

Transformational Change in Higher Education

A case study at Nova Southeastern University

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Nova Southeastern University (NSU) in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, is one of the healthiest colleges you've probably never heard of. NSU has more than 28,000 students, is the sixth largest independent university in America, and has net assets exceeding \$383,000,000 including a nearly \$50,000,000 endowment.

Clearly, NSU is doing something right -- there aren't many academic institutions with numbers like NSU's. Unfortunately what has worked so well in NSU's past could undermine NSU's future.

Successful silos

NSU was founded in 1964 by, according to NSU's president, Ray Ferrero, Jr., J.D, "A progressive group of men and women united to establish an academic institution that would break new ground in educational excellence and community service."

Those progressive men and women obviously succeeded beyond the dreams of most college administrators anywhere. And all college administrators should learn what may be the key to NSU's success: The university operates on a performance-based budgeting system. In other words, the best-performing schools and colleges get the most funding.

This was the path set by NSU's second president, Dr. Abraham Fischler, who used the "Harvard Model" of decentralization in which "every tub (school) sat on its own bottom." During rough times, when NSU had very limited resources, this model fostered an extremely competitive environment across all of the schools and colleges. But it also created silos.

Dr. Fischler's vision effectively guided the university throughout its initial growth stages, but the silo effect undermines a unified institutional brand.

Branding

"For the past decade, we've been focused on improving the curricula throughout our programs -- building the technological and campus infrastructures and expanding the student population," says Dr. Frank DePiano, vice president of academic affairs at NSU. "We are at the point of our evolution where we are able to focus on building a stronger NSU brand through the unification of our people."

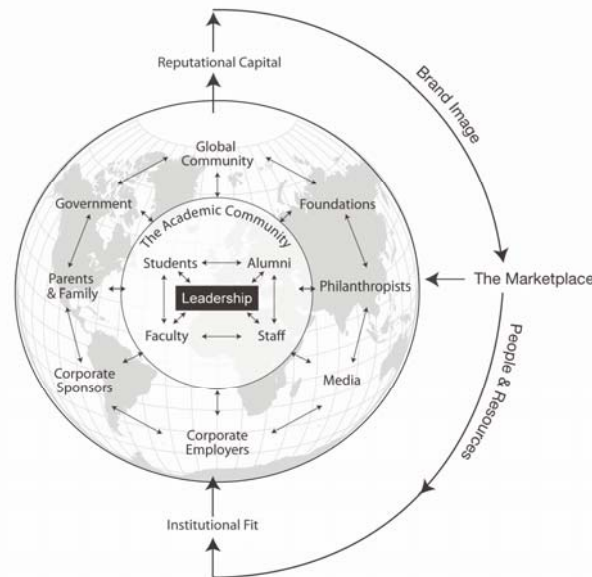
And NSU desperately needs a stronger brand. That's not at all unusual in academia, and many college administrations are going to great lengths -- even changing their universities' names -- to create a stronger brand image.

But President Ferrero wasn't even sure how the NSU brand image is seen. "Understanding how we are perceived internally and externally based on the quality education we provide is what matters to us," he says. "If we don't believe and perceive ourselves in such a way that reflects our reality, how will we ever convince the outside world?"

To determine the difference between perception and reality, NSU asked its constituent groups what they thought. Working in collaboration with The Gallup Poll, NSU assessed everyone who impacted the vibrancy of the culture and economic health of the institution -- the students, faculty, staff, leadership, board of trustee members, alumni, as well as the general population. In this way, NSU could get a read on internal and external perceptions.

But it also netted NSU the objective data it needed to begin to unify the university. "A holistic approach provides greater insight than measuring ourselves in the mono-focused manner in which we're accustomed to," says Dr. Ron Chenail, vice president of institutional effectiveness at NSU.

"Historically, we have measured student engagement across a few of our academic units," Chenail says. "We had never taken a concurrent measurement of all the key constituents such as faculty, staff, students, and alumni across the university, which has proved to us that a centralized approach definitely provides much greater value. Through this centralized approach, our level of understanding is enhanced and our level of research is, too."

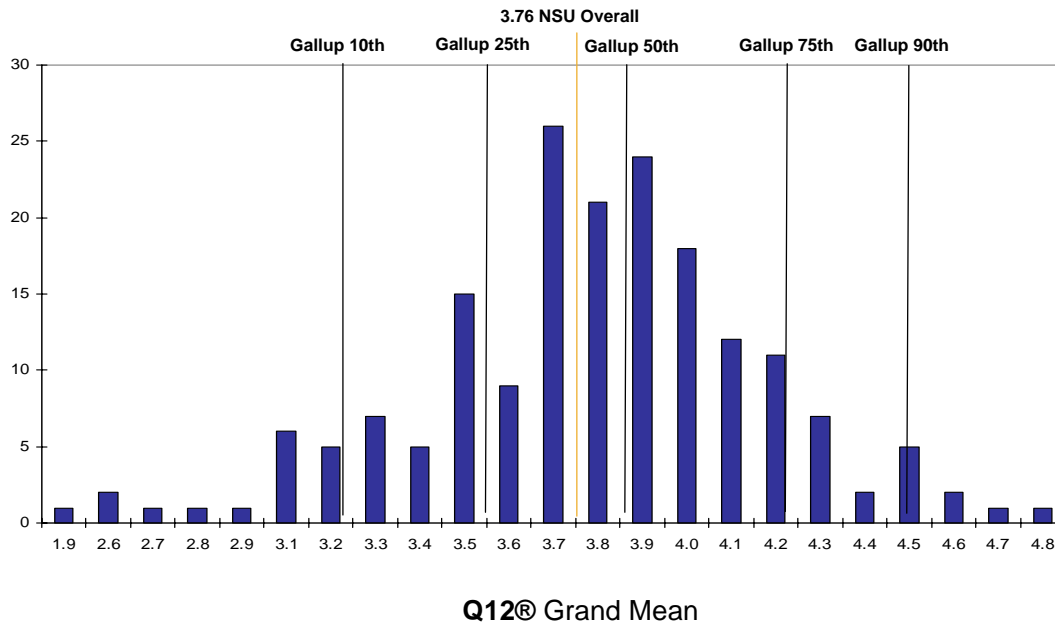


The data had a few other benefits as well. Chief among them was that it allowed the university to implement a HumanSigma leadership performance process.

"HumanSigma" is a methodology that assesses, manages, and improves the employee-consumer -- or in this case, university-student -- relationship. It boosts financial performance, often dramatically, which is what it was designed to do. But it also turns up a lot of organizational information that would have been otherwise invisible, such as work-unit level variability and the impact employee engagement has on student engagement.

Hidden pockets of excellence

Uneven performance distribution costs organizations millions of dollars every year, and there's more variation than almost anyone expects. It's not unusual for a HumanSigma assessment to uncover variability ranging from above the 90th percentile to below the 10th percentile, in comparison to Gallup's global database of work units.



NSU is no exception. The university's work-unit variability ranged from the 3rd percentile to the 96th percentile. Knowing which departments hide their light beneath a bushel -- and those hiding something else entirely -- permits NSU to fix what needs to be fixed. "Gaining objective data at the work-unit level provides us with the granular information necessary to make incremental improvements throughout NSU," says Dr. George Hanbury, executive vice president and chief operating officer at NSU. "We expect the cumulative impact of this change to be significant."

So far, however, the change has been more transformative than incremental. Any NSU work unit that receives an employee and/or student engagement scorecard is required to formulate a commitment plan to foster improvements through collaborative efforts. The commitment plans are centralized in a web-based portal, and NSU's office of institutional effectiveness is monitoring the execution of these plans.

Institutional effectiveness is also analyzing them -- NSU wants to know where the work-units are focusing their attention. The next assessment administration (October 2008) will provide NSU with a "Time One" versus "Time Two" comparison to understand where, if, and how much these work units have improved in comparison to their constituent engagement goals. And that's also an excellent way to dismantle the silos that stood in the way of overall school unity.

Engagement

It could be argued that there is no more predictive measure of university success than student engagement. That's because engaged students do invaluable things for academia -- they tend to remain in school and graduate at higher levels, become advocates for the institution, become engaged alumni that contribute dollars, and later send their own children to their alma mater.

Decades of Gallup research with millions of people, however, shows that the only way to create sustainable engagement in a consumer group is to sustainably engage employees. The university's HumanSigma research indicated that things are no different at NSU.

"Constituent relationships are pivotal to our success," says Hanbury. "The three schools that have the highest employee engagement also have the highest student engagement. This isn't a coincidence." In fact, student poll results show that student/faculty interactions influence student well-being more than any other factor.

Not only will organically grown student and employee engagement attract and keep students and employees, it also provides a basis for NSU's brand. And that was one of the university's primary concerns.

Back to the brand

Nova Southeastern University has gone to vast lengths to build its brand. And with startling efficiency, NSU has also found a way to work several other critical measures -- engagement, work performance, HumanSigma -- in to the effort. But one of the most innovative ways NSU has chosen to build its brand is with *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, the bible of academia.

In fact, NSU is the first institution ever to leverage the branding aspect of the alliance between *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and The Gallup Poll. NSU will measure their brand, via The Chronicle/Gallup Panel (www.chroniclepoll.com), on both national and state levels.

"Understanding the differences between state and national perceptions will provide greater insights as to which messages to broadcast nationally based on the strengths of our state-level brand image," says David Dawson, executive director of marketing at NSU.

"And utilizing *The Chronicle of Higher Education* to help broadcast the right NSU messages throughout academe will help attract the right administrators and faculty we need to support our growth, while helping to improve the peer review ratings for the *U.S. News and World Report* rankings."

But meanwhile, NSU is still doing the hard work of growing a university. Unlike many organizations of any kind, it has honestly and successfully sought out information that might not be flattering -- the authentic perceptions of its constituents, the performance variability of its work units, the genuine engagement levels of its employees and students. More importantly, NSU is working to find and implement the most effective methods of improving itself in every venue.

This is not an easy process, nor is it painless. But it does fulfill the school's founding mission -- "to establish an academic institution that would break new ground in educational excellence," as NSU's president, Ray Ferrero, Jr., put it. NSU is unquestionably breaking new ground. And if its efforts are successful, Nova Southeastern University may grow to have the healthiest academic brand image you've ever heard of.