



# BRAND HEALTH 101

Communicating  
and Differentiating  
Your Higher  
Education Brand



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## HANOVER RESEARCH FOR HIGHER EDUCATION

Hanover's insights help higher education institutions strengthen their academic portfolios, maximize enrollment and retention, manage costs, improve brand perception, and engage alumni. From research to consulting and advisory services, our solutions address a comprehensive array of challenges to achieve the best possible outcomes for our clients and the students they serve.

### BY THE NUMBERS

**15%**

increase in net tuition  
revenue our clients  
experience

**\$500M**

in new program  
revenue

**\$700M**

in total  
grant awards

**11x**

average ROI with  
membership

**600+**

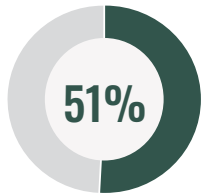
higher education  
members

**3000+**

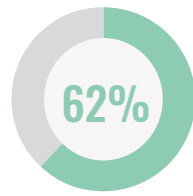
research projects  
completed  
since 2020

For more information about Hanover's solutions and services, turn to page 13 or visit [hanoverresearch.com/higher-education](https://hanoverresearch.com/higher-education).

# INTRODUCTION



The percentage of higher education marketing departments with measures in place to track brand strength over time



The percentage of institutions that have conducted brand research in the last three years



The average increase in institutions' marketing budgets since 2020

## COMMUNICATING YOUR INSTITUTION'S VALUE IS MORE CRITICAL THAN EVER

As competition for a shrinking pool of potential students heats up, what is the path forward for higher education institutions? To stand out from the pack, college and university leaders must do more than spend advertising dollars. They must clearly define their institution's purpose and communicate a distinct brand promise to stakeholders: What value does your institution provide, how does this set you apart, and why should they choose your institution over others?

## THE PATH TO A BRAND TRACKING STRATEGY

Successful brand health measurement means monitoring metrics that matter, tracking brand health over time, and regularly adjusting strategy. This guide outlines the steps needed for a strategic brand tracking process. In a competitive landscape, continuous attention to your institution's brand will ensure you stay top of mind with prospective students.

This guide will enable you to:

- 1. DEVELOP a Strategy**
  - Define Your Goal
  - Identify Tools to Use
- 2. UNDERSTAND Key Metrics**
  - Awareness
  - Perception
  - Preference
  - Loyalty
- 3. ANALYZE Your Results**
  - Prepare the Data
  - Examine Brand Tracking Results
- 4. TRACK Your Brand Strategy**
  - Drive Marketing Decisions
  - Refresh and Restart Your Brand Tracking

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# 1. DEVELOP YOUR BRAND TRACKING STRATEGY

Brand tracking aims to track an institution's brand strength over time, visualize longitudinal trends, and highlight the impact of marketing campaigns and activities. It starts with defining goals that align with your institution's needs and identifying the right tools to assess brand health. Over time, you'll hone your approach based on the data you collect to advance strategic goals such as increasing enrollment among target audiences, raising your academic profile, and supporting giving campaigns.

## DEFINE YOUR GOALS

Institution-wide goals can help contextualize brand tracking findings and inform gaps in your brand strategy. Some common institutional goals include driving enrollment growth (including among new audiences), promoting research, and building alumni engagement.

## IDENTIFY TOOLS TO USE

When deploying a brand tracking strategy, there are a variety of tools to help uncover both the "what" related to your brand (for example, "What segments are most aware of our institution?") and the "why" ("Why are certain segments more likely to recommend our institution than others?"). Using a mix of survey research, competitive benchmarking, and qualitative feedback, you can paint a more complete picture of how stakeholders perceive your brand.



See the **Approaches to Brand Tracking** on page 13 for more information on how to incorporate these tools into your brand tracking efforts.

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## 2. UNDERSTAND KEY BRAND HEALTH METRICS

When it comes to measuring brand health, the fundamental issue is knowing which metrics matter. Brand health is multifaceted, with different brand metrics capturing and illustrating important and unique elements of total brand health.

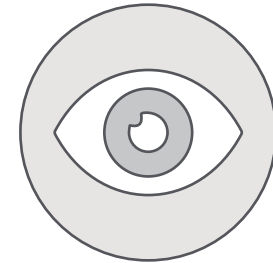
Over the last several decades, many institutions have tracked rankings performance as a proxy for evaluating and measuring overall brand health. But while rankings and brand are linked, *they are not synonymous*. The latter, after all, encompasses *all* the emotive associations connected with your institution—something that rankings can't measure. Yet a recent survey of higher education marketing professionals revealed that fewer than one-third of university presidents use brand health metrics to assess marketing performance. Instead, these administrators tend to rely on undergraduate enrollment figures and anecdotal opinions of reputation.

Brand tracking frequently assesses individual elements of brand health—from the broadest of general awareness, to the narrowest of how likely a stakeholder is to recommend your institution. But failure to holistically view all the key brand health metrics means that institutions receive only a partial view of brand health. To comprehensively measure your institution's brand health, understand stakeholder engagement, and capture a full picture of your performance, consider tracking four specific metrics:



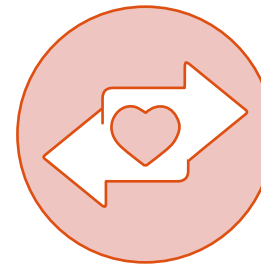
### Awareness

Who has heard of us?



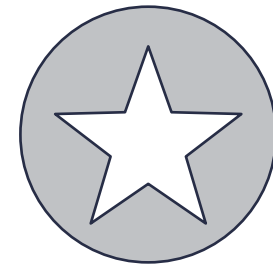
### Perception

What do our target audiences think about us?



### Preference

Are we a preferred institution for applying and enrolled students?



### Loyalty

Who are our brand advocates?



## 2. UNDERSTAND KEY BRAND HEALTH METRICS: AWARENESS

### WHAT IT IS

Awareness, the extent to which key stakeholders (including prospective students and their families) are familiar with your institution, is the key to driving enrollment. Brand awareness is measured by two factors:



**Unaided awareness**, which measures prospective students' ability to recognize your institution without a stimulus – such as a logo or tagline – or to identify your institution when asked to list “top of mind” colleges or universities.



**Aided awareness**, which measures prospective students' ability to remember your institution after prompting.

### HOW TO MEASURE

**Surveys:** Deploy regular surveys measuring brand awareness to collect a vast array of brand awareness data.

**Social Listening:** Search social media hashtags associated with your institution, study the comments on your posts, and identify how often your branded content is shared to understand how your audience (including supporters such as current students and alumni) are talking about your brand.

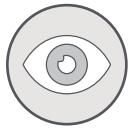
#### SAMPLE QUESTIONS: AWARENESS

When collecting stakeholder feedback, or conducting an awareness survey, include questions on both unaided and aided awareness to determine their awareness before and after prompting.

**Unaided Awareness:** When you think of higher education institutions based in California, which colleges or universities come to mind? Please list up to five.

**Aided Awareness:** Which of the following higher education institutions, if any, were you aware of before this survey?

- University of San Francisco
- California State University Long Beach
- Stanford University
- University of California, Los Angeles
- Our Institution



## 2. UNDERSTAND KEY BRAND HEALTH METRICS: PERCEPTION

### WHAT IT IS

Brand perception measures how stakeholders (such as prospective students, their families, current students, faculty and staff, alumni, donors, and community members) evaluate an institution's strengths and weaknesses. Not only does brand perception research help uncover differentiators that can be leveraged in marketing campaigns, it can also identify risks to an institution's reputation.

### HOW TO MEASURE

**Surveys:** Compare stakeholder feedback across different groups and benchmark brand perceptions against your competitors.

**In-Depth Interviews:** Structured conversations can be valuable for asking open-ended questions about stakeholder impressions of your brand. This may be a particularly important means of reaching expert audiences, including future employers.

Find out what motivates potential students to apply and enroll in a particular institution. Download the [2022 National Admitted Student Survey](#).

### SAMPLE QUESTIONS: PERCEPTION

Uncover how stakeholders perceive your brand by asking them to respond to questions like the following:

- Which of the following words best describe our institution:
  - Progressive
  - Traditional
  - Rigorous
  - Easy
  - Flexible
  - Rigid
  - Prestigious
  - Friendly
  - Uninviting



## 2. UNDERSTAND KEY BRAND HEALTH METRICS: PREFERENCE

### WHAT IT IS

Brand preference evaluates how likely a prospective student is to apply to your institution and, if accepted, to enroll. If prospects rate your institution as a top choice, it can be concluded that your brand is healthy and strong in applicant preference.

### HOW TO MEASURE

**Surveys:** Ask prospective students how likely they are to apply to your institution. Also, question admitted students about how they assessed your offer of acceptance, relative to other offers they may have received.

Make sure your institution's brand meets students where they are. Get new ideas from our blog post, [Higher Education Branding: 3 Tips to Bolster Your Institution's Messaging](#).

### SAMPLE QUESTIONS: PREFERENCE

Uncover where your institution stands in prospective students' application process by asking them to respond to the following questions:

**Prospective Students and Parents:** How likely are you to [consider applying/ recommend that your child consider applying] to our Institution?

- Extremely Likely
- Somewhat Likely
- Neutral
- Somewhat Unlikely
- Extremely Unlikely

**Admitted Students:** How did our institution rank among all the institutions to which you applied?

- It was my first choice
- It was among my top choices
- It was "in the middle of the pack"
- It was among my bottom choices
- It was my last choice or "safety school"





## 2. UNDERSTAND KEY BRAND HEALTH METRICS: LOYALTY

### WHAT IT IS

Brand loyalty – or a stakeholder’s willingness to reengage or continue engaging with you – is core to brand health. Unlike corporate marketers, colleges and universities cannot leverage repeat purchase intent as a primary and immediate indicator of brand loyalty. Instead, brand loyalty is often measured before and at the point of students’ initial choice and in subsequent financial giving.

Employing a Net Promoter Score (NPS)<sup>®</sup> framework can help institutions gauge stakeholder loyalty on an ongoing basis. The more loyal a stakeholder is to your institution, the more likely they are to become promoters – people who take supportive actions that enhance your brand's value and public perception. To maintain and grow its reputation, an institution should track its NPS and seek to uncover factors that drive the score. Why are promoters loyal to your institution and more likely to recommend you? Why are detractors unlikely to do so?

### HOW TO MEASURE

**Surveys:** Survey prospective students (and their families), current students, faculty and staff, alumni, donors, and community members to identify supporter personas and to uncover potential reputational challenges.

#### SAMPLE QUESTIONS: LOYALTY

One of the best ways to gauge brand loyalty is through your institution's Net Promoter Score (NPS)<sup>®</sup>. This is measured by a single question that determines stakeholders’ satisfaction level with your institution.

Stakeholders should be asked the following question, providing a zero to 10 scale, with zero being "very unlikely" and 10 being "very likely."

- How likely are you to recommend our institution to a friend, family member, acquaintance, or colleague?

Read more about how to apply a Net Promoter Score framework to your branding and marketing efforts in our blog post, [NPS: The Most Important Metric Your Higher Education Competitors Aren't Using](#).

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## 3. ANALYZE YOUR BRAND TRACKING RESULTS

After you have collected your brand tracking results, it's time to prepare your data and analyze your findings. Identify patterns across studies and audience segments and use that data to inform your strategic initiatives. For example, if you are preparing for a capital campaign, you can identify personas associated with high loyalty and then use that information to reach out to potential supporters. Or you can use awareness data, segmented by region, to target an upcoming paid search campaign.

To get started analyzing your brand tracking results, there are two critical steps: preparing and examining the data.

### PREPARE THE DATA

#### VALIDATE



Analyze your data to confirm that respondents completed the full interview or survey and to ensure that the data collection was performed correctly and without bias.

#### CONVERT



Group and assign values to your raw data to convert it into a meaningful and readable form. Evaluate open-ended responses for salient themes, relevant relationships, and unifying narrative. Model quantitative data via descriptive and statistical analyses.

#### CLEAN



Review your data for errors and remove any invalid respondents who may have completed fields incorrectly or skipped them entirely. Conduct rigorous data cleansing to ensure that data are included from serious and qualified study participants only.

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## 3. ANALYZE YOUR BRAND TRACKING RESULTS

### EXAMINE BRAND TRACKING RESULTS

Study your brand tracking results to connect metric performance with strategic initiatives, activities, or institutional strengths and weaknesses.

Key questions to ask when studying your brand tracking results include:

- Which metrics performed the strongest? The weakest?
- Are the results evenly spread or are there certain segments that are stronger or weaker (e.g., stakeholder group, region, age)?
- Was there a change in results based on any marketing campaigns or news stories?
- If tracking over time, what direction are brand metrics trending? Are there macro trends that might affect your brand?

Make more confident decisions with data from emerging trends. Download the Higher Ed Trends to Watch infographic.



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## 4. TRACK YOUR BRAND STRATEGY — AND ADJUST

When it comes to brand health, it's not enough simply to track results: You have to use the data you generate to drive more results, whether through marketing activities, or ongoing performance monitoring and strategy developments. Here are two critical uses for your brand health tracking outcomes.

### DRIVE MARKETING DECISIONS

Use the findings from your brand tracking to drive key marketing decisions and to make strategic investments. For example:

**If your results indicate low awareness levels:**

Investigate paid advertising options and media coverage to boost your brand.

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**If your results indicate low preference levels:**

Review benchmarking results to uncover opportunities to better meet stakeholders' expectations and to differentiate your brand. Examine survey results and consider focus groups to identify changes that your institution should make to better communicate its value.

### REFRESH AND RESTART YOUR BRAND TRACKING

Review your brand tracking results with a focus on questions or approaches that might change in subsequent rounds. If you are using a survey, determine which areas could benefit from additional clarity, such as from a focus group. Brand tracking should drive actionable insights, and continual brand tracking can improve the quality of findings.



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# APPROACHES TO BRAND TRACKING

## SURVEY RESEARCH



**BRAND AWARENESS SURVEY:** Uncover how widely you are known. Segment results by region to assess your geographic reach. Maximize participation by keeping your survey short and by offering incentives for completion.



**BRAND PERCEPTION SURVEY:** Gauge brand perception by surveying key stakeholder groups (e.g., prospective students and families, faculty and staff, current students, alumni and donors, employers, and community members) to gain insight into how you are viewed by each segment. The data you collect should inform branding campaigns and general improvement efforts. Conduct these surveys annually to track the impact of messaging efforts.



**CONCEPT/MESSAGE TESTING SURVEY:** Assess the efficacy of potential messages, advertisements, or taglines by asking key audiences to react to sample concepts. Maximize the impact of forthcoming advertising campaigns by investigating which messages are most effective at relaying key information and how likely respondents are to take a desired action after seeing your marketing materials.

## COMPETITIVE BENCHMARKING



**MARKETING POSITION ANALYSIS:** Perform a comparative review of online marketing for your institution vis-à-vis your top competitors to differentiate your marketing presence.



**BRAND PROFILE ANALYSIS BENCHMARKING:** Refine your value proposition and distinguish yourself from the competition by regularly assessing how peers present themselves.

## QUALITATIVE RESEARCH



**FOCUS GROUPS:** Focus groups can be used at the start of your research for an exploratory look into stakeholders' perceptions of an upcoming advertising campaign or to get feedback on your wider brand. While in-person focus groups have traditionally been the norm, online focus groups provide administrative ease for connecting with a geographically dispersed population, and participants may feel less inhibited in sharing their true opinions.



# ABOUT HANOVER RESEARCH

Our insights help institutions strengthen their academic portfolio, maximize enrollment and retention, manage costs, improve brand perception, and engage alumni.

## OUR BENEFITS



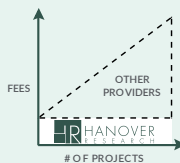
**EXPERT**  
200+ analysts with advanced multiple methodology research expertise



**FLEXIBLE**  
Ongoing custom research agenda adapts with organizations' needs



**DEDICATED**  
Exclusive account and research teams ensure strategic partnership



**EFFICIENT**  
Annual, fixed-fee model shares costs and benefits

## OUR HIGHER EDUCATION SOLUTIONS

### ENROLLMENT MANAGEMENT

Optimize your entire enrollment funnel from enhancing prospective student recruitment to maximizing applicants and matriculants.

### ACADEMIC PROGRAMMING

Build a standout academic program portfolio based on student preference and employer demand.

### STUDENT SUCCESS

Increase retention and maximize student engagement from start date to graduation.

### OPERATIONS & FINANCE

Comprehensive insights to run an efficient, financially sustainable institution.

### ADVANCEMENT

Identify right-fit donors and maximize giving from your key stakeholders.

### MARKETING

Understand your institution's value proposition—and communicate it through messaging that resonates.

### GRANTS

Targeted guidance to bolster the quality, volume, and success rates of your grant applications.

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