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Why Clusters: Branding, Uniqueness, Identity and Reputation

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Why Clusters: Branding, Uniqueness, Identity and Reputation

August 10th, 2016 by Don Birx

We dealt tangentially with branding, uniqueness, identity, and reputation in the last blog post on student success and its role in attracting and retaining students who want to come to Plymouth State. But creating a unique identity has importance in many domains. Plymouth State used to be known as a teachers college and somewhat later it became known for training in business. When we became a college, then a university and finally a regional comprehensive university, we lost not only our focus and uniqueness, but we lost our potential students', parents' and communities' understanding of what we were about and how we had been known. We tried to be like everyone else, and in doing so risked losing how we were viewed and what had made us special.

This couldn't have come at a more difficult time because higher education in general was being challenged nationally in perception by businesses, taxpayers and state, federal and local governments. We began to hear a lot of talk about outcomes, metrics, career relevance and high costs. Underlying this was the sense that students were not getting the type of education they needed to succeed in a global economy. In some sense, they had a point, but there is also the sense that we, in higher education, may have not communicated in a coherent and focused way what we were doing and why it has huge impact on our land nationally and regionally. Moreover, the diagnosis and remedies suggested, in my view, missed the mark and have spurred policy shifts and involvement that ultimately could be destructive (e.g. look at the impact on K-12) to higher education.

What are we attempting here at PSU?

Is it not that we want to give our students an educational experience that is unique and different than what they'd get elsewhere – an educational experience that is built on the roots of what PSU has always been about and which integrates the liberal arts into connected programs of study that enables students to excel in a complex interdisciplinary world?

Plymouth State has never been just a generic milieu of programs, so why not present ourselves in a way that tells others what is unique and wonderful about PSU? That is what integrated clusters are about. Clusters give us the focus and coherence that has been missing in our messaging and highlights a key long-term strength of PSU – our interdisciplinary and integrated approach to education. It also leverages our location and regional strengths. This is not something that came from me, it is something PSU has always had, but clusters provide a way to highlight and message it. So we have organized our marketing materials and our funding requests around our seven clusters. How we market to students, businesses, governments, taxpayers, and donors is now being based on our uniqueness and national strengths not our sameness to everyone else. How can that not be a better way to view this great university that we are so proud to be part of?

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Current Weather in Plymouth



Mostly Cloudy. Temperature: 43;

Wind: WNW at 3; Conditions as of Wed Feb 08 at 04:00 PM EST courtesy of *The PSU Weather Center*

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