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More than a sound bite

Integrated marketing program will broadcast Berry's distinctiveness to new audiences

It happened several times last week. It happens most every week. A prospective faculty member from Texas interviews on campus and comments again and again on the exceptional nature of the campus. A well-respected higher education analyst who has visited hundreds of colleges and universities remarks that he has never seen anything the likes of Berry. A prospective student from Florida and her family tour the campus and are taken aback by its scope and beauty, even though they learned of Berry from a family friend and have explored the college's Web site.

There is a curious satisfaction in observing people's initial reactions to Berry College. The campus amazes them and inspires a sense of wonder and possibility. It also makes them question why Berry is not better known – an issue we all find vexing.

While astounded by Berry as a place, the

father of the prospective student from Florida also probed deeper. He wanted to know what value Berry would add and how it differed from other schools. Why should his daughter attend Berry when she could attend one of the state universities in Florida for next to nothing?

My answer was sure, though not particularly short.

First, I explained that Berry offers a top-quality educational experience for undergraduate students beginning in the first year. Although we know that the initial year is a difficult time of transition and learning for many students, faculty at large research institutions rarely have time for senior majors, much less a first-year student. Their focus is primarily on advanced graduate students.

Berry faculty members, however, are actively engaged with students from their

very first semester. Classes at that level are generally as small as those in the senior year, providing students every opportunity to rise early to the challenge of college work. By their upper-class years, students have forged strong mentoring relationships with distinguished faculty in their field of study. This is the value that residential or "liberal arts" colleges offer above the large research and state universities, and in this regard, Berry is comparable to the nation's most respected residential colleges.

Next, I explained that Berry offers something beyond what is available at even these other fine residential colleges: Berry is one of the few schools in the nation that values work experience as a central part of a student's four-year education.

At Berry, work is not just about helping to finance an education, although it

continues to provide such means for many students. It is, more importantly, an opportunity to learn the value of a strong work ethic, persistence and a "can-do" spirit – lessons that are important for students of all economic backgrounds and often best acquired outside of the classroom

Early on, Berry students learn what it means to serve others and the dignity of work done well. For example, students who are part of the grounds crew come to appreciate the value of a well-maintained campus and respect work done well in this area. They learn the lesson of leaving a place better than they found it. In later years, students learn to manage complicated projects, design innovative solutions to nagging problems and supervise people working together as a team. Berry seeks to foster student-managed enterprises and projects to support learning of this kind.

In conclusion, I explained that a Berry education grows out of a sense of purpose. We want our students to reflect on what matters to them and how they can make a difference with their lives. We want them to leave with an initial sense of direction, knowing that the path of life will include many turns and junctions they cannot yet anticipate but also knowing how to orient themselves at each new spot mindful of their enduring hopes and values.

This is important to us because Berry is a school rooted in faith – that each of us has value and significance as individuals created in the image of God, that this understanding explains our own deep yearnings for significance and purpose, and that there is more meaning

and more satisfaction in the good that we distribute to others than in the goods we amass for ourselves.

The Florida family responded favorably to this explanation. The answer demonstrates, however, that while Berry's story is compelling, it is not easily reduced to a sound bite. College leadership has been wrestling

“Berry must become more widely known. Let it be for who we are and what we do best.”

with this issue and how best to convey the Berry message so that we can increase our visibility locally, regionally and nationally.

In October 2006, the Board of Trustees approved the hiring of a market research firm to study how key audiences perceive Berry, how they respond to the primary elements in Berry's message and how best to convey Berry's message to new audiences. After a careful review of potential firms, we engaged SimpsonScarborough from Washington, D.C., to assist us in researching the Berry brand and developing an integrated marketing plan.

Elizabeth Scarborough, president of the firm, has interviewed many campus leaders and met several times with the board. She also is working with an advisory committee of students, faculty and staff. The firm conducted telephone surveys of various groups of prospective students last spring: those who inquired about Berry but did not apply, those who applied to Berry but chose not to attend, and those who applied and entered Berry as new students this fall. In addition, the firm administered online surveys to a substantial number of current students. Studies of alumni and faculty are in progress. In conducting this research, Simpson-Scarborough has examined a number of Berry's defining attributes, any of which might provide a valid basis for attracting someone's interest. For example, the various surveys have asked about interest in and emphasis on:

- Getting work experience in college
- Extensive outdoor opportunities
- Research projects with faculty
- Study abroad
- Serving those in need
- Promoting eco-friendly ideas
- Leadership
- How to lead a meaningful life
- Deepening your faith

Berry already offers all of these opportunities and will continue to do so into the future. However, some of these opportunities may catch the attention of a prospective student more so than others and win us a closer look.

One finding, as surprising as it is

reassuring, is that the most highly rated factor for influencing a student's choice about Berry involves the opportunity to graduate with a rigorous education *plus* four years of work experience. This finding held equally true for students who chose to attend Berry and those who chose not to apply. Other important factors include service (improving the lives of others) and living a meaningful life (doing something significant). Factors that would not influence student choice as much, although they are still rated positively, include participating in research projects with faculty, participating in outdoor recreation opportunities and taking part in an environmental project. We know, however, that many students later come to understand the value of these special experiences, even though they may be less influential in their initial decision-making.

This research also helps us to understand how current and prospective students think about Berry's Christian heritage. The pattern suggests that students appreciate Berry's approach and the balance that it strikes – students generally not wanting Berry to become "more Christian" in its culture and perspective, but even more clearly not wanting it to become "less Christian" either.

Information from all of these surveys is being analyzed as we begin the new academic year. In October, SimpsonScarborough will recommend to the Board of Trustees a strategy for positioning Berry to various external audiences based on their research and their ongoing conversations with members of the college community. At the conclusion of this process, Berry will use this new positioning framework to prepare an integrated marketing campaign designed to introduce the college to new audiences in targeted new locations using imaginative methods and media.

Our message needs to be broadcast in a manner that is effective, compelling and ever true to the college's enduring values and purpose. Berry must become more widely known. Let it be for who we are and what we do best. **B**



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