

# EXPERT VIEW: Advice for regional state colleges in search of a national brand

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Regional public universities are reevaluating the strategies they have long relied on as enrollment and state aid hang in the balance. To make matters worse, most of these schools face mounting maintenance and infrastructure costs for campuses built decades ago.

Kasey Price, a consultant at MGT Consulting Group, works with public colleges as they navigate their most pressing needs — and branding challenges — of the day. She recently spoke with *The Business Journals'* Hilary Burns about ways regional schools are differentiating themselves in an increasingly competitive market. The following is an edited transcript of their conversation.

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## **How concerned are your clients about declining state funding at this point?**

I think campuses are concerned. Those cuts have come in very small increments over the years, say 3% this year, 4% for next year, maybe one year it will stay flat. Most of our colleagues have just watched it slowly drift away. So, we're definitely concerned.

They need the income that the state provides. They don't want to increase tuition. They are very sensitive to the dollars that students pay. They don't want to have to increase tuition per student. Affordability is often on the top of the list of priorities that we hear from clients in every market.

I think campuses are trying to figure out how they can recoup the dollars that they're losing from their state without having to put that on the shoulders of the students. It's a concern that they're used to it.

## **We're seeing some consolidation in state university systems around the country. Are you receiving inquiries from schools looking to consolidate or merge?**

None of the campuses that we're working with at the moment are in the process of consolidations or mergers. But I do think that there is pressure, particularly on the regionals, to make sure that they're keeping enrollment up and make sure that they're doing what they need to do to be relatively self-sustaining. There's just a lot of pressure right now.

The regional market is tough. There's typically a low price point on tuition and a high expectation of performance, so it's hard delivery.

The other thing that is challenging with regionals is that many of the regional campuses across the country ... have been for the last 40 to 60 years in this growth mindset. They've been growing, building, adding new programs, hiring faculty — they've just been growing and now that they are to that age. They have buildings that are 60 years old and those buildings need a lot of funding and deferred maintenance.

They aren't going to continue to grow and they've been at their maximum size, or maybe they already hit the maximum size they have to shrink a little bit. I think they're going to be hit harder than some of the bigger (universities) that have been

around for 150 years.

## **How would you advise a school that is struggling with enrollment and is trying to improve its brand?**

Regionals do sometimes struggle to differentiate from the other regionals or from the main campus. And I think where campuses can really be successful starts with the mission and vision. You've got to know what your goal is and who you're going to serve.

It's part of the culture of higher education ... colleges want to be all things to all people. They want to be open access and have all of the programs that people could want to pick. That is a very honorable thing.

The reality for most campuses, where their success comes is when they can differentiate themselves by having some really great programs. All of the examples that are turning in my brain right now are these campuses that have really defined programs that are really excellent in that they serve the region, but it's also something that's relevant to the country.

I was talking to a client this morning and she said our job is to serve our region and be so good that we have national recognition. I think there was a lot of truth in that statement. Sometimes in the desire to recruit students and to grow bigger that can get lost.

## **The pandemic has put a spotlight on higher education's affordability problem. How are schools grappling with that?**

They are trying to identify ways to increase access. Every time there's been a recession, you see a boom in enrollment. People lose their jobs so they go back to school. We saw that in 2008 but we're not seeing that this time around because this recession has obviously been very unique.

I think institutions are trying to figure out how they can be affordable again. How do I deal with a declining donor base, a reduction in state dollars, maybe some loss of federal funding, and not do a tuition increase? They're trying to figure out how can we provide more support to our students? How can we be creative with our financial aid to make sure that we are providing the greatest impact that we can

to keep students there.

Affordability is always at the top of the list of concerns. The issues of college student homelessness and food insecurity are real issues that college students face that we know are affecting not only their ability to be in college, but also their academic performance. It's very hard to learn when you're hungry.

U.S. campuses are really starting to have very intentional ways of addressing those issues as it relates to student support through a food pantry and policies and plans for students who are experiencing homelessness to get them to secure housing. Campuses are all doing those things to help support for students in addition to just giving them financial aid.

**And once students are in the door, how are campuses making sure they feel welcome in an inclusive environment?**

They are making sure that they're making diverse hires. They're trying to be inclusive in the ways that higher education should be delivered.

There's a lot of conversations about should students have to turn their cameras on when they're on a Zoom (class) because their learning environment may not be an ideal situation that they feel comfortable sharing. They have to be hiding in a closet that is quiet enough for them to hear or sitting in their car on campus to be able to get Internet. All of those things occur.

How are they creating opportunities that expose students who maybe haven't been exposed to a variety of cultures? How are they exposed to new ideas to learn about the world around them? It has to be thoughtful and intentional. You can't just hire diverse faculty and say that you've created an inclusive environment. You can't just have a diverse guest speaker. It's everything.

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