

THE BRAND JOURNEY

A GUIDE TO DEFINING & LIVING YOUR BRAND

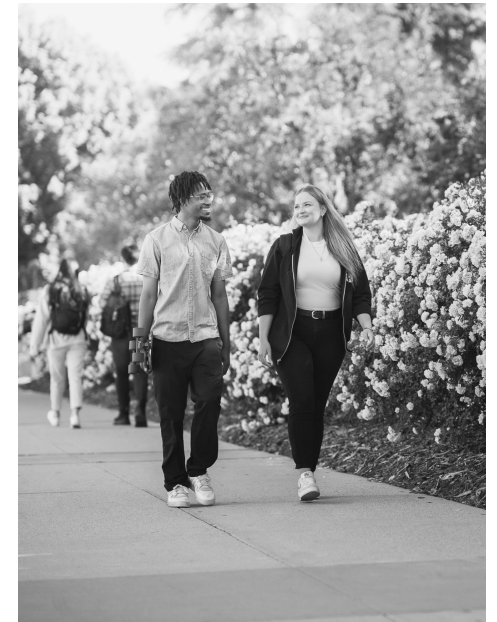
Every College And University Has A Brand

Although many people equate brands with messaging and advertising, what a university does—how it teaches and supports students, how it engages alumni and stakeholders, and how it solves community and societal problems—communicates its true brand more powerfully and with greater impact than any tagline or marketing campaign.

“Timely and potentially game changing for some institutions. Brand promise and experience are critical components to planning and design...a vitally important, yet rarely discussed, aspect of planning.”

In today's competitive marketplace, colleges and universities need to think differently about their brands. Many branding efforts are confined to an institution's marketing and communication offices, with messaging designed to shape perceptions among prospective students, alumni, and donors.

But to stand out from the crowd, an institution must leverage the full power of its brand, first by developing a values-based brand position that speaks authentically to its students and stakeholders, and then incorporating its brand into all aspects of its strategies, operations, and culture, from student recruitment through teaching and learning to commencement and beyond. At BVK, we call this *The Brand Journey* – a process of defining and living your brand that creates a powerful framework for integrated planning and authentic differentiation.



Transforming your institution by defining and living your brand requires you to rethink old notions of branding and the role it can play in the strategic management of your institution. The Brand Journey involves three steps:

1. Uncover: To be truly authentic, colleges and universities must create a distinct, well-articulated brand position, built not on the typical features or attributes that every university shares, but on the core values that define your institution and who it serves. Your brand positioning and points of difference should communicate your unique value proposition and the way you bring it to life.



2. Integrate: Living your brand means ensuring it is communicated in everything you do, not just what you say. This requires integrating your brand into all aspects of your institutional strategies, operations, and culture. By measuring the lived experience of students, staff members, and community stakeholders against the aspirational qualities of your brand position, you can produce a roadmap of strategic improvements, each of which helps ensure that your brand is experienced consistently by students and stakeholders at every touchpoint.

3. Optimize: Building your brand is not a one-time project but an ongoing effort to align your brand position with the evolving needs and expectations of new generations of students and stakeholders. Measuring your impact and honing your efforts to live your brand has the power to transform your institution through a rigorous process of continuous improvement.

Whether your institution has a long-established, highly respected brand or you're ready to refresh your positioning, BVK's unique approach to values-based brand development and integration can take your institution to the next level of differentiation and success.

A Deeper Dive into The Brand Journey

An authentic brand position is a promise an institution makes to its most important stakeholders. It is communicated and reinforced with every interaction and every experience. An institution that authentically defines and lives its brand will stand apart in ways that resonate genuinely, powerfully, and personally with its stakeholders, positively impacting strategic goals and key measures of success.

By embarking on *The Brand Journey* with BVK as your strategic partner, you will develop an authentic brand position that can both differentiate your institution from its competition and function as a powerful framework for driving innovation, culture change, and continuous improvement. Let's take a more detailed look at the steps.



STEP ONE:

UNCOVER

Step 1: Uncover

In higher education, many institutions position and market themselves on their features and benefits: world-class faculty, top-ranked programs, newly renovated residence halls, geographic location, low-cost tuition, and high graduate placement rates. The problem is, many of those are shared across colleges, so it is difficult to carve out a unique niche or competitive advantage. And with an industry changing as rapidly as higher education, where competition is heightened, value is questioned, and funding is decreasing, the stakes have never been higher to create differentiation to build and sustain success.

The best way to ensure authenticity is to articulate a brand position that is based on an institution's core value or purpose—its value proposition to the students it serves—rather than the typical list of attributes that many institutions claim. In other words, a brand should be defined based less on what a university does or how it does it, but on why it does it and who it serves.



All institutions have a powerful brand within them – but uncovering and living their authentic brand requires going far beyond funding a new marketing campaign or designing a new web site. It requires some research, a touch of honest reflection, a bit of courage, and a commitment to delivering a consistent student and stakeholder experience every day.

The first step in your journey begins with uncovering the value on which to base your institution's brand position and the motivation of your key audiences. Consider your institution's origin story and the purpose for which it was originally started. Discern the most powerful qualities and ideals that define you – not just your features, but the cornerstones of who you are and the purpose that drives your faculty and staff. Tap into past research and/or conduct new research to study your most important audiences. Strive to understand their emotions, motivations, needs, and values.

Once you have determined the value to leverage for your institution's brand positioning, you can begin the exciting process of bringing it to life and unleashing it both inside and outside the organization. What are the overlapping themes between your brand values (core strengths, essence, purpose) and those of your audience (needs, motivations, identity)? Why is your institution uniquely relevant to your most important students and stakeholders? What will excite and motivate people, internally and externally, to engage with and support your institution? Your goal is to uncover a space that is a combination of what is true today, but also aspirational. This will give you something to grow into.



Step 2: Integrate

Now that you have uncovered it, your values-based brand position can be a powerful lens through which you can examine your current strategies, operations, and internal culture and determine if they are creating distinction and competitive advantage.

An authentic brand position can not only help differentiate you from your competition but also function as a powerful tool for driving strategic change and improvements. Identifying and closing gaps between an aspirational brand position and actual stakeholder experience enables an institution to leverage the full potential of its brand.

Brand positioning must expand beyond your communications and marketing professionals. Activating your brand involves engaging your whole campus in understanding and internalizing your brand position to ensure it has traction throughout your institution. Beginning this work inside your organization rather than moving immediately to an external campaign ensures that everyone's actions are aimed at delivering on your brand promise, and that each time a student or stakeholder interacts with your people or programs, they walk away with an experience that is consistent with and reinforces your brand.

BVK's Brand-Strategy Gap Analysis provides a systematic review of each operational area of your institution to identify where your brand is being effectively cultivated and communicated—through your *actions* as well as your *words*—and where there is room to do better. By locating gaps between your institution's brand promise and the lived experience of your stakeholders, we offer a detailed list of opportunities for improvement, creating a roadmap for focused strategic change and authentic differentiation. Put simply:

- + A strategic plan explains **WHAT** you want to accomplish. For example:
 - Increase enrollment, improve student success, expand fundraising
- + A brand, by contrast, helps you determine **HOW** to accomplish these goals.
 - Specific actions and programming that align with your brand and help you deliver on your brand promise.

Colleges and universities that leverage their brand positions to make these kinds of purposeful strategic improvements stand a far better chance of adapting to the many challenges confronting higher education today. Equally important, they will do so in ways that stand apart, resonating genuinely, powerfully, and personally with their stakeholders.

The Brand-Strategy Gap Analysis

Consider how your university would be described by the following groups. In other words, how would each group define your brand? (It is vital to be honest in this assessment.)

- + Current Students
- + Prospective Students
- + Faculty and Staff Members
- + Alumni
- + Community Stakeholders
- + Peer Institutions / Departments

Now, review your university's brand positioning. Are there gaps between the ideals promised in the brand position and the lived experience of your students, faculty, staff members, and other stakeholders? Each gap you identify is an opportunity for strategic improvement.



STEP THREE:

OPTIMIZE

Step 3: Optimize

Building distinction in the marketplace is not a one-time exercise, but an ongoing effort to align your institution and the educational experiences you provide with an ever-changing world and the evolving needs and expectations of new generations of students and stakeholders. Periodically, but at least annually, you should be collecting data to understand how you are doing and use that information drawn from student and stakeholder feedback to adapt and innovate.

BVK can create a custom set of brand value key performance indicators (KPIs) to measure how you are doing in advancing your brand promise and how your brand is contributing to the achievement of your most important institutional performance measures.



Getting Started

Identifying and leveraging your brand is an investment of considerable time and energy across your institution. It can be completed internally or with the guidance of outside strategic counsel. Either way, the journey is both worthwhile and necessary for the long-term success of your institution.

Because leveraging your brand requires moving beyond the traditional work of marketing and communications offices, BVK employs a team with real-world campus experience and expertise that spans the landscape of higher education.

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As a pioneer of higher education marketing at BVK, Tam focuses her efforts on how she and the higher education team can help clients break through the clutter. Tam is an expert in brand positioning and has authored countless whitepapers detailing the past, present and future of the education industry. Her mantra is “never stop learning,” and that’s exactly how she operates.

Tam is responsible for all aspects of marketing, communications, planning and strategy on behalf of BVK’s broad portfolio of higher education clients across the country. As BVK’s higher education brand champion, she drives a culture of accountability, collaboration and excellence on behalf of her clients. Her relentless pursuit of creating impactful dialogues and innovative ideas make her a vital partner to BVK and its clients. Under Tam’s leadership, the education industry has recognized BVK as Best of Show in the Higher Education Marketing Awards, and multiple CASE Circle of Excellence Platinum Awards, among others.

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Lisa has a passion for combining theory with practice to help higher education clients achieve their strategic goals. An American Council on Education Fellow, Lisa has more than two decades of experience in advising presidents, chancellors, provosts and other senior higher education leaders on impactful strategic planning and creating approaches to institutional effectiveness, data analytics, strategic communication, and branded student experiences that make a difference. Her clients come from all sectors of higher education, including public R1s, regional comprehensives, community colleges, state comprehensive systems, and private liberal arts colleges. A scholar in higher education organizations, Lisa teaches graduate courses in planning and change and institutional effectiveness.

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Greg is a scholar of higher education and a longtime former administrator with more than a dozen years serving as a department chair, associate vice chancellor, and provost. In these roles, Greg helped manage the many challenges facing universities today, including those created by restricted budgets, changing demographics, and new technologies and economic needs—trends that have only accelerated with the recent pandemic. His experience includes everything from curricular reform, assessment, accreditation, and improving student support to advancing strategic plans, capital campaigns, new budget models, restructured institutions, and community partnerships. He has been especially engaged in the development of brand identities in higher education, including their use in both recruitment and marketing and as focused lenses through which to drive differentiating strategic change.

