Approach #3: Promoting an Identity and Reputation of Excellence

The third approach to promoting academic excellence calls on the university to promote an internal identity and external reputation of excellence. Identity is defined as what those directly associated with the university—students, faculty, staff, administrators, and alumni—perceive and think about UD. Identity is more internal and defined by those within the university community. People outside the university frame its reputation. What they see, hear, and experience about UD shapes its reputation.

A university’s identity and reputation are undoubtedly linked and inherently complex. UD has many identities and many reputations. Moreover, many factors shape identity and reputation, and people understand these terms differently. Proponents of this approach say that there are aspects of our identity and reputation that reflect excellence and other aspects that do not. This approach says that the best way to achieve academic excellence is by fostering an identity and reputation that embodies these values.

Seeing Our University as Excellent

How do we perceive UD? Proponents of this approach would say that in order to improve academic excellence, members of the university community must see UD as a superior institution. How do students perceive UD? Borrowing from the Vision 2010 document, do we see ourselves as members of “one of the finest Catholic universities in the nation”? Do we commit ourselves to developing our whole person? Do we see ourselves engaging in “critical inquiry, vigorous dialogue, thoughtful reflection, ethical behavior” and making “meaningful contributions to society”?

Proponents of this approach would say that efforts should be redoubled to highlight and publicize the many occasions when UD students and faculty achieve excellence. The more we see ourselves in such light, the more excellent our identity becomes. Perhaps a bit less modesty is required. Perhaps a bit more institutional promotion is necessary. Perhaps less focus should be placed on stumbles, screw-ups, and foibles.

Creating an identity that reflects a strong focus on academic achievement would have far-reaching consequences and would promote a campus culture committed to superior academic success. Faculty would be encouraged to better their courses, improve their teaching, expect more from students, and find more opportunities for student-faculty collaboration. Students would be encouraged to push themselves academically. Students would hold faculty members accountable for what and how they teach. Imagine students boycotting classes not because they’re tired or sick but because the professor is not challenging them enough. An academically excellent identity would also impact the type of students UD recruits and enrolls.

Did you know?

- UD is ranked seventh among national Catholic universities and 98th among all universities in the country, according to the 2004 issue of America’s Best Colleges from US News & World Report.
- The Princeton Review named UD as “one of the best” in the Midwest.
- UD boasts one of the world’s largest campus ministry programs.
- UDRI attracted a record $65 million in sponsored research last year.
- UD was first in the country to offer an undergraduate degree program in Human Rights.
- A Nobel Prize Winner, members of Congress, a NFL coach, the developer of NASA space food, the inventor of Claritin, the former CEO of Ann Klein, author Erma Bombeck, and countless other remarkable people claim UD as their alma mater.
- Math professor Aparna Higgins received the 2005 Mathematical Association of America’s most prestigious award for teaching.

These data were taken from the following UD web address: http://admission.udayton.edu/lifeatud/ataglance.asp
Helping Others See UD as Excellent

Reputation is critical to this third approach of seeking excellence: Do others see UD as “one of the finest Catholic universities in the nation?” Popular perception impacts the type of student UD recruits. It impacts how employers, graduate schools, and professional schools think about UD graduates as applicants. A stronger academic reputation would increase the value of a UD diploma.

College review magazines and guidebooks participate in creating UD’s reputation. These reviews portray images of our university life and shape what prospective students, their parents, and guidance counselors think about the place. Although many university administrators find these reviews superficial and based on faulty methodologies, their influence cannot be ignored.

Just what do these college guides say about UD? According to the Princeton Review website:

- One student writes, “[T]he J. Crew and Abercrombie crowd at UD is dominated by white Catholic kids from private schools, primarily from Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Indiana. . . . Most students are what my friends and I call the three C’s: Caucasian, Catholic (non-practicing, of course!) and conservative.”
- UD is one of the 170 universities named “Best in the Midwest” (2004).

This mixed picture might suggest that we have an inconsistent reputation. Mr. Robert Johnson, Vice President for Enrollment Management, indicated in our interview with him that while UD alumni look back fondly on their college experience, fewer of them are encouraging their own children to attend. Mr. Johnson claims this is primarily because of UD’s growing reputation as a party school, and that alumni prefer their children attend a university with a stronger academic reputation.

Proponents of this approach would encourage concerted efforts to respond to these rankings by either improving our standings or publicizing their limitations. As mentioned, many administrators criticize these rankings because they are often based on a university’s resources and not what happens in the classroom. For a more accurate picture, UD and other universities participate in the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). This survey measures student engagement—how challenged students are and how much interaction and collaboration they enjoy with faculty. The NSSE survey is thought a better measure. UD’s NSSE data should be used to promote a reputation of academic excellence. It also should give a diagnostic assessment of where improvements are needed. You can review UD’s NSSE data at the following web address: http://provost.udayton.edu/facresources.

Higher education is becoming more and more competitive. Over the next decade, fewer students will be graduating from high school and looking to attend
Approach #3

college. The cost of higher education over this period will only increase. The net result is that UD will be in an increasingly competitive environment to recruit the 1,750 students that it needs each year to remain economically viable. Tuition can be raised, but UD is often competing for students against neighboring public institutions with much lower tuition. So, UD’s diploma must be worth the money.

High school guidance counselors become critical players in this environment. Our research indicates that they too often see UD as a “safety school” or a “second choice” to Notre Dame, Villanova, and increasingly to regional, public institutions like Miami University and Ohio State University. Proponents of this approach would encourage the university to do a better job articulating a distinct identity of excellence to prospective students, parents, and guidance counselors. Sharpening the message—that UD’s education is excellent and distinctive—and then delivering on that promise will change the university’s reputation. As the reputation improves, UD will be more competitive and able to recruit better students. Furthermore, a stronger academic reputation makes it easier to attract and retain faculty who like teaching in such a setting. A number of specific actions could be taken:

- Dedicate personnel and resources to promote UD as an academically excellent institution.
- Be more intentional in recruiting students who match UD’s identity.
- Increase financial aid benefits for students who exemplify UD’s identity.

Trade-Offs with Approach #3

- Faculty members are sometimes jaded about students and their abilities. Some may be unwilling to give up their skepticism and negativity. Others are uninterested in thinking about the institution’s identity.
- Faculty may be hesitant about investing the time and energy necessary to change course material to better reflect an identity of excellence.
- Students would have to think more about how their choices match the institution’s identity and some may resent being pushed in this fashion.
- Still others may become disenchanted with a focus on improving our reputation. Such efforts appear unseemly, as if UD is packaging itself like a product. Reputation is earned, not marketed.
- Others may actually prefer UD to live out the reputation portrayed in many of the college guides.
- Resources and personnel would be directed at cultivating identity and reputation. Other projects and initiatives may get sidelined.

What Critics Say about Approach #3

Critics raise a number of concerns about approach #3. Some fear that the Marianist spirit of equality and inclusiveness would be compromised by casting an identity and reputation that seem exclusive. We could lose the holistic, servant-minded education that the Society of Mary envisions. Approach #3 could discourage prospective students from applying who like UD’s reputation for educating the whole person, emphasizing community interaction, and being a fun place to spend four years.

Having surveyed three approaches to academic excellence, what do you think? How should UD engage this topic?