How to Market a College

Antoine Garibaldi, president of the U. of Detroit Mercy since 2011, often makes high-school visits himself, finding alumni among the administrators and putting his university on their radar.
in a Troubled Locale

By LEE GARDNER

DETROIT

ANTOINE M. GARIBALDI remembers what it used to be like for prospective students to visit the University of Detroit Mercy. When he took over as president, in 2011, anyone coming up Livernois Avenue, a main artery that borders the campus, encountered rusted light poles with dead bulbs along the scruffy streetscape. The city declared bankruptcy two years later.

Livernois now sports new light fixtures and a landscaped median. Things are looking up for Detroit — and for Detroit Mercy and nearby Wayne State University as well. A revitalized downtown has helped the city begin to rebound from its nadir as an international symbol of urban decay and dysfunction. Its two largest universities have increased their once-sagging enrollments, even as the number of high-school graduates in Michigan continues to drop.

As the two institutions have benefited from Detroit’s gradual turnaround, however, they have had to contend with its lingering reputation as a near-ruin. “The image of the city was detrimental for people wanting to come into the city to study,” says Deborah Stieffel, vice president for enrollment and student affairs at Detroit Mercy since 2013.

Incoming classes at Detroit Mercy have risen above 500 for the first time in recent memory; this fall, the campus welcomed 550 new freshmen. The number of full-time freshmen at Wayne State rose from 2,588 in the fall of 2016 to 2,653 in 2017.

The secret to the colleges’ recent enrollment success is that there is no secret — or at least no single tactic or killer app. They have relied on a suite of efforts to step up their recruitment game, lower barriers to entry for students, and shift perceptions of their location from an albatross to an asset. “There are no silver bullets, but there’s a lot of silver buckshot,” says Dawn Medley, associate vice president for enrollment management at Wayne State since 2016.

RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

Both enrollment managers knew that Hail Mary gambles on far-flung recruitment efforts were less likely to help than was building a solid local ground game. About 90 percent of students at both Detroit Mercy and Wayne State come from within 100 miles of Detroit, and that demographic was unlikely to change much. Rather than spend precious resources trying to lure Californians, for example, to snowy Michigan, Ms. Medley says, “I’d rather go and get those students who are closer.”

Continued on Following Page
How a College in a Sleepy Town Energized Itself

CANTON, Mo., is a small town located between two sharp bends in the Mississippi River — and not near much of anything else. It's the kind of remote and sleepy place that's pretty much invisible to college students looking for somewhere bustling to spend four years. But it is home to Culver-Stockton College.

Back in the mid-aughts, when Misty McBee was an assistant admissions counselor at the Christian institution, the campus had become invisible to prospective students. Ms. McBee was an admissions counselor at the Christian institution, the campus had become invisible to prospective students. "Folks in our region knew we existed," she says. "But the challenge that we saw is they really didn't know much more than that."

Over the next decade, Culver-Stockton introduced a new academic calendar, changing 15-week semesters to 12 weeks with a three-week miniterm to enable students to fit in internships or travel. New offerings included online master's programs in business administration and education. Culver-Stockton also began a $10-million capital campaign, eventually raising $14 million. It used some of the money to improve the campus. Ms. McBee, now executive director of admissions and college marketing, led the efforts.

The admissions office started reaching out to high-school sophomores and juniors, so that "by the time their senior year rolls around, they've known about us for two years," Ms. McBee says. "It was clear at both institutions that enrollment had to be a campuswide effort. It wasn't just pushing paper across the table," Ms. Stiefel says. "It was developing relationships with families and all the people who might refer a student to our institution."

Outreach needed to be limited to recruiting efforts. Since some Detroit high schools lack libraries, Wayne State is designing a workshop to make sure schoolteachers and students know that the university has resources they can use.

It was clear at both institutions that enrollment hadn't been left only to a few administrators and counselors. Improved enrollment had to be a campuswide effort. Wayne State has created a community-ambassador program that trained more than 200 students and faculty and staff members on how to be a resource for information about the university. A casual conversation at a soccer match or in a waiting room can be turned into an information session. Ms. Medley and her staff hand out cards reading "Caught in the act of radical hospitality" when they spot someone making a visitor on the campus feel welcome.

As with so many other things at a college, leadership can make a crucial difference. The gregarious Mr. Garibaldi makes many high-school visits himself, sniffing out Detroit Mercy alumni among administrators and putting the institution on their radar.

"He may not have met you before, but he knows someone who knows you, and he knows their kid and he knows their dog, and he can always remember their name," Ms. Stiefel says. Building a team means building relationships within the institution, too. "Make a lot of friends on campus," Ms. Stiefel says — and not just among faculty members or others who may play an obvious part in recruitment. Detroit Mercy needed new software for managing customer relations, but she didn't have enough money in her budget. Her conversations with Edward G. Tracy, associate vice president for information-technology services, led to his department's paying half the cost.

A PATH TO ‘YES’
The two universities not only doubled down on marketing to the Detroit area but also changed how they communicate with them, and what they said. In years past, Wayne State had typically sent large packages of printed information — admissions forms, financial-aid information, invitations to open houses — all at once. "That would save money on postage, but it wasn't establishing a relationship with the student," Ms. Medley says. Now the university stays in more frequent contact with prospective students, through calls, emails, and texts. It is testing an artificial-intelligence-powered chatbot to answer questions at all hours.

The university reminds potential applicants about forthcoming deadlines, answers questions, and provides advice on financial aid, so that prospects "see us as a support system and not just the big behemoth that they have to go up against," Ms. Medley says.

Wayne State has also tried to expand its enrollment by making the process less intimidating for students who are from lower-income backgrounds or, especially, who are first-generation college attendees. Nearly 50 percent of students there are Pell-eligible, and about the same proportion are first-generation. The university has begun waiving the application fee for any student identified as first-generation. Those students, and their parents, then get additional contacts from counselors, along with invitations to events regarding financial literacy and what to expect from the college-application process.

Wayne State has also re-examined its institutional aid to make sure the funds are going to those who most need the help. Ms. Medley's enrollment-management office has tried to make sure that endowed scholarships are used as efficiently as possible for merit-based aid, so that institutional dollars can be used for students in need. A new program called the Wayne Access Award uses institutional aid to cover any gap left over after Pell Grants and scholarships. Ms. Medley has become an evangelist for RaiseMe, a program sponsored by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation that allows high-school students to earn microscholarships for academic milestones to help pay for college — say, a $150 award for an A in a class.

All the financial-aid maneuvering is designed not only to build Wayne State's enrollment but also to enroll more students who need the education it offers. "We need to find a path to 'yes'," Ms. Medley says. Continued on Page A12.
Students these days, we were finding, are driven by mission, interested in working in their own communities.

CHALLENGE AND OPPORTUNITY

What about the challenge of Detroit itself? Ms. Stieffel arrived at Detroit Mercy the same year the city declared bankruptcy. But she had served as dean of admissions at Loyola University in New Orleans, she noticed. Hurricane Katrina devastated the city and during the first years of its recovery. "Disasters are really, really bad," she says, "but they also provide opportunities for you to learn some things.

It was clear to her that Detroit Mercy needed to own its location. The university’s recruiting material at the time seemed to downplay the city, she noticed. "The word "Detroit" was not front and center, and it had to be," she says. "You can’t not say it. And you have to find and promote the reasons why people might come to Detroit to study."

The idea of living and studying in Detroit appeals to many members of Generation Z, Ms. Stieffel says. "When students these days, we were finding, are driven by mission, interested in working in their own communities to build their own communities."

With the combination of many entrenched problems and the recent renewal sparked by significant investments by the Detroit native Dan Gilbert, founder of Quicken Loans, Detroit can offer a rich mix of challenge and opportunity for some applicants.

Matt Sutton, a graduate of Detroit Mercy and a master’s candidate in its architecture program, says his father’s family lived just two blocks from the campus during the 1967 riots that set the city aflame. They moved out of Detroit, and eventually to Royal Oak, a suburb where Mr. Sutton attended high school. When he began looking at colleges, in 2011, he grew interested in Detroit Mercy’s School of Architecture and planned a visit to the campus, he says, despite his "expectation that everything was going to be run-down." He was pleasantly surprised to find that it was "kind of like every other college" but "nice.

Detroit Mercy has a particular appeal to architecture students, Mr. Sutton says, because its School of Architecture also houses the Detroit Collaborative Design Collective, a nonprofit architecture-and-design firm dedicated to revitalizing the city. "It’s beneficial for the students to have a practice actually inside the building, working on improving the community," he says.

Students may see the appeal, but Mom and Dad were sometimes another matter. "Parents were a little more, "Well, I don’t know if I trust Detroit,"" Ms. Stieffel says. "And her staff worked hard to get both students and their families to visit the campus, which borders blocks from deserted houses but also some of the toniest streets in the city. Many local parents hadn’t even driven by Detroit Mercy in 15 years, and a visit to the 91-acre main campus served to assuage their worries.

The university offers a $1,000 financial-aid grant, renewable for four years, to high-school students who visit before March 1 of their senior year. "That made them come and see what we had to offer here," Ms. Stieffel says.

The truth is that the city’s past reputation doesn’t matter much to today’s high-school students. "They don’t know what happened in Detroit 10 years ago," Ms. Medley says. "They were little kids."

Students visiting Wayne State find a bustling campus in a neighborhood, Midtown, that has benefited from the renewed vitality of downtown.

Perhaps nothing persuades students and their parents to get excited about a university more than a university that is excited about itself. "Find what makes you amazing and spend your time sharing that," Ms. Medley says. "Be authentic.

The combination of a good academic program, good outreach, and a distinctive mission can help colleges make good matches with students. Stella Costello, now a senior at Detroit Mercy, was one of those suburban Catholic high-school juniors who took an early tour of the campus. The nursing programs she found a good fit with her vocational goals. She was "a little bit" nervous about attending school in Detroit, she says, but Detroit Mercy’s emphasis on improving the city helped seal her deal.

"My family’s really about service work and giving back," she says. Ms. Costello herself began volunteering in elementary school, at a soup kitchen run by her mother.

"That’s one of the things I liked about U of D," she says, using students’ nickname for the University of Detroit. "They’re clearly focused on the community they’re in."

Tips on Making the Most of Your College’s Location

We asked some enrollment-management professionals to suggest ways that a college situated in a seemingly less-than-ideal place could appeal to students. Here’s what they said.

John W. Dysart, president
Dysart Group

Challenging locations can be overcome. If you are in an urban area, emphasize the educational advantages of city locations. Entertainment venues, professional sports teams, a diverse population, museums, and cultural outlets can be a plus. Colleges in urban areas tend to have more housing options. City locations are often ideal for internships and employment.

It helps to sell the unique characteristics of your city, such as the extraordinary architecture in Chicago, the French influence in New Orleans, or modern art in Buffalo. The theater district in Detroit (one of the largest in the country), the movie-and-television industry in Los Angeles, and the diverse musical heritage in Atlanta are all reasons to celebrate.

Colleges in rural locations should focus on vibrant on-campus experiences. Promote outdoor pursuits such as hiking, skiing, water activities, and fishing. Many small communities have attractive or historic downtown areas filled with affordable, family-owned businesses. Rural institutions often provide more chances to interact with faculty members outside the classroom, meaning even greater personal attention.

Colleges in economically depressed areas can turn an enrollment obstacle into an advantage if deal to the interest of students in mission and/or service prospects. Attending colleges in such places can provide openings to make a real difference in the communities.

Regardless of location, it is crucial to communicate your unique academic offerings, distinctive majors, or approaches to majors — and, most important, outcomes. Emphasize how your location can positively influence the preparation of your students for career and personal success.

Nicole Foerschler Horn, president JMH Consulting

Today recruiters from hundreds of miles away may be communicating with prospective students in your backyard about their colleges’ online programs — which just happens to compete with your most successful degree.

Here are three ways to stand out in a crowded and geographically limitless market:

Go after the niche. Don’t offer commodity programs. If you start a master’s program in business administration or criminal justice, you are entering a crowded field. It’s expensive to market those programs and even more difficult to differentiate yourself. Instead, develop programs with niche audiences so you can provide a value that few other schools offer. Good examples include a master of arts in museum studies at the University of Oklahoma and a master of business and science with a concentration in biotechnology and genomics at the University of Maryland.

Create a unique learning experience.

Make it worthwhile for students to drive to your college or attend your online program. At the University of Michigan, for example, its executive-education program goes beyond video lectures and textbooks by using simulations to give students a safe way to test what they have learned.

Foster partnerships. Forming partnerships with outside groups can help you engage with prospective students at a lower cost and with less effort. They also can allow you to offer courses that are customized and in a more attractive location. Examples include health programs that offer classes at hospitals and business schools that offer classes at a corporate headquarters.

Mary Kay Hyde, vice president of marketing
Gil Rogers, director of marketing
National Resource Center for College and University Admissions

For prospective students, choosing a college is a lot like dating. Most want to go out with the guy or gal who’s the most attractive, the smartest, the funniest. Most are probably less interested in the strange kid who’s socially awkward.

But if your institution has one or more “dating” challenges, there’s still hope. Maybe your campus isn’t stunning, or your location leaves something to be desired. Perhaps...