

Let's go back to the beginning, to the pilot project that got this ball rolling. Working with AASCU's Division of Communications and Sage Communications, the Washington, D.C.-based marketing firm that is our partner in *Opportunities for All*, we took the time for introspection and to find out who we—as a group, not just the pilot project participants—were and what we offered our students and our states.

Then we had great discussions about the values of state colleges and universities (SCUs) that we are confident we all share: SCU institutions are high quality, affordable, accessible and responsible. These are the values we breathe each and every day on our campuses. I ask very respectfully, who wouldn't want to have these values as descriptors of who you are as an institution?

To capture the essence of who we are, we then shortened our brand identity to SCUs. We are the nation's state colleges and universities. We are that powerful and impactful group of institutions that is located between our better recognized sister, Research 1 and Land Grant institutions, and the two-year community college and technical schools that are the most prevalent institutions across our national landscape.

Next, it was time for the Western campus to roll up our sleeves and to get to work. With strong endorsement from then President Shepard (and now fully supported by our new president, Sabah Randhawa), we set out on developing an integrated marketing plan to launch Western as an SCU institution. Given that Western is a large SCU institution, we brought *Opportunities for All* to our Office of University Communications and Marketing and to our campus-wide integrated marketing and social media committees.

The buy-in was immediate as all recognized the way Opps4All would complement and strengthen our Western brand, while also appreciating the need to give SCUs a national platform to create greater awareness of the difference we all make.

Our professionals quickly decided we would go for the low hanging fruit first. That included:

- Placing the SCU tag on the footer of our Western homepage;
- Developing a SCU *Opportunities for All* webpage that would link from that footer;
- Writing an SCU *Opportunities for All* story for Western Today, our daily campus communication piece that is e-mailed to all students, employees and alumni and donors who sign on to receive it—more than 16,000 recipients each day;
- Developing a SCU *Opportunities for All* printed page to insert into the state and federal legislative briefing books;
- Inserting *Opportunities for All* information in our student recruitment materials;
- Writing and providing an op-ed by our president on *Opportunities for All* in the local newspaper;
- Making presentations across campus to create awareness of this exciting new initiative.

Once the low hanging fruit was picked, we moved on to complimenting those initial steps by:

- Developing a short student narrated video about Western being an *Opportunities for All* campus and placing it on the SCU *Opportunities for All* webpage;
- Drafting a social media plan to incorporate #Opps4All into the social media messaging issued by our director of social media and by those responsible for social media in the various departments across campus; and
- Developing a social media #Opps4All content library within Hootsuite, our social media content management system.

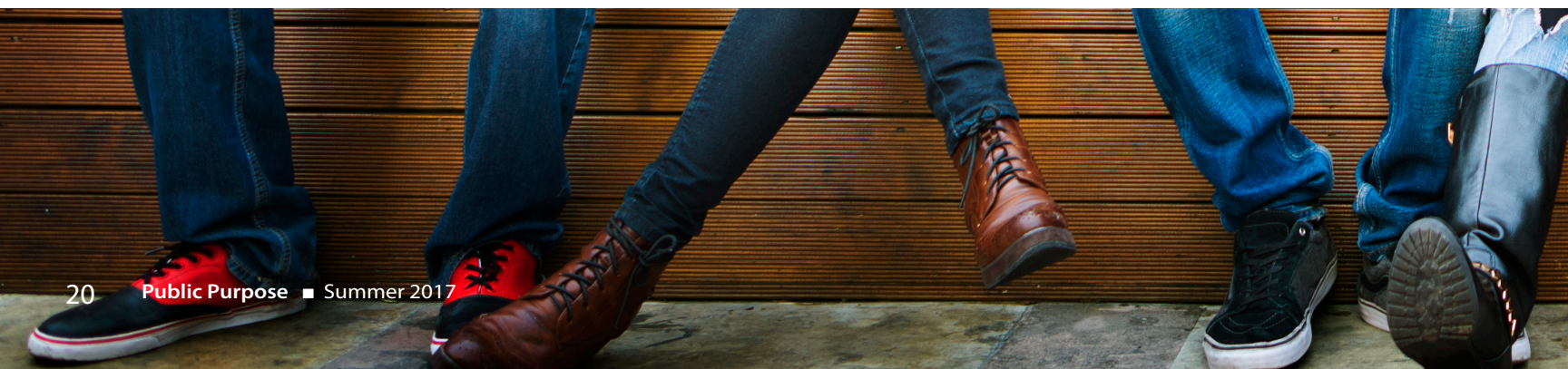
There is yet another phase planned that will include messaging about SCUs and our #Opps4All campaign to all alumni. And it goes without saying that we repeat all of the above on a regular basis.

Now for the obvious question, "Is the *Opportunities For All* campaign making a difference?"

It is too early to confidently say that we have moved the needle nationally. I do know that we need more institutions to sign on to give us a critical mass and a stronger voice. As we used to say back in my basketball coaching days, "the strength of the wolf is in the pack."

Distilling it down to just Western, I would never say that *Opportunities for All* is the only reason for numerous successes, as we have high-quality work being done in the trenches throughout departments and offices across our campus. But Western has had a record number of new student applications each of the past few years, we are better recognized for our quality by state and federal legislators, and we just concluded a highly successful comprehensive campaign that exceeded its original goal. Those aren't anecdotal—they are all based on numbers, and the numbers are very positive.

Western is a proud State College and University, we know we make a significant positive difference, as do all SCUs. We are thankful we seized the opportunity to work with other SCUs to better tell our



story, and we encourage you to do so as well. This is, truly, about opportunities for all.

Washington State University Vancouver

It was the messaging that first drew in Washington State University Vancouver.

There are a lot of ways you can talk about college quality, affordability, access and value, but one truism is undisputable: presenting a unified message is critical. Americans are bombarded by 4,000 to 10,000 messages a day.

Think about it.

I got up this morning, grabbed my Crest toothpaste, applied it to my Oral B toothbrush and flossed with my REACH floss tape. Three messages in the first two minutes of my day. Imagine what happens when I start the hair and makeup routine!

And remember the old Rule of Seven. It's the marketing adage that says a prospect needs to see or hear your marketing message at least seven times before they take action. If state colleges and universities start talking about quality, affordability, access and value with a common voice, our target markets get to know, like and, most importantly, trust us.

But won't we all sound alike? Of course not. Integrated messaging around quality, affordability, access and value is the foundation. It will raise awareness and understanding of the shared values of our state colleges and universities. From there you build the differentiated story about your institution.

Aside from the essential benefit of being heard, *Opportunities for All* saves valuable time. I don't think my university is unique. We have a small marketing and communication team and a very big job to do. Why sweat over an affordability message when you can go to the *Opportunities for All* Member Portal and pluck a proven one? Or do what I do. Keep a copy of the messaging on your desk. Mine has notes, highlighted text and, to be honest, coffee rings. I consider those attributes proof of use.

I could go on and on about the messaging. There is messaging by target market, vertical messaging, and even bridge messages to help you customize for your own institution. But there's more. The *Opportunities for All* program provides social media tips, logos and my favorite—webinars.

What's next for WSU Vancouver?

It's time to loop in my colleagues.

The chief of staff to the chancellor works closely with the university's advisory board, local legislators and their staff. Those stakeholders can benefit from consistent messaging about the value of a college education. The director of strategic partnerships can also benefit from *Opportunities for All*.

Every new academic year brings with it fresh opportunities to tell our story. As each of those stories is created, you can bet I'll run it through the *Opportunities for All* lens before it leaves our offices.

So, to wrap up, we think you'll see commonalities in both our approaches and can now better understand why we devote precious staff time to *Opportunities for All*—because it works, because it's good for all of us, and because it makes us as a group a stronger and more unified presence. Or to put it succinctly: Why get involved with *Opportunities for All*? Because why in the heck wouldn't you?

We stand ready to answer any questions you might have and strongly urge you to add your voice to the growing chorus about what makes SCUs such a cornerstone of our higher education system. **P**

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pledge you
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your voice to
the chorus of
institutions
that will raise
awareness and
understanding
of the shared
values of our
nation's SCUs.