



From the Boston Business Journal:

<https://www.bizjournals.com/boston/news/2017/10/18/viewpoint-where-have-you-gone-don-draper-our.html>

EDITORIAL/OPINION

Viewpoint: Where have you gone, Don Draper? Our colleges turn their lonely eyes to you

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There was a time when investing in a branding campaign did not enter the minds of college or university presidents. A school's academic reputation, place in the community, and successful graduates said all that needed to be said about institutional worth. Over the long-running television series "Mad Men," set in the 1960s, nary a college engaged advertising guru Don Draper to create a catchy tag line.

Those days are over.

While schools like Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and MIT have long maintained superior educational brands, most of the country's 4,000 colleges and universities — ours included — never have had household names. We are increasingly challenged to convey a differentiating image to potential students, especially when they and their families are expecting a considerable return on investing in a college education and the pool of applicants is shrinking.

Over the past decade, a growing number of schools have branded, or rebranded, to distinguish themselves from the pack. In an era when branding effectively has never been more urgent, especially for smaller colleges, those that don't rise to the occasion may soon end up in critical condition — or worse.



Fran West-Engelke is president of Nichols College in Dudley.

The Chronicle of Higher Education found that more than 40 percent of private colleges and 30 percent of their public counterparts missed enrollment or tuition revenue goals in 2016. To make matters worse, the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education predicts that after 3.5 million students graduated high school in 2013, the declining numbers since then won't recover until 2024.

Colleges have begun to see the writing on their walls, and they are writing back, in the form of catchy tag lines and more. The refrain, "We can't afford to invest in an expensive branding campaign," has increasingly given way to the realization, "How can we afford not to?"

Massachusetts colleges betting on better branding range from Lesley University ("Creativity doesn't just have a place, it lives here") to Wheelock College ("Are You Tough Enough to Inspire a World of Good?"). Three years ago, Nichols College did the same, to highlight our expertise in teaching leadership.

Developing a corresponding brand proved no easy feat. Our new tag line, "Learn. Lead. Succeed." was literally easier said than done when it came to institutionalizing those concepts.

We had to gather faculty, staff, and student input. We had to introduce a new logo, a redesigned website, and an extensive marketing campaign. We employed experts and replaced every official piece of paper in sight.

Colleges need to be clear about who they are. A 2016 Gallup survey determined that scores of colleges share "strikingly similar" mission statements. Where's Don Draper when we need him?

The bottom line is that colleges need to put mission and brand promises into practice, and to provide evidence that they've delivered. Pretty words in a tag line won't cut it. At Nichols, we've set our two largest undergraduate enrollment records over the last few years, in great part due to a clear, achievable mission and a refined brand that tightened our message. It's still not going to be easy going forward; our competitors are pressing hard, and families continue to expect demonstrated results and affordable pricing.

In a new era of college business, we are girding for a battle of the brands.

Susan West Engelkemeyer is president of Nichols College in Dudley.