



A PRELIMINARY PERSPECTIVE FOR MARKETING

COASTLINE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

VERSION 1.0

APRIL 27, 2017

CAVEAT

This analysis and proposal is written from an outsider's perspective. There are undoubtedly reasons for the current structure and actions of the college that are not yet known to the author; that lack of knowledge will impact the information and ideas presented herein. However, looking at the organization with fresh eyes provides an opportunity for introspection and the consideration of new ideas and new approaches that might be more effective and helpful.

SITUATION ANALYSIS

Background

Originally developed as a "college without walls" in the mid-1970s, Coastline's mission was to provide college-level education to students outside a traditional classroom setting. The college successfully produced texts and course content for distance learners, and also sold those products to peer institutions throughout the U.S. Over time, Coastline's offerings grew to include business training (corporate education not leading to a degree), military personnel, and incarcerated students.

As technology evolved, so too did competition for these distant learners. Online education is now widely available, both through traditional higher ed institutions and through a myriad of for-profit and not-for-profit entities solely focused on delivering online learning. Coastline also evolved, and now offers traditional classroom-based courses at three

widely dispersed campuses in Orange County.

Strengths / Opportunities

Coastline provides students with a variety of academic options, ranging from career and technical education to programs that lead to a transferrable associate's degree. This spectrum of offerings ensures that Coastline has the ability to respond to the educational needs of almost any prospective student. It is an excellent resource for individuals seeking to pursue higher education in a personalized, affordable, and easily accessible way. Students can access Coastline through a variety of modalities, and campus locations are convenient and student friendly.

These strengths position Coastline to take advantage of future opportunities. The rising cost of higher education, for example, will increasingly draw attention to the extraordinary value inherent in community colleges. As that conversation begins, Coastline can tout both its spectrum of courses and the diverse ways in which students can pursue an affordable education at Coastline. Even now, this could be an important selling point for tiger parents who might appreciate the logic of sending their children to community college for two years at a fraction of four-year university rates.

Coastline's adoption of the Coastline Promise is another opportunity that will help distinguish the college from the competition and build awareness of the institution. Promoting the Promise needs to be part of the college's constant message—it is evidence of Coastline's commitment to its communities, to making education

affordable to everyone, and to the future success of its students.

Weaknesses / Threats

While Coastline prides itself on its commitment to innovation and adaptation, the college's system of shared governance impacts its ability to react quickly to the marketplace, and inhibits the opportunistic adoption and promotion of new programs that might enhance Coastline's reputation in the community.

Additionally, the college's growth and evolution has created a culture of multiplicity. There seems to be a plethora of projects that aren't clearly articulated as part of a comprehensive whole. While these programs and offerings are undoubtedly helpful, they sometimes seem ancillary to the primary objective of student education or, worse, create a silo perspective that focuses on the success of that unit without considering the broader impact on the entire organization. There is a sense that the left hand doesn't know what the right hand is doing...or simply doesn't care.

Today, Coastline faces significant competition in the online education marketplace. Many of these competitors have deep marketing budgets and are aggressively promoting their programs to the same audience of prospective students that Coastline needs to convert. This should be a source of significant concern to the college, since more than three-quarters of our student body are primarily online students. The erosion of that base to competitors would have a seriously negative impact on the college's growth and funding.

From an organization/department perspective, it seems that institutional constituents view the marketing function as a fulfillment house rather than as a strategic planning and implementation partner. This fosters a perception of "want" versus "need." That is, clients are asking marketing to produce what they want, rather than engaging with marketing to explain what they need and allow marketing to recommend strategies and tactics to address that need. Changing that culture of demand/respond will be extraordinarily challenging. Campus clients may perceive marketing as denying requests and obstructing activities rather than helping to achieve a more effective marketing approach.¹

OBSERVATIONS ON THE COASTLINE BRAND

Before the college can begin to market itself effectively, it must first agree on what is being marketed. That is, *what is Coastline Community College?* Can the college define itself in a way that resonates with prospective and current students?

The challenge is to explain Coastline using an external perspective, rather than as the sum of all its parts. The college is not, in other words, EOPS, or MECTBD, or Student Life. It is not individual programs, specific classes, or support services. Those are the components of who Coastline is. Neither should the college use delivery modalities as a description or definition. Internally, Coastline might identify "online" or "distance learning" or "campus centers"

as organizational verticals, but to prospects and students those are merely the ways in which the product (education) is distributed. Consider: Would Ford ever define itself as “assembly line” or “showroom”? Of course not. Rather, it markets the end result of those activities. So too should Coastline focus on defining itself by outcome rather than by modalities or individual courses. To understand this shift of focus, it might be especially helpful to view higher education as a horizontal organization, with various components intersecting with the vertical production process. (See for example Illustration B).

To appreciate how challenging it might be to market Coastline right now, try to explain the college to someone unfamiliar with the institution and watch how quickly the conversation spirals into confusion. The discussion will likely leave the listener scratching his/her head in puzzlement.

- “So...you’re like the University of Phoenix?”
- “So...you provide online classes for military personnel. And employee training for corporations and businesses. And CD/DVD courses for prisoners. But I thought you said you were a community college?”
- “So...you’re a community college...but you have three different campuses...so I might have to drive all around Orange County to take my classes?”
- “So...you’re a college. That’s cool. Where’s your student center? Do you have a performing arts center? Where’s your athletics fields?”
- “You do career and technical education? So you’re a vocational school?”

- “Wait...how many degrees do you offer? I thought community colleges could only offer associate degrees.”
- “What’s a ‘certificate’? What good does that do me?”

Clearly, Coastline has an identity crisis. Is it an online school? A brick-and-mortar school? A distance learning school? Is it a college focused on academic degrees and transferrable education? Or corporate training and military education? Or careers and technical training?

Unfortunately, the current answer to all those questions is “yes.” Coastline is an amalgamation of modalities providing educational resources to a spectrum of audiences. In other words, right now, Coastline is a conglomerate.ⁱⁱ

So how do we generate awareness of a conglomerate, with a very limited budget? Perhaps the better question is: *Should* we attempt to generate awareness of the conglomerate, or should our marketing efforts be focused solely on key product lines?

Let’s take a different perspective. From the prospective student’s viewpoint, s/he is less concerned about the ways in which the outcome is delivered than s/he is with the outcome itself. That is, the prospect is looking for an entity that can provide accessible and affordable education, which ultimately leads to a better standard of living. When viewed through that lens, Coastline’s amalgamation of modalities becomes a selling point! It suggests an organization so focused on producing positive outcomes for its customers that it willingly develops and implements a variety

of delivery methods to ensure students achieve success.

This then becomes a marketable differentiator for the Coastline brand, and can also serve as a guiding principle in processes and programs developed within the organization. It can be manifest in the Coastline Promise, in the Guided Pathways, in the Student Success Center, and in our manifest willingness to take education to our student populations (in Westminster, Garden Grove, and Newport Beach) rather than requiring that they come to a single central location.

Because audiences quickly tune out any response that requires a lengthy explanation in today's over-communicated world, defining Coastline by the sum of its parts will never be simple enough to engage their interest. Instead, the college must consistently define itself from the perspective of the prospect: What's in it for me?

Fortunately, Coastline has a brilliant answer: *Coastline is focused on your success.*

We define our self not by the components we've created, but by our ability to configure those components in ways that ensure success for our students and alumni.

- Do you want a low-cost but almost surefire way to get into the CSU or UC systems? We can help you succeed.
- Are you looking for additional education to improve your career opportunities? We have certificate programs that can help you succeed.
- Are you looking for a stable career with good earnings potential that doesn't

require a university degree? We can help you succeed.

- Are you a student with special needs? Someone unfamiliar with the rigors of college who needs additional assistance? Someone seeking ways to earn a degree without racking up considerable debt? We can help you succeed.
- Are you eager to get through your first two years of higher education as quickly as possible? We can help you succeed.
- Are you working and need to earn your degree online? We can help you succeed.

Our emphasis as a learning community needs to be on our commitment to helping our students succeed at their goals and objectives. The lens through which we view our self needs to be less that of siloed offerings and more that of a broad continuum of services, ready to assist each student to succeed in his or her lifelong goals. Our message must be clear and consistent:

If you want to succeed in life—regardless of where you're at physically, mentally or geographically; or what you want to become; or how you define success—Coastline is here to help you achieve that success.

We fulfill that promise by the programs and services we offer – everything from EOPS and Financial Aid and Special Services, to fully online degrees and dispersed campus locations and transfer-enabled courses. Our prospective students don't care where these resources are located within the organization. They only care that Coastline has resources—multiple and varied and

intensive resources—ready to help Coastline students and alumni succeed!

That focus also helps refine our marketing approach. Our consistent advertising message will center on student success. Our public relations and press releases will emphasize the efforts we're implementing to ensure student success. Our blog posts and social media content will feature stories of student and alumni success. And, while it's too late to make substantive changes to the new Coastline website, the next iteration of that marketing tool should be developed with a focus on helping prospective students, current students, and alumni achieve success.

STRATEGIES AND TACTICS

Given limited financial and human resources for marketing purposes, it might be wise to consider a “divide and conquer” approach for generating awareness of Coastline and its programs. This strategy would focus the majority of resources on generating higher volumes of inquiries for application/enrollment, and a lower percentage on building general awareness of Coastline.

Further, because the marketing budget is tight, the “divide and conquer” approach would also recommend focusing on a specific geographic area rather than casting a wide (but thin) net over the college's entire district. Targeting a five-mile radius around the Newport Beach campus in FY17-18, and a similar radius around the Westminster campus the following year, will generate more awareness of Coastline over time than

would otherwise be feasible with this marketing budget.



There are three broad media opportunities for marketing tactics: paid, produced, and owned.

Paid media tactics in the very competitive Newport Beach market can quickly eat through our limited budget, so advertising must focus on a younger audience and use unexpected and non-traditional media. A possible marketing calendar is attached as Appendix C.

Produced media relies on the efforts of marketing staff to generate awareness of the college through press releases, community relations activities, and—more important for our target audience—online content development and manipulation. Research shows that 18-29 year olds are not heavy consumers of traditional news; spending scarce time and resources on producing and distributing press releases will not create a connection with our target audience.

However, this same age group is a voracious

consumer of online information, preferring to “google it rather than know it.”

Consequently, efforts for generating awareness via produced media should focus on maintaining and updating information about the college wherever prospective students might be turning for information. A partial list of online sites might include:

- Wikipedia
- California Community Colleges (CCCO)
- College Board
- USNWR
- Niche.com
- CollegeSimply
- Petersons
- TheBestSchools

It’s important that Coastline present a consistent story across every platform, and that the information is frequently updated and refreshed. The content should always be outwardly focused, written from a student perspective, and emphasize the college’s commitment to student success.

Affordability and accessibility should also be featured, but lengthy lists of courses or of programs that showcases technology or activities that do not directly benefit student outcomes should be avoided.

In addition to these online information sites, prospective students will also use the college’s website and social media platforms to learn about the school and make a decision about attending. These *owned media* offer a strong opportunity for the college to put its best foot forward, and extraordinary effort and resources should be put towards that objective.

The college’s website, while undergoing a critical update within the next eight weeks,

will still need significant improvement to position Coastline successfully against its competitors. The next iteration of the website should allow viewers to identify their particular focus (prospective student, current student, alumni, faculty/staff, and/or community) and then be directed into a site that specifically addresses that perspective. Excellent examples of that approach can be seen at:

- Bucknell.edu
- BU.edu
- Middlebury.edu

Note that websites of this caliber do not come cheap, and cannot typically be produced in a timely and targeted way by internal staff. The college should begin to prepare now to engage an external web development firm, invest in a broadly used content management system, and hire additional personnel (perhaps on a limited contract basis) to produce fresh content for that new website.

Similarly, social media has become the primary news source for the prospective student audience. Building a stronger social media presence will substantially improve Coastline’s recognition without requiring a media investment. The college should invest instead in the human resources needed to ensure a robust presence on existing platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, and YouTube and in content-rich blogs and podcasts that provide a longer and more in-depth presence on the internet. This would include developing Snapchat geo-filters, promoting college-specific hashtags, producing a constant stream of short-form video content, and

working with program communicators to write engaging content for the college's social media platforms.

NEXT STEPS

Coastline has a deeply vested culture of shared governance; sharing this plan with relevant internal constituencies would be an important next step in generating support for the ideas proposed here. Further, it's very likely that sharing this plan for feedback and recommendations would sharpen its focus and improve long-term outcomes.

At the same time, the shared governance model has the potential to slow the implementation of this plan and dilute potential results as each constituency weighs the ideas and responds with new suggestions.

Given Coastline's pressing need to generate awareness of its products in order to increase the volume of students applying for enrollment, it might best serve the college if parts of this plan were implemented as quickly as possible, even while the totality of the plan is being discussed and reviewed by internal constituencies.

For example, the proposed media allocation for FY17-18 might easily be approved by the president and/or the president's cabinet without vetting it with the larger governing boards. The message of "Coastline is focused on your success" can be used as the campaign theme while the broader plan is being discussed. If the college determines a different message might be more appropriate, messaging can easily be

changed or adapted. (Note that the attached media calendar reflects only a preliminary allocation of the marketing budget. I'm not yet familiar enough with other expenditures that have traditionally come from marketing and would need to be included here, e.g., trinkets, program brochures, event fliers, etc.)

Addressing role-based navigation and externally focused content issues on the Coastline website should be a priority for the college. However, both these areas need broader consensus from campus constituencies in order to move forward effectively. Creating a "Web Advisory Committee" might be a first step in achieving that goal. Committee members should be empowered to develop customer-focused navigation, revise and edit content, and make recommendations about the future direction and design of the college's website. To ensure the committee's effectiveness, it should be seen as a presidential initiative.

If resources become available, the department could also move forward with hiring a full-time social media coordinator. This position would not likely need the involvement or approval of the broader governing boards of the college.

These actions should be viewed as first steps in a longer transformation of the college from presenting itself as a conglomeration of delivery modalities to an institution centered on helping students succeed. That vision will require Coastline to come together in ways that are palatable and understandable to prospective students—streamlined, efficient, and above all, customer oriented.

END NOTES

ⁱ It's worth noting that the marketing department itself is structurally challenged. The department functions primarily as a fulfillment house, yet lacks fundamental project management software, an archived database of past projects, and an up-to-date photo library. Organizationally, the department would be more effective if additional resources were allocated or existing responsibilities were modified. A part-time administrative assistant, for example, tasked with production coordination, budget tracking and reconciliation, trinket acquisition and allocation, and baseline HR functions would free other personnel to focus on strategic marketing planning, media and community relations, and a more aggressive social media presence. A possible organizational chart that might address this and other opportunities is attached as Illustration A.

Further, the department faces a double challenge. On the one hand, the college needs the department to continue fulfilling requests for program/product-specific marketing support, while on the other hand, the college needs the department to develop a more comprehensive marketing strategy and implementable tactics. This dichotomy will strain the department's ability to be successful because the definition of success will vary by audience.

ⁱⁱ Again, entirely from the perspective of a new member of the Coastline family, I

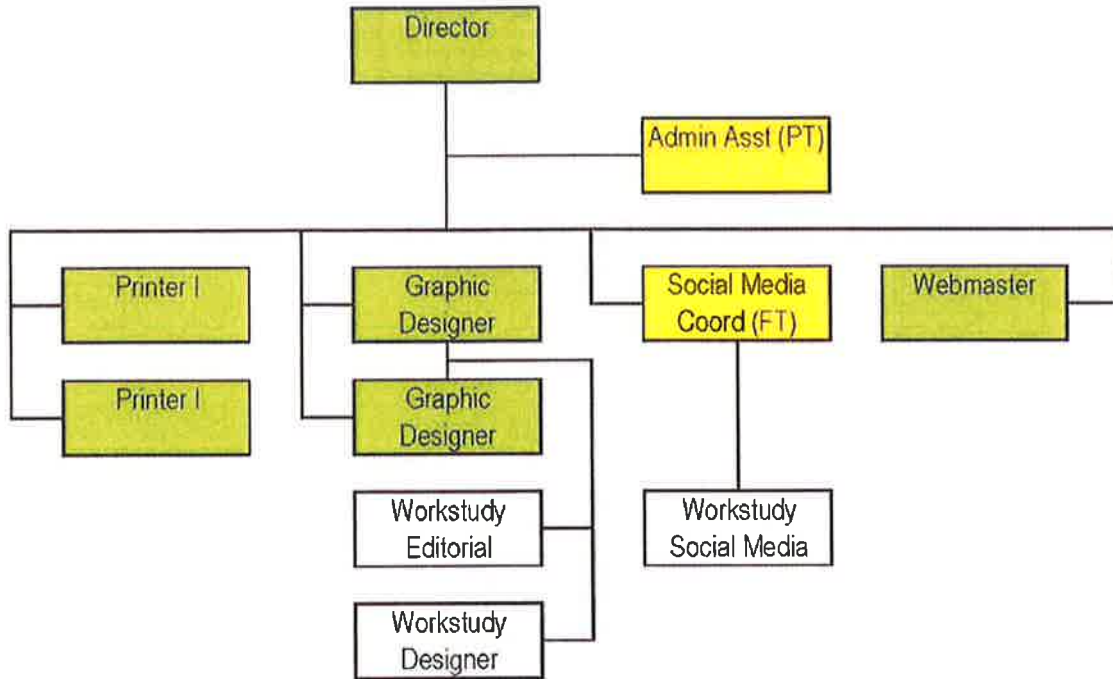
wonder if it would be easier for people to comprehend Coastline if we framed the external appearance of the organization so that it more closely reflected a traditional university structure. If that were true, a possible way to present that perspective is attached as Illustration C.

This proposed structure, even if it is only for external presentation and does not reflect actual organizational structure, would allow for a more effective utilization of scarce marketing funds, and make it easier for consumers to understand our available products. Trying to parse the marketing budget among all the existing courses/programs will inevitably result in none of the courses/programs receiving a sufficient amount of resources to thrive. There are simply too many courses that want to be marketed individually rather than part of a greater whole (i.e., Coastline Community College).

By grouping the college's courses/programs into six strong arenas (Arts & Humanities; Business; Education & Teaching; Health & Human Services; Math, Science & Technology; and Security & Legal Studies), the college can quickly clarify its offerings to prospective students while simultaneously positioning Coastline as a well-organized pipeline to careers and/or further educational opportunities. This would also provide navigational simplicity and organization to the college's website content.

ILLUSTRATION A

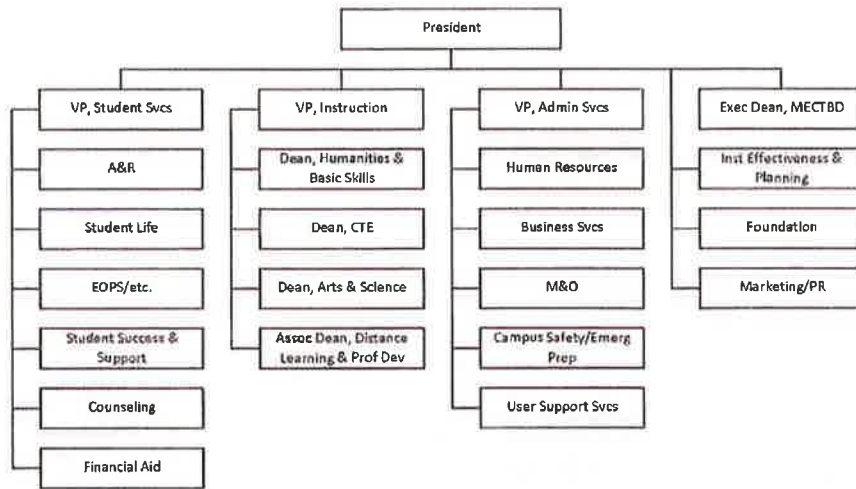
Coastline Marketing Department Organization



Key: Green = existing employees / Yellow = proposed additions / White = workstudy students

ILLUSTRATION B

How we see ourselves



How our customers see us

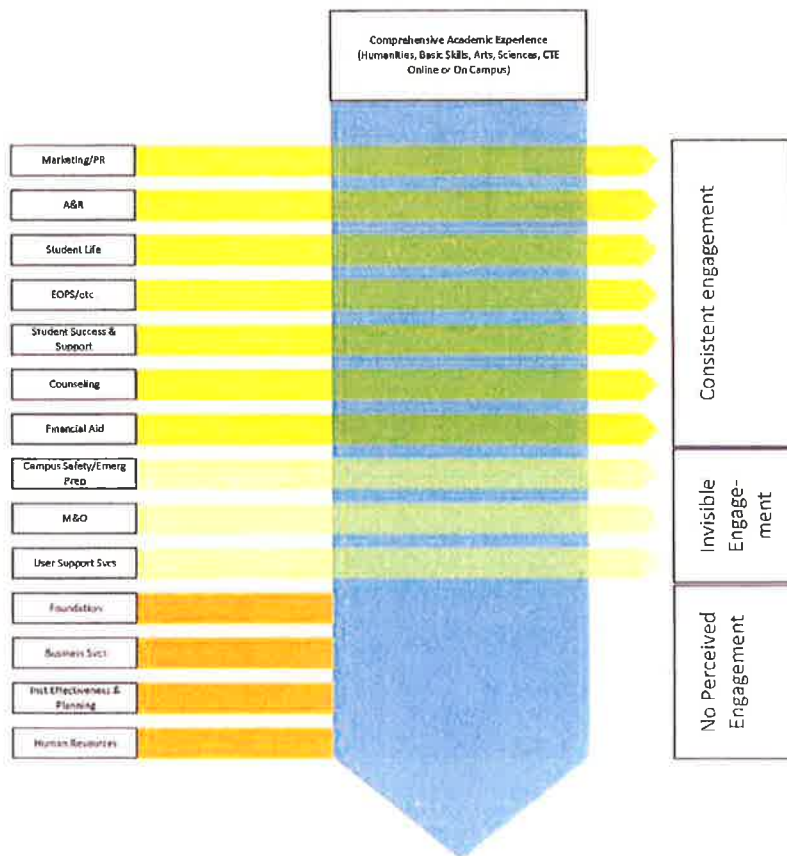


ILLUSTRATION C

COASTLINE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

→ **ARTS & HUMANITIES PROGRAMS**

- Art (Art History, Ceramics, Painting)
- Communication Studies
- English
- ESL
- History
- International Languages
- Music
- Political Science

→ **BUSINESS PROGRAMS**

- Business (Accting, Mktgng, Business Comp, Economics, Mgmt)
- Real Estate

→ **EDUCATION & TEACHING PROGRAMS**

- TEACH3
- Special Education

→ **HEALTH & HUMAN SVCS PROGRAMS**

- Psychology
- Sociology
- Biology (Anatomy, Physiology)
- Foods & Nutrition
- Physical Education
- Acquired Brain Injury Program
- Intellectual Disabilities Program
- Gerontology Program
- Adaptive Fitness

→ **MATH, SCIENCE & TECH PROGRAMS**

- Math
- Computer Services Technology
- Chemistry
- Anthropology
- Geography
- Geology
- Marine Science
- Physics

→ **SECURITY & LEGAL STUDIES PROGRAMS**

- Emergency Mgmt/Homeland Security
- Cybersecurity
- Paralegal Studies

→ **COASTLINE COLLEGE**

EXTENDED LEARNING (CCEL)

- Corporate Training
- Community Education
- Military Education
- Business Development
- Contract Education

