

Analysis of Nonprofit Universities
Strategic Communication and Public Relations (SCPR) Industry Backgrounder

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In the volatile and competitive market of higher education, effective public relations is the key to success. Within this market are for-profit or nonprofit public and private institutions. A for-profit institution has shareholders who have the purpose of making money through tuition, sales of services the institution provides that ultimately goes back to both the shareholders and possibly into marketing and recruiting at the school (Western Governors University, 2017). Nonprofit organizations are held by 501(c)(3) IRS rules that allow the organization to collect and invest tax-free money on both the state and federal level; they also don't pay property taxes. The agreement is that the money is to "be recycled back into the nonprofit [institution's] public benefit mission and activities" (Picincu, 2020). Beyond tax breaks, nonprofit higher education institutions rely on tuition payments and alumni donations. Higher Education institutions have been struggling to meet their financial needs and retain students for a four-year investment, often prompting drastic program cuts. In our interview with Andrew Cunningham, the Content Development and New Media Manager for FPU, we learned how important it is to have a public relations function that creates marketing campaigns that strategically communicate the university's mission, vision, and what it has to offer. He stresses the importance of authenticity to attract the right student who will thrive at FPU, retain their admission over four years, and stay involved. He explains the target demographic and how their public relations department creates a marketing approach that attracts the right FPU student, specifically through a major website overhaul. Despite the current COVID-19 pandemic, nonprofit universities like FPU remain focused on bringing students back to campus and offering a university experience as close to normal as possible. This exploration of the current strategies and campaigns provided by FPU shows their advancements toward a well-rounded public relations and communications department.

Organizational Profile

FPU is a private, liberal arts, nonprofit university. The main campus, located in Rindge, NH (Franklin Pierce, 2021). Surrounded by Mount Monadnock and Pearly Pond, the campus is ideal for students who want to be away from busy cities or urban lives. Still early in its legacy, Franklin Pierce University started as a college in 1962 and has a smaller student body of about 1,400 students on the main campus in Rindge, NH (Franklin Pierce, 2021). The college prides itself on marketing an authentic campus experience, in one of the essential functions of recruiting potential students to attend the university.

Values and Mission/Vision of FPU

Another essential function of the university is providing critical education, skill, and professional development. Every nonprofit organization, including education institutions, has to have a mission and vision statement. This is part of their strategic planning and the strategic direction (Conrardy, 2021).

Franklin Pierce's Mission Statement:

"Franklin Pierce University delivers programs and educational experiences that develop essential intellectual and professional skills; promotes close community connections; and

empowers our students to realize their potential through the intersection of highly personalized liberal learning, innovative engagement, and professional programming.” (2018)

A mission statement is what an organization does every day, and it clearly states the organization’s goals (Team & Cannell, 2020). This statement should “help the organization achieve the long-term goals set forth in the vision statement created by the board of directors” (Team & Cannell, 2020).

Franklin Pierce University Vision Statement:

“Franklin Pierce University will be a leader in innovative teaching and experiential learning, having a positive social and economic impact on its communities. The University will establish a legacy for its unique ability to support and prepare students to thrive as leaders and engaged members of society.” (2018)

A vision statement is a concise, transparent, well-articulated set of words that describe your organization’s vision to internal and external stakeholders (Conrardy, 2021). Developing a concept or vision is a strategic plan and should go along with all statements and messages the organization wants to convey (Conrardy, 2021).

The vision and mission statements are strategic communication tactics. Organizations should not only have the board of directors involved with writing them, but they should also have “internal and external stakeholders” be involved as well (Conrardy, 2021). PR and marketing teams are usually given the job of writing these. Still, it should include representation from the people you serve, like families, members of the community where the organization operates, volunteers, donors, and “anyone else who has a stake in the future your organization is working to create” (Conrardy, 2021). For example, in universities, staff, professors, students, donors, the board of directors, and other members of the university’s community should be a part of creating these critical communication pieces. All of these pieces - including more people to develop the vision and mission statements, reaching out to them, generating ideas for the views, creating the statements, and releasing them - are part of strategic communication in a nonprofit organization.

SCPR Specialty Area

“Modern PR leaders begin with the institution’s mission and vision, building plans that connect the university’s goals with the needs and interests of the public” (Melichar & Brennan, 2017). Historically, the most common ways colleges approached marketing and strategic communication, pre-internet, involved analog approaches (Oreskovic & Rossoff, 2015). The strategic communication media campaigns supported brand recognition and reputation, often by word of mouth, print media through news, articles, direct mail, magazines both in and out of the house, legacy, networking, and alumni relations. These adaptations are only one aspect of a public relations approach. Beyond creating current and engaging campaigns, the content needs to reflect the institution and the mission they wish to express. “Our call to action for PR practitioners is to stand for something. Be about more than what you and your team can produce, and focus on the value of authenticity, of trust, and of not just speaking at people but communicating with them. Stand for the discipline of knowing your audiences, respecting them,

and crafting strategies to engage people in your vision for the future” (Melichar & Brennan, 2017). Authenticity, trust, respect, and knowing the audience are all building blocks for effective strategic communication planning. These start at the foundation of the mission and vision statements - including a diverse group to create these statements and stem to everyday communication with the public.

Public Relations, Strategic Communications, and Marketing

Public Relations, Strategic Communication, and Marketing departments are often grouped together because they collaborate, but they need to be recognized and evaluated individually. Nonprofit universities need to create and express a vision and brand for their institution to stand out towards their target markets. The public relations team is in charge of communicating this vision and protecting the reputation of the school. Sometimes tough decisions need to be made, but the institution must be careful to protect its reputation, especially regarding authenticity. Their reasoning needs to be communicated strategically and proactively to explain their actions and acknowledge how their decision can negatively impact some target audience members.

In 2014, FPU decided to no longer offer majors and minors in American studies, theater and dance, graphic communications, fine arts, math, and arts management (Mulhere, 2018). These cuts came as a surprise to many, which made the news more disheartening. Administrators explained that the cuts were in line with the institution's five-year plan, follow enrollment trends, and offer programs that “align with post-graduate work opportunities” (Mulhere, 2018). The University spokeswoman made a statement saying the changes weren't directly related to money problems, but the university needed to be financially responsible with their programming decisions (Mulhere, 2018). According to their mission statement, FPU “delivers programs and educational experiences that develop essential intellectual and professional skills...and empowers our students to realize their potential through the intersection of highly personalized liberal learning, innovative engagement, and professional programming” (Franklin Pierce University, 2021). With this statement, they are either saying they will offer programs so that anyone regardless of interests or backgrounds can come and succeed or that they will offer the programs that they believe will attract certain people who will follow. If you interpret it as the latter, then FPU stayed true to its mission statement. Some students' dreams were cut in the process.

In this scenario, public relations and marketing worked together while leaving out strategic communication, which damaged the school's reputation, especially among those who wanted to pursue the Arts. An effective strategic communication plan would have involved open communication with the students before any announcement, incorporated student feedback into the decision making progress, or even acknowledged the importance of the arts and their reasoning for cutting the programs. Marketing this new decision will showcase the new without ever having to mention the old. They can concern themselves with what the future holds for the institution and not be tasked to explain the cut programs' reasoning but promote its new offerings. In a piece by Emma Leech, the Director of Marketing and Communications at Nottingham Trent University, she says, “Disruption, turbulence, and change have been hallmarks of the past 12 months for anyone working in [Higher Education] marcomms and recruitment” (Leech, 2018). Leech believes that because of these concerns, the marketing of

higher education has become too similar. All schools are attempting to become what research tells them to receive and retain students. She challenges universities to be authentic and “for us as professionals in the field to put our faith in the quality of our institutions and what they offer”(Leech, 2018). While it may be the safe choice and more comfortable choice to provide just the top-earning majors and minors and market those to a broad audience, there are benefits to sticking to what your institution does uniquely and what it can offer the right student. It may be more challenging, but it can still be a compelling draw to a smaller but more precise audience with strategic communication.

Authenticity

Planning authenticity and “facilitating more authentic stories has just become good business” (Minnium, 2016). Authenticity is an essential strategic communication tool for nonprofit universities for two reasons - recruitment and retention. An undergraduate nonprofit college’s main objective is to educate, retain and graduate students, in full classrooms, within a four-year program. The challenge is to target and find students who fit your community through strategic messaging, then convince students to invest in a four-year commitment that promises to work hard and make a large financial investment.

Recruitment is one of the most significant ongoing projects in any university. Colleges with a history of low retention rates, like FPU, a lot of time and money goes into recruitment. Recruitment is a strategic tool because it involves marketing, outreach, and other types of strategic communication. Maintaining good communication with students after they are enrolled is also essential. They pass communication to student life, clubs, sports teams, residential life, and other staff who make a large part of the college experience. “Low freshman retention rates are commonly symptomatic of a school’s inability to make a meaningful connection with their students” (Peck, 2020). Marketing ways to be involved on campus and campus events by the staff is also a strategic communication mechanism used to get students engaged with the campus, thus gaining a rich college experience. The richer their involvement with the school, the more likely they will stay around because they have things to do, and they are making connections.

Take a deeper dive, and low retention rates can reflect that an institution is not meeting its students (Peck, 2020). Those needs could be academic, financial, campus culture, social life, or the environment (Peck, 2020). In this case, strategic communication could be multi-department communication and making numerous individuals aware of a situation to help students succeed.

Cunningham uses photos to capture the authenticity of FPU. Photography is a useful strategic communication tool and is an ideal way to tell a story. Organizations should not be afraid of using the not-so-attractive details. “Don’t leave out the hard stuff because of concern that it doesn’t position the brand in a positive light” (Frimoth, 2017).

Another area of strategic communications is alumni networks. Schools know alumni are hyper-critical for their Alma Maters. Alumni provide a human touch for high school juniors and seniors when a school representative cannot be there, putting a face to a name. Alumni legacy

also serves as a recruitment tool for the college. Alumni host special events off-campus to promote the school. Often the press will show up and do a news story.

Alumni promotion or using famous graduates is a *soft* strategic public relations move. In 2011, Vassar took this on when it recruited Meryl Streep and Lisa Kudrow, two Vassar grads and celebrities, to help with their 150th Anniversary. They capitalized on the success of these two celebrities to benefit and promote the school and raise money, at the tune of \$431 million for their endowment (Plapinger & Vogelstein, 2013). It was an effective strategy to bring relevance and interest to the school. They were authentic in showing their love and support for their alma mater. It is crucial to be authentic in your approach. "This trait is about honesty, transparency, and building trust. Authenticity is at the heart of human relationships and should be the backbone of your brand communications efforts. Temple Grandin, an American scientist, and activist is one of FPU's famous alums. She could be the next face scrolling on the website banner, exemplifying all that is amazing about FPU: being "Authentically Unique." Being authentic requires a clear understanding of your brand's promise, then communicating it consistently, creatively, and clearly" (Weas, 2020). A person can quickly determine when something or someone is not being honest or authentic. When your honesty or authenticity is questioned, it can cause a great deal of damage to an institution's reputation and following. If an institution builds trust, the intuition will also build loyalty, but they are honest in their approach.

SCPR Function in the Organization (PR Role)

Main Objectives and Who They are Trying to Reach

FPU, while a unique institution, is like any other nonprofit university in that its primary goal is to drive admissions, their target demographic being students ages 13-17, people thinking of graduate school, and lifelong learners (Cunningham, 2021). Cunningham states, "obviously, being in undergrad, the biggest push is to get admissions up" (2021). That is where their public relations and marketing campaigns focus their efforts, at the moment, targeting potential students for entry into their university. They are using strategic tactics to appeal to a larger audience and recruit students to attend FPU. They focus a great deal of time, effort, and money on a complete website overhaul, which will take the next 6-8 months. Cunningham's department is making it easier-to-use, streamlining information, and creating a more appealing look in general. Not only are they changing the face of the website, "we are changing everything. We have changed the wireframe, the site map, and the flow. We are getting rid of the 'X' amount of pages. We are streamlining. We are changing the language. We are making the language more interactive, more real" (Cunningham, 2021). They want the website to draw in potential students and their families. To do this, they must make the website feel easy, impressive, and authentic. According to a college counselor, a university's website can sway a student's opinion on a school, "it is imperative. Study it thoroughly, as you might find that the school is perfect or that you would not be caught dead there" (Aresty, 2019). This is why having a state-of-the-art website is vital. Reecy Aresty says a convincing college website is one of the main draws for potential students (2019). A website is a powerful connection and representation of the university, especially when you have less direct access to a school. It becomes a person's only authentic source of information, making it a deciding factor in if a student will choose to attend an institution or not.

Strategies and Campaigns

Nonprofit universities must spend a great deal of time planning. Planning goes into what they post on social media, what they send through mailers, and what is visible on their official websites. College websites are critical to marketing an institution and driving admissions. They must stay current and continuously evolve, especially now due to COVID-19, people are relying heavily on information they can gather for the websites. Also, interviews and meetings with admissions and even coaches have gone mostly virtual this past year. Websites and other content need to be straightforward and easy to navigate.

This past year FPU had to use their budget of \$275,000 to overhaul everything completely. They felt it was pertinent to be competitive with other institutions (Cunningham, 2021). This means a revamp of their website and promoting the admissions process, campus activities, and campus life. They are attempting to be as authentic as possible and trying to be honest with what they can offer, “Authenticity will require an institution-wide understanding of what your brand stands for and the personal and collective benefits it delivers. It will move the conversation beyond programs, rankings, and outcomes and deliver emotional benefits that elevate brand meaning. Authenticity may mean revisiting and reanimating your existing brand platform or creating and crafting one anew” (Weas, 2020).

They want potential students to get a feel for the real FPU. They feel it is important that they represent the school's brand truthfully and sincerely. To do this, they have, along with the website, created virtual tours of the campus and worked on a 360 virtual Google tour. However, Cunningham, a trained photographer, has used his skills and knowledge of the PR and communications landscape to help draw in students. Using these skills, He says what is essential is to show they can still have the college experience even during a raging pandemic. They attempt to show what that experience can and will look like to a potential student. They want students to know that there is life on campus and people to engage with while still following COVID-19 protocols. Cunningham says they have portrayed this through their use of social media and the other tools they have been developing. It is working in proving to potential students and their parents that it is still worth applying to Franklin Pierce University, that they can safely have the college experience so many desire (2021).

Media Relations

Before the internet and social media, schools had a relatively small footprint or physical space for media offices in either the student union building or the admissions office. They had a handful of people who negotiated the publications for creating, printing and distribution. The messaging stayed local, rarely, unless there was some major event a school hosted or supported was the media involved.

Today, schools have professional, strategic communication public relations offices that encompass all media outlets. They develop, support, and promote all the college's most important initiatives and stories. They incorporate every official publication, website, visual,

technical, social media, public relations, and events. Anything that gets disseminated from the college comes through this office. They use media relations professionals in-house and outside vendors and members of the college community in a team effort. There are even guidelines and publications that define what the college identity and brand should look like every step of the way. For example, look at a few local, small, nonprofit colleges like Vassar, Bard, and Sacred Heart University. They all possess intentional, social media-driven spaces. There are 19 full-time employees listed on the Vassar communications webpage, each with a specialized title (Vassar, 2021). Vassar's house publications have been digitally archived through the Vassar Library in conjunction with their SCPR so visitors to the site can go back in time to see the evolution of their brand. Bard College, branded "A Private College For the Public Good," does not list employees, but all departments are comprehensive, making it easy to find and understand (Bard, 2021). Sacred Heart University has transparent communication and identity criteria on its website and instructions for brand and usage guides (Sacred Heart University, 2021).

The COVID-19 Pandemics' Impact on FPU's Strategies

Due to the COVID-19 Pandemic, much has changed within education and the nonprofit sector. On average, "undergraduate enrollment fell 2.5% for fall 2020" (Dennon, 2020). FPU is included in this; their admissions are down $\frac{1}{3}$ from years prior (Cunningham, 2021). While FPU's main objectives are still to work on student recruitment and retention. Their approach has had to change drastically, as have many other schools. No longer can universities count on potential students coming to the campus and taking in its beauty, feeling the energy, or engaging in-person. They have to "hit their target audience in as many ways as we can" (Cunningham, 2021). They have to develop a strategy that blends the old with the new. Incorporate social media and more recent technologies while still sending out mailings, posters, and flyers. They have to take part in virtual college fairs; they need to find a way to stay current but stay true to their industry. They have to get creative with their approach because social media and other newer media have become a significant part of marketing any institution. They use social media to show what life is like on campus, activities, classes, and students having fun. It must be intentional and planned.

FPU has embraced social media in the strategies used for their PR and marketing initiatives, especially during this past year. There is still a learning curve, but FPU has a "robust social program with a lot of engagement" (Cunningham, 2021). However, Cunningham has stated that the issue they have with social media is that they find it incredibly challenging to track their investment return (ROI). ROI is critical to understand because they prioritize where and how they spend their time and money. While they find it hard to track, they know what an important tool it is to use. ROI is a tool that everyone in the department has embraced. FPU has a relatively small PR/Communications department. With all positions filled, there are six full-time employees. There is a "Director of marketing, and there is a vacant director of communications position. Those two are directly above me, then at my level, there is a website manager, and below us, there is a marketing coordinator and vacant senior writer position" (Cunningham, 2021). They also have a graduate assistant and a few undergraduate student photographers who work part-time for tuition reimbursement. While the department has done a great job, it is small; and a smaller department generally means a smaller budget.

Is Franklin Pierce University on the Right Track?

Their budget is small at \$275,000, all of which they are not guaranteed because admissions can pull from it when needed. (Cunningham, 2021) Nevertheless, with the money they do have, it is crucial to plan how to spend it. To be truly competitive with other nonprofit universities, they must clearly understand where and how to spend their money best and be intentional with what they put out. For instance, another nonprofit university, Southern New Hampshire University (SNHU), spends \$139 million on advertising and marketing alone, a large amount spent on just social media ads (McKenzie, 2019). Of course, they have over 100,000 students, so obviously, they have a bigger budget. A majority of students are fully online, so they know a successful approach will be social media. Some of the things their marketing and advertising focuses on are that they are nonprofit and how quick it is to apply, appealing to a vast amount of people. Advertising heavily like this has proved fruitful for them. It has increased the number of online students from 3000 in 2003 to over 100,000 as of 2019. They have learned and grown from their efforts, they understand their base and whom they want to appeal to, so they know how to allocate their money (McKenzie, 2019). They know what works for them, and they spend their money to support that. FPU is learning to do this, and since Cunningham began working for them, they have made great strides by blending old and new tactics. They are using social media and still focussing on the beauty of the campus and creating intentional posts. They are developing a state-of-the-art website while still sending mailers. These strides continue even with the COVID-19 Pandemic and will most certainly pay off in the future.

Not all colleges are equal in terms of entry, affordability, or legacy. And now, the thought of showing up and living on campus is diminishing (Mautref, 2018). Now, nonprofit schools have to act like corporations, where students and revenue are needed to validate their brand and control their image and pay for the overhead. You have to brand yourself uniquely and continuously send the message for reinforcement. With FPU having just over \$10 million in their endowment, according to the FPU website and the 2017 annual report, and with undergraduate admissions down by one-third, now, more than ever, schools need to rely on data-driven reports through a space like Google Analytics to help schools interpret and drive future marketing programs to get back on track (King, 2019).

Franklin Pierce University stands among many in the nonprofit private university higher education market. In a market that has faced many changes and challenges over time, institutions can become cookie cutters and appeal to the masses or hold onto what makes them unique and strive towards doing it well. Authenticity in any industry is vital to portraying the reputation of the organization. For nonprofit universities, authenticity allows prospective students to feel confident in choosing one school over another. Authenticity in marketing strategies and community engagement gives a prospective student an accurate gauge of the university. FPU has made significant adjustments to its program offerings to align data trends. They cut programs to replace them with data-driven lucrative options. Their strategic communications response lacked, and they lost trust in current students and alumni. With Cunningham's approach to authentic photography, the overhaul of the website, and promoting what FPU has to offer instead of what it may lack, Franklin Pierce University is on track to advance the university and remain a competitor in the nonprofit higher education market.

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