

Defining Your Brand: 10 key components

1. Assets. First, take stock of your assets. What parts of your brand have you already built equity in? Assets can include your school seal, colors, motto, positioning statement, mission statement, etc.

2. Positioning statement. A positioning statement is a short statement (1–3 sentences) that differentiates your institution from other schools. If your school hasn't already written its positioning statement, this is the best place to start. For example, your statement may position your institution as "an all-boys school in New Hampshire for grades 9–12 that prepares students to meet the challenges of the world's best colleges."

3. Brand attributes. Using your positioning statement as a guide, list your institution's brand attributes, or distinctive characteristics. From the example above, you can pull the following attributes: New Hampshire location, high school, all-boys and college-preparatory academics.

4. Mission. Your mission statement explains your purpose, or the school's reason for being, such as, "to prepare dynamic leaders who will change the world." Build your brand with your institution's mission in mind. Continue to compile your list of brand attributes by pulling from your mission (e.g., dynamic, leadership, global reach, etc.).

5. Myths (misperceptions). If you haven't clearly defined and communicated your brand, your audiences may harbor myths about your institution. Students may not know that one of your school's strengths is its athletic program; or they may think that your institution is antiquated or too easy or too hard. Include these myths in your foundation document, then develop key messages to set the record straight.

6. Promise. Use the following prompt to outline your institution's promise to your students: "[Our college/university/school] is a place where students..." What will students achieve and learn at your institution? Use your mission to shape your promise. We recommend that you define 5–7 promises.

7. Experience. Which specific experiences at your institution support your promises and your mission? Examples include: signature programs, study abroad, integrated day/boarding experience, etc.

8. Traditions. Which experiences at your school are distinctly yours? Perhaps the president of your university interviews students before they graduate to ask them how they would improve the university; or all faculty dress in matching purple shirts and pitch in on move-in day. These unique traditions will differentiate you and go a long way toward establishing your unique brand.

9. Key messages. Your key messages—or strong, specific statements about your institution—are the most important component of your brand. These messages will dispel common myths, support your promise and define the experience at your school—differentiating your institution from your competitors. We recommend that you determine 5–7 focused, key messages.

10. Publication priorities. A newly defined brand can at first seem daunting to execute. By prioritizing your communications efforts, committing them to paper and assigning tasks, you'll not only make it easier on yourself, but you'll also ensure that the necessary steps are taken to build and communicate a solid brand for your institution.

Your brand is dynamic. It will have to evolve as the world changes. This foundation document, "Defining Your Brand," should be reviewed and updated on a regular basis to ensure that you are keeping up with the evolution of your institution.