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**Challenges in Marketing and  
Student Relationship Management  
in Higher Education**

A BrandSequence Whitepaper

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A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Clifton Lemon". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Clifton Lemon  
President,  
BrandSequence

## Challenges in Marketing and Student Relationship Management in Higher Education

A BrandSequence Whitepaper  
by Clifton Lemon

Higher education today is undergoing a more radical and fundamental transformation than perhaps any other aspect of our culture. Technological, economic, sociological, and governmental forces are altering education dramatically, impacting its institutions, teachers, students, funding sources, and basic function in society. Underlying this change is the increasing awareness of education as the provenance of privately held corporations rather than public institutions. Educational institutions of all kinds are being forced to adopt operational models and methodologies from the world of commerce, and the effects are not all negative. Above all, institutions need strategies that make them more receptive and responsive to their core constituencies—their students.

Students increasingly see themselves as customers who purchase education services from competing providers. Although marketing issues in education are qualitatively different from those in consumer products sectors, higher education institutions have a lot to learn about taking care of their students like many successful businesses take care of their customers. Many of the inefficiencies and irrelevancies of academe probably deserve to crumble at the onslaught of economic and technological upheaval. At the same time, educational institutions need to maintain their roles as centers of knowledge and keepers of academic standards in order to remain socially and economically viable. The impacts of new information technologies and management and structural models borrowed from private enterprise must not be allowed to overshadow the primary function of education as a keystone of the social contract.

Fortunately, emerging methodologies in research and marketing offer higher education institutions the ability to adapt and evolve by building an ongoing dialog with students, admissions representatives, parents, employers and alumni. This dialog serves as the process by which an educational brand is built and maintained. The brand of a school or institution of learning is a different animal than the brand of a tube of toothpaste, and it may be a stretch to use the term for both. But research on many fronts today is redefining the concept of the brand by examining the fundamental mechanisms of thought and brain function in relation to buying behavior and social relationships with companies and organizations. Thinking about the brand of your school and how to better manage relationships with current and prospective students is not a matter of selling out or following a trend, it could be a matter of survival.

This paper describes our view of the current situation in higher education in the U.S. today, lists some of the issues and challenges we've observed in our work with higher education institutions, and delineates some of the most salient impacts and benefits of well-designed, ongoing research and the strategic planning that it informs.

The following is a brief overview of the state of higher education today, in which we highlight certain aspects of the sector that we've validated in our own research and point to several macro trends that influence the shape and direction of curriculum development, marketing, student services, admissions, and strategic planning.

### **Growth of Specialized Schools and Institutions**

Public attitudes toward “vocational” or “trade” schools in higher education are changing. Older generations of Americans associate these kinds of schools with advertising on the back of matchbooks, in car magazines and comic books, offering courses in welding, auto mechanics, and the like. But today many types of specialized schools, vocational and otherwise, are blossoming, offering various types of degrees in everything from medical technology to animation to traditional business subjects.

Many different factors have played a role in the development of these kinds of schools. When the dot-com bust put many qualified workers out of the workforce for several years, many decided not to return to traditional nine-to-five jobs, instead seeking more personally meaningful work, often in non-technical fields. The rise in self-employment, telecommuting, and home offices has given many workers a more practical business focus—they're interested in learning very specific skills quickly so that they can get their businesses up and running or get the specialized training they need to advance in their companies. Changing governmental regulations have made the development of specialized trade and vocational schools more feasible and attractive to investors. And the increasing number of new jobs being created by emerging industries requires new kinds of higher education institutions, built “from the ground up,” that are more responsive to industry than traditional institutions.

### **Privatization and Commercialization**

Although still less than one percent of all public schools, the number of public schools in the U.S. managed by private companies has more than tripled in the last six years.<sup>1</sup> Privatization is a controversial issue mainly because people

who are used to the entitlement of public education see an inherent disconnect with the basic concept of for-profit education. Commercialization is a far more pervasive phenomena, and is evidenced by practices like corporate sponsorship of student service functions in exchange for advertising opportunities.

While private enterprises can “move at the speed of business” and provide crucial access to enabling technologies and management practices, many economists, politicians, and business leaders argue that organizations that provide some of the fundamental needs of society, like education, utilities, and health care, should not be privately held and should not be forced to follow for-profit structural models, even operating at a loss if necessary. It's a matter of incentives—the needs of corporate shareholders usually trump the needs of students. One of the symptoms of this is the high instance of leading private educational companies currently being investigated for SEC violations and inquiries into their operations.<sup>2</sup>

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### **Increased Accountability**

Many different factors have combined to increase pressure on institutional administrations to measure, predict and reduce operating costs: increased governmental intrusion into academic affairs; reduced government funding for education; shifting social priorities, and a general decline in public confidence in higher education. While much can be learned from the business sector in making higher education more efficient in general, such as the adoption of new,

efficient technologies and programs like distance learning, this pressure often has the effect of shifting the focus of institutions away from the needs of students.

### Changing Student Demographics

Rapid shifts in the demographic profile of the U.S. population are being reflected in the student populations of the nation's higher education institutions. There is increased ethnic and international diversity, and the overall percentage of women has risen from 30% in the mid 1980s to over 60% at many schools today.<sup>3</sup> The percentage of older students has also risen steadily since the early 1980s. Macro trends like increased life expectancy, retirees re-entering the workforce, delayed retirement, and the increasing need for continuing education all contribute to an increase in the number of students in higher education. Changing student demographics have resulted in many new developments and trends, including: opening up new markets for educational services for new and diverse student populations; development of new curricula; downsizing of facilities and tenured faculties; and outsourcing and automating of instructional functions.

### Increase in Two-Year Sequences

A recent trend with many high school graduates is to do consecutive two-year terms in community colleges and four-year or vocational institutions, rather than commit to traditional terms at four-year schools. In California, this trend is being exacerbated by the fact that for the first time in history, the University of California announced this year that, due to state budget cuts, it could not admit all students who were accepted, requiring students to attend community colleges for two years before being able to attend U.C. This policy was recently conditionally reversed<sup>4</sup>, but still left many students confused about their options.

Students are doing shorter stints in post-secondary school and re-thinking traditional four-year schools for many reasons: rising housing costs (it's cheaper to live with mom and dad and go to the local community college); increasing tuition costs; rapidly changing job markets (if you go to school for four years to train in one profession, job require-

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ments in that profession are now likely to change significantly by the time you graduate); a basic ROI calculation (an accelerated, focused two to two and a half year program gets graduates out in the job market faster, enabling them to pay off their student loans sooner); and the increasing perceived irrelevance of the traditional liberal arts curriculum. Foreign students are also using shorter terms in non-traditional vocational or language schools in the U.S. as a springboard to traditional colleges and universities that are harder for them to get into from overseas.

### Focus on Job Skills and Results

Our research shows that most students are very focused on specific jobs after graduation, and their top priority is to acquire the skills necessary to land these jobs. This contributes to the loss of perceived value in a traditional liberal arts curriculum—what students and parents object to is generalized learning that is increasingly difficult to connect to real-world results. Many feel that the first two years of a traditional four-year program are often wasted in the student figuring out what he or she wants to study. Because of the high and increasing cost of all schools, private and public, most families are deciding that this no longer makes economic sense. Students are interested in acquiring skills that they can carry with them and build upon as they adapt to the changing work environment.

### Distance Learning

Distance learning is one of the recent developments with the most potential for both innovation and disruptive change in education. Distance learning programs are emerging as both stand-alone offerings and adjuncts to traditional campus-based education. Distance learning is also widely used for training purposes in businesses today—this body

of experience has informed the development of many levels of learning technologies. In addition to their core undergraduate, graduate, and even doctorate programs, many distance learning providers offer professional development programs for corporations.

Distance learning encompasses a wide range of options and configurations, with classes and instruction being delivered over the internet, television and videoconferencing, in both live and “asynchronous” sessions. Coursework is supplemented by telephone, email, and web contact. Instructors and students can work and collaborate over long distances, or short ones—at completely different campuses, partner facilities, or even different classrooms on the same campus.

### **Internationalization**

According to the International Association of Universities: “Internationalization is a process which integrates an international or intercultural dimension or perspective into the major functions of the universities, namely teaching, research, and service.”<sup>5</sup>

Higher education institutions play a key role in global economic development—as centers for research and development they help to create the conditions for globalization through technology, communications, and knowledge management, as well as studying the effects and impacts of

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globalization. Internationalization facilitates the increasing mobility of faculty, students, and curricula. It aids in the cooperation and sharing of research and development across international boundaries. It encourages understanding of cultural differences and similarities and an awareness of global interdependence. And it is consistent with the emergence of education services as an export commodity, allowing otherwise resource-poor countries to contribute knowledge and innovation to a global market.

### **Changing Nature of Work and Lifelong Learning**

The changing nature of work itself is having a significant impact on higher education institutions. The increasing pace and scope of technological change will continue to force education to adapt more rapidly to changes in the workforce. This is especially true in light of the fact that so much of the new economy is information based, and education is crucial in developing the critical thinking skills necessary for information processing. And constant change means lifelong learning—some researchers predict that the average worker in the next ten to twenty years will cycle through as many as six or seven careers sequentially. With this level of re-invention required of workers, the term “career” takes on an entirely different meaning today. The constant retraining this implies will certainly redefine the economic role of education. Our own research indicates that many students are much more focused on job skills for specific job descriptions than on any traditional notion of a “career.”

Urban development patterns will also continue to impact education delivery—building new schools in many new U.S. suburbs is no longer feasible because commute times are too long for many workers and students.

### **Partnerships and Collaboration**

New kinds of partnerships between corporations and educational institutions, both for-profit and non-profit are increasingly being viewed as a way to cut costs and develop innovative ways of managing resources. Collaboration among different higher education institutions is also a significant trend, again influenced by restraints on resources.

Many of the new partnerships are driven by what government sees as the role of education in workforce preparation. In this context, such partnerships can help meet the need for employees in employment sectors with the highest demand; provide access to continuous education and training for employees; provide access to faculty expertise for corporations; and allow postsecondary institutions to aid K-12 schools in preparing students to be better workers.<sup>6</sup>

### **Loss of U.S. Dominance in Science and Technology**

The United States has begun to see a loss in its dominance of science, technology and innovation. According to John E. Jankowski, a senior analyst at the National Science Foundation: “The rest of the world is catching up. Science excellence is no longer the domain of just the U.S.”<sup>7</sup> Key indicators of this trend are: a steep decline in the percentage of scientific papers published by the U.S., a decline in the percentage of awards, including Nobel prizes, won by U.S. scientists, and reduced federal funding for basic research and science. The American public is largely unaware of this decline and its implications for our national security, jobs, morale or cultural traditions.

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Much of the loss of U.S. dominance is the result of the global sharing of research and scientific data facilitated by improved information technology. But it is also the result of an overall decline in educational standards in the U.S. Other countries have invested proportionately higher amounts in their educational infrastructures and as a result are graduating more and more highly skilled technical workers who compete with American workers for increasingly sophisticated white collar jobs.

Today higher education institutions, private and public alike, face many pervasive problems in management and operations. The following is not a comprehensive account of these problems, but focuses on marketing and student relationship issues we've encountered in our research and work with different higher education institutions.

### **Student Information Overload**

A consistent problem in marketing educational institutions is the severe information overload that students are likely to experience when evaluating different institutions and education options. Our research clearly indicates that school websites are critical in establishing credibility and trust, and prospective students equate better websites with better schools. But students' efforts to evaluate large numbers of institutions on the internet also quickly leads to confusion and a lack of differentiation between schools.

We've found that one of the most important ways to address this issue is to train admissions representatives in consultative sales techniques that "cut through the clutter" and help the student to remember something distinctive about the school and consequently to make a better informed decision. Students evaluating schools are often in need of good advice and honest feedback, and frequently don't have all the information they need to make the right decision. By understanding and empathizing with the emotional state of students during the often stressful evaluation process, as well as providing the required information and "deliverables," admissions representatives become much more productive in enrollments.

### **Confusion in Categories and Standards**

Categories of higher education are being fragmented, diluted, and re-invented. A notable example is the University of Phoenix, which is probably in its own category altogether. While the traditional definition of a university as an institution that offers graduate courses and has physical campuses applies to UOP, the similarities end there. They provide extensive distance learning programs, bricks-and-mortar campus-based programs, and programs that are a hybrid of the two. According to their website,

University of Phoenix is the largest accredited university in the U.S.

Many other non-traditional private institutions now also use the term "university," in an effort to confer respectability, so that the term is now acquiring a new significance and meaning to students.

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The emergence of so many new categories of institutions has created considerable confusion among students about course credit standards. Students have trouble transferring credits between different kinds of institutions. According to Beth Buchanan, executive director of the Center for Workforce Preparation at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, testifying before the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee earlier this year: "These multiple definitions are confusing and fail to recognize the maturation of for-profit institutions and their contributions. These distinctions also limit the ability of students to transfer credits they earn at for-profit institutions to other institutions. If students are required to retake courses, the cost of education increases."<sup>8</sup>

### **Inconsistency in Marketing**

Because of a limited access to effective research, strategic planning, and marketing methodologies in the quest for students, most educational institutions don't understand their competitive positioning from the most important viewpoint—that of prospective students. They're too busy react-

ing to the rapidly changing environment rather than focusing on their core competencies and competitive advantages, thus their marketing and admissions programs are inconsistent and fragmented. Admissions representatives, executive management, marketing staff, and others often don't convey a consistent, compelling message about the institution to prospective students, parents, or the rest of the outside world. The result is a lack of differentiation and missed enrollment opportunities.

### **Admissions (Sales) and “SRM”**

We use the term “Student Relationship Management” to refer to the admissions process, adapted from “Customer Relationship Management” or CRM. A school's relationship with a student begins before the student has direct contact with the school—it starts when he or she becomes aware of the school through referral by friends or through direct marketing, and begins to develop impressions and opinions of the school and expectations of quality and service.

***Our research shows that a student's relationship with the admissions representative is the single biggest factor that influences his or her choice of a school during the evaluation phase.***

Our research indicates that many schools do a poor job of admissions (or sales) in the crucial initial evaluation phase, when students gather information from different schools in order to make a decision on which to attend. This information gathering and decision process is usually difficult and fraught with anxiety for both parents and students. The stakes are high, time is short, and the potential financial commitment daunting. Admissions representatives often fail to make a personal connection with a student during this process, despite the fact that the value of the “sale” per student can be as high as \$150,000 or more. If automobile salesmen performed as poorly as some of the admissions

representatives we've encountered in our research, the U.S. economy would be severely impacted—far fewer people would buy cars. This situation is exacerbated by some of the more prestigious schools, who traditionally project and cultivate an image of exclusivity that actively discourages most students from applying.

Our research shows that a student's relationship with the admissions representative is the single biggest factor that influences his or her choice of a school during the evaluation phase. Students want to be able to talk to one point person, get answers to difficult questions, and generally feel that they are being listened to. Schools that are able to make an emotional connection to prospective students through their admissions representatives have a decisive advantage in enrollment.

### **Attrition**

One reason for attrition in many higher education institutions is a high student to teacher ratio, and the corresponding lack of individual attention that students experience. If students feel ignored or not listened to, they now have many different educational options and an increasing number of different specialized providers—they'll move on and try something more suited to their needs. Traditional liberal arts programs also suffer attrition when they provide little or no guidance to students in selecting a career-track course load. Higher education institutions today need to monitor students' needs regularly, and adapt their admissions, curricula and student services to be more responsive to an increasingly sophisticated and diverse student base.

### **Staff Quality and Turnover**

The culture of educational institutions has historically been constructed around a value system that is arguably the antithesis of professionalism, thus many schools are staffed by individuals who are not necessarily qualified to perform the kinds of administrative, technical, and marketing functions that institutions now increasingly need in order to stay competitive. Part of the reason for this is that schools often hire from an available pool of students, who must usually work in order to support their education. The transient

nature of the student workforce and their low level of professional skills result in a high staff turnover rate that further taxes the resources of the institutions, requiring more HR efforts and constant retraining.

### **Decreasing Marketing Budgets**

Many institutions suffer from a low awareness in their market areas because of lack of knowledge of or expertise in marketing in general and because of a lack of understanding their competitive differentiation. Most institutions must now do more with less, and attract increasing numbers of students with decreasing marketing resources. This makes it all the more urgent to target students effectively with the correct marketing messages about difference, benefits, credibility, and return on investment. Schools are increasingly turning to customer research to provide the qualitative and quantitative data that can improve the effectiveness of marketing and admissions.

### **Lag Behind Industry Development**

Despite the adoption of enabling technologies, the organizational infrastructures inherent in traditional higher education make it almost impossible to develop relevant curricula at the same pace that technology impacts the job market. New job descriptions appear (and disappear) almost overnight—this will continue to have a disruptive effect on higher education for the foreseeable future. Students must now learn how to retrain rapidly and often, as well as how to collaborate effectively in highly specialized, project-focused teams. New definitions of learning and job training are emerging.

### **Student Financing**

Middle and low-income students are increasingly unable to afford higher education, and the ratio of loans to grants in education has quadrupled in the last five years. According to Education Week: “The average tuition and fees at public four-year institutions recently increased by 14 percent, from \$4,115 in 2002-03 to \$4,694 in 2003-04 (College Board, 2003). To help offset these rising costs, the U.S. Department of Education provides over \$40 billion a year in grants, loans, and work-study assistance to students pursuing a col-

lege education. Federal aid represents the largest source of student aid in the nation and over 40 percent of all undergraduates benefited from it in the 1999-2000 school year (U.S. Department of Education, Digest of Education Statistics, 2002).”<sup>9</sup> The Princeton Review puts the average private college cost at \$27,000 a year in 2004, increasing at an average rate of 5% a year over the next fifteen years.<sup>10</sup>

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This has many widespread effects on students across the entire economic spectrum, although a proportionately higher percentage of minority and disadvantaged students are adversely affected. Because of the federal aid programs are available only to accredited schools, many private and for-profit schools, or new innovative schools awaiting accreditation must lower admissions standards in order to survive.

### **ROI and Value**

Few educational institutions are willing to demonstrate clear and compelling evidence for students’ (and parents’) basic return on their investment for education. Our research shows that this is becoming an increasingly crucial calculation, since costs per student for an undergraduate education at a traditional four-year college can be almost as high as the cost of the median home price in the U.S.

Two key factors that influence value perceptions are length of programs and job placement rates. Accelerated programs, in which four-year curricula are delivered in two and a half years or less by eliminating summer vacations and other “dead” time, are attractive because students are out in the work force putting their skills to use sooner. Schools with good industry connections benefit from high placement rates for graduates, as well as the positive influence that

industry can have on keeping curriculum development current and relevant.

**Increased Competition**

Students today are becoming more astute and demanding in what they require from higher education providers, and they will gravitate toward institutions that are more adaptable to economic, technological, social and political change, and that give them the marketable skills they need to become and stay productively employed. Competition among higher education providers is increasing on many levels—there is increased specialization and more technology that delivers education faster and more collaboratively across distances. And new kinds of institutions are emerging that are more responsive to rapid technological change and its impact on how we learn.

Higher education institutions of all kinds must take full advantage of new research, marketing, curriculum development and strategic planning methodologies in order to adapt, compete, and evolve.

Customer research has emerged as a powerful strategic tool for higher education institutions to address the challenges they face today. According to Shanda Diehl, Manager of Institutional Research for Spokane Falls Community College: “Colleges like ours really value research as a basis for deciding what services and modes of instruction benefit the student the most.” Reduced resources for marketing and admissions operations for many schools mean that the resources that are deployed must be more effective and give a better return. The best way to achieve this return is through the use of targeted qualitative customer research, analysis and strategic planning. The following are some of the salient impacts and benefits of research and planning.

### **Support for fact-based decisions**

Brand and customer relationship issues are often referred to as “intangibles,” but in fact are tangible and measurable with emerging, proven methodologies. Targeted, contextual research on how students view your school against competing options provides the facts necessary for making strategic decisions about marketing, admissions, student services, and curriculum development.

### **Dramatic improvements in admissions productivity**

The initial evaluation phase with admissions representatives is a crucial factor in students’ choice of schools. One-on-one in-depth research with students uncovers hidden attitudes and experiences that provide a deeper understanding of how prospective students experience admissions.

### **Correlation with other research and testing**

Quantitative surveys, interviews with student service and admissions representatives, and other forms of secondary research and testing can be correlated very effectively with qualitative primary brand and student service research.

### **Improved competitive positioning**

The public’s image of the value of higher education is changing significantly. Schools that have data that help them understand how this change is occurring and how it applies to their own specific markets have a considerable advantage in building competitive positionings.

### **Improved ROI from marketing, increased enrollment**

Research provides a better understanding of brand character and emotional drivers of choice. Students tend to make their initial “purchasing” choice of a school for emotional reasons, then validate the decision with practical reasons. A school’s brand personality plays a decisive role in students’ ability to form an initial emotional connection to it.

### **Better curriculum development decisions**

When curriculum development is more focused on what students perceive to be direct benefits, especially as they relate to job skills, schools can operate on a more student-centric basis. In-depth qualitative research with students adds a new level of awareness of student needs that greatly improves the curriculum development process.

### **New curriculum ideas and creative content for marketing communications**

Students’ spontaneous comments made during interviews almost always provide compelling testimonials and uncover unexpected new ideas that can be used in creative marketing communications and curriculum development.

### **Increased market share, better returns from current market share**

Higher education institutions today have a critical need to establish compelling positioning and competitive advantages in an environment that is undergoing rapid and far-reaching transformation. Knowing how students currently see your school helps you to build on its strengths in creating a strong competitive positioning for the future.

Institutions that invest in ongoing research with students and learn to integrate findings with marketing and admissions operations acquire an automatic evolutionary advantage that allows them to survive and prosper in a changing and often chaotic economic and social environment. Higher education today is being radically redefined. Research establishes a dialog with students that allows institutions to be more productive, responsive, and resilient.

Developing and implementing long term research and strategic marketing has many implications for institutions. New thinking is necessary, and change is a given. The goal is ultimately to become “student-centric,”—this may mean reorienting some of the basic functions of institutions. Fortunately, research clarifies the purpose of implementing changes, as it identifies the positive attributes that are shared by people both inside and outside the institution, enabling a uniform sense of identity.

**Commitment to Consistency**

Research results in a distillation of the perceptions and images of a school that are most shared by a carefully selected sample group. The “common denominator” of these perceptions is usually referred to as the brand. Building the brand involves understanding the core messaging that most resonates with the market, and applying this messaging consistently over an extended period of time, so that the correct impressions are reinforced. Despite the seemingly ever-increasing speed and fluidity of communications, brands still require months and years to build.

**Managing Change**

Customer research often uncovers attitudes and information from students, parents, staff, employers, and others that indicate the need for institutional change. Things that worked well five or ten years ago may not work in the future. Or they may still be effective despite an internal perception to the contrary. By providing ongoing empirical data about students’ needs, attitudes, and behavior, customer research can help institutions assess the extent of required change and its impacts.

**Assigning Responsibility for Branding and SRM**

In order to effect the consistency required to build an enduring brand, responsibility for keeping the brand “on message” should be assigned to one person or small group. Student relationship management is informed by the brand and also reinforces it, so everyone in the organization who comes in contact with students or the public should have a clear understanding of the brand as reflected in students’ perceptions and needs.

**Allocating Adequate Resources**

Institutional brands are built through marketing communications and student relationship management. Research and subsequent strategy recommendations won’t be effective without devoting adequate resources for their implementation in marketing and admissions operations. This may require increasing budgets or finding ways to do more for less. While this is often difficult to do today, good research is invaluable in optimizing investment in marketing and admissions.

**Shared Vision and Strategy**

Higher education institutions, like all organizations, operate most effectively when an underlying vision is well understood and shared with members and the constituencies they serve. The strategy that is developed to realize the vision also must be shared within the organization. The role of customer research is to gauge how vision resonates with the marketplace and whether the organization sees itself as customers and constituents see it. Research can also suggest ways to revise the vision or communicate it to customers more effectively.

Global technological, economic, and political changes are redefining the role of higher education in our world cultures, but educational institutions can remain driving forces in innovation and knowledge development. Higher education institutions can adapt and thrive by utilizing innovative new methods of research and development that connect them more closely with their core constituency—students.

**For more information**

For detailed information on our research and strategy solutions, please contact us at:

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### Notes

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