National survey of colleges reveals importance of branding, creating community

February 24 2010, By Angela Yeager

A national survey of large and small colleges and universities aimed at identifying brand connection and affinity among alumni shows that while size may matter, large public universities can compete on the same playing field as a small, private college.

A new paper by Jim McAlexander and Hal Koenig, both marketing professors in Oregon State University's College of Business, explores brand community in different settings in higher education. The research is in a future issue of the *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education*.

"The ability to build affinity, by making connections and creating a community, is an inherent advantage that small colleges have over large ones," McAlexander said. "What we found though is that while affinity scores overall are lower among alumni of larger schools, there are large schools that get it right."

More than 2,000 alumni of colleges and universities from all 50 states and the District of Columbia were surveyed by OSU's Close to the Customer Project, which is directed by McAlexander and Koenig. The Close to the Customer Project provides professional market research and consulting services delivered by faculty and student teams.

Based on the "brand community" model that McAlexander and Koenig had developed in earlier research, they measure four customer-centric relationships: alumni's assessment of their education's impact upon their life, their connection to the institution's identity, their feelings about

interactions with the institution and the degree to which they value relationships with their alumni peers.

McAlexander and Koenig developed the brand community model after working with companies in the private sector such as Harley-Davidson and Chrysler Corporation and publishing much-cited research that outlined the critical components of these "brand communities." Now they have extended that scholarly work to higher education.

The researchers found that alumni of smaller schools tended to have more positive feelings about their education than those at large schools. However, they found no evidence that alumni had stronger or weaker connections to the school's brand based on institution size, nor did alumni from smaller schools report having more interaction with other alumni.

The data also showed that alums of larger colleges and universities were more likely to desire logo clothing, and were more likely to encourage friends and family members to attend their alma mater.

"Our survey shows that there are large institutions that do well, and can accomplish the same affinity you find in small private colleges," McAlexander said. "Those that create this sense of community and build affinity have an advantage over their peers."

McAlexander said the type of information that the Close to the Customer Project is able to obtain is essential for alumni associations, foundations and advancement offices of universities.

"We can find out where the deficits are, where connections can improve," he said. "Reciprocity is important in a time of strained budgets and limited state resources. We know that alumni want to feel like their alma mater cares - they want that connection."

McAlexander said OSU's Close to the Customer Project has launched a service called Building Community Initiative to help university philanthropic organizations build these important connections and identify ways to make alumni relations and giving stronger. For information, go to www.oregonstate.edubci

Provided by Oregon State University