



ADULT LEARNER RECRUITMENT

Differentiating Your Graduate and Online Programs

A Workbook to Help Graduate and Online Programs
Stand Out in a Hypercompetitive Market



Standing Out in a Crowded Graduate and Online Market

Making the Case for Differentiation in Graduate Enrollment

Too often, the marketing messages intended to distinguish a graduate or online program from competitor programs do not sufficiently set a program apart from competitors. A prospective student researching program options will encounter dozens of similar messages related to program flexibility, academic excellence, and opportunities for career advancement and personal fulfillment. While these messages may seem appealing, students have come to expect these attributes of every program. And in today's hypercompetitive and turbulent graduate and online market, these claims will not distinguish your program—or earn a spot on a student's shortlist.

The Growing Need to Differentiate



Competition Is Growing

Across the last decade, the average change in new graduate programs launched (2.37%) has outpaced the average annual growth in conferrals (1.58% per year). The demographic cliff and expected declines in international enrollment will make the market even more competitive in the years to come.



Application Lists Are Short

Prospective graduate and adult degree completion students apply to an average of 3.8 and 3.3 schools, respectively. Your value proposition can help your program make this short list—and set you apart from the 1-2 other programs of interest.



Student Mindshare Is Maxed Out

The average adult is exposed to 4,000-10,000 brands a day, and few make a lasting impression. Prospects spend just 90 seconds on university webpages on average, leaving little time for your message to resonate with students.



Stealth Shopping Rates Are Growing

80% of applicants to graduate and online programs are stealth and rely solely on program information found across digital channels to decide whether to apply. Your programs need to capture their attention and stand out from others.

How to Use This Workbook

This workbook is designed to help leaders in graduate and online education craft a value proposition to differentiate their program from competitor programs. Use the following worksheets to build, stress test, and improve a value proposition for a graduate or online program.

▶ *To complete this workbook, please select an academic program to prioritize.*

Understand What Makes a Value Proposition Unique

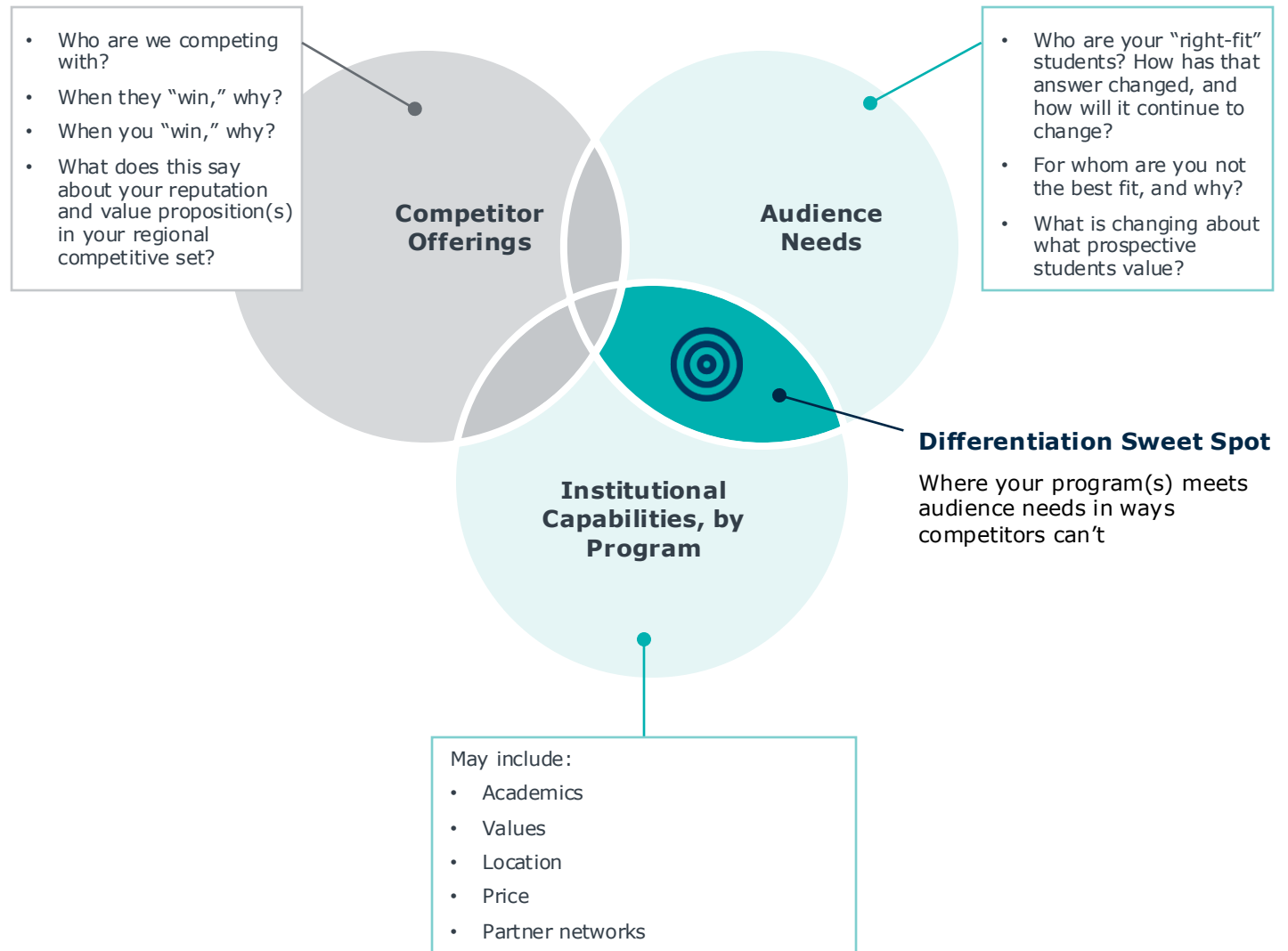
What Is a Differentiated Value Proposition?

Your value proposition exists at the intersection of your capabilities and your audience's needs. However, it must also be distinct from your competitors. Your value proposition is the answer to the question, *"How do you meet your audience's needs in a way that your competitors cannot?"*

A strong, differentiated value proposition should meet the following criteria:

- **It's relevant:** The value proposition addresses the needs and pain points that matter most to your audience.
- **It's difficult to replicate:** Your competitors cannot make the same claim—if they make a similar claim, you outperform the competitor substantially on at least one dimension.
- **It reaches the majority:** Most, if not all, audience members benefit from the value proposition.
- **It's provable to the market:** Data, social proof, or external recognition validate the value proposition.

Finding Your Differentiation Sweet Spot



Identify Your Program's Differentiators

Reflect on Unique Program Attributes

The next step to identify and articulate your differentiated value proposition is to select the attributes that are most relevant to your program—and that your competitors cannot claim.

The “starter kit” to the right includes potential value drivers across academics, student services and experiences, outcomes, and more. While these attributes alone are not differentiated, selecting attributes of your program that other programs cannot claim is an important step.

Exercise

Consider the list of potential value drivers to the right.

▶ What are your top competitors claiming? Cross those items off the list.

▶ Check 2-3 remaining items that your program can claim.

70+ Potential Value Drivers to Consider

Distinctive Academics

- ☐ Program Variety
- ☐ Program Quality
- ☐ Unique Programs
- ☐ Stackable Credentials
- ☐ Flexible Delivery
- ☐ Short Time to Completion
- ☐ Flexible Scheduling
- ☐ Pedagogical Method
- ☐ Class Size

Special Services for Target Students

- ☐ Working Adults
- ☐ Adults New to Online Learning
- ☐ Adult Degree Completers
- ☐ International
- ☐ Special Needs
- ☐ Military

Distinctive Location

- ☐ Proximity
- ☐ Beauty and Climate
- ☐ Cultural Attractions
- ☐ Recreation Options
- ☐ Regional Economy

Student Outcomes

- ☐ Employment
- ☐ Earnings
- ☐ In-Demand Skills
- ☐ Industries
- ☐ Portfolio

Service Quality Levels

- ☐ Personalized Service
- ☐ One-Stop Service
- ☐ Concierge Service
- ☐ Peer-to-Peer Service

Distinctive Student Services

- ☐ Advising
- ☐ Mental Health
- ☐ Career Services
- ☐ Financial Aid Support
- ☐ Technology

Partner Networks

- ☐ Alumni
- ☐ Community
- ☐ Employers
- ☐ Industries
- ☐ Global
- ☐ Research

Student Experience

- ☐ Global Experience
- ☐ Small Cohort
- ☐ Student Organizations
- ☐ Real-World Projects
- ☐ Research/Lab Facilities

Price

- ☐ Low Net Price
- ☐ Low Price Relative to Competitors
- ☐ Payment Options
- ☐ Need-Based Aid
- ☐ Merit Aid

Staff Characteristics

- ☐ Credentials
- ☐ Background
- ☐ Teaching Experience
- ☐ Industry Experience
- ☐ Technical Expertise
- ☐ Availability

Shared Values

- ☐ Sustainability
- ☐ Faith-Based
- ☐ Social Justice
- ☐ Community Service
- ☐ Wellness
- ☐ Outdoor Life
- ☐ Innovation

Brand Character

- ☐ Exclusivity
- ☐ Quality
- ☐ Higher Purpose
- ☐ Value for Money
- ☐ Lifestyle
- ☐ Disruptive

Combine Differentiators to Create Your Unique Value Proposition

Compounding Attributes Can Distinguish Your Program

The key to differentiating your value proposition is to combine multiple program attributes. The attributes compound one another, and together, they amplify your value proposition. Your program should be the only program that can make this series of claims together.

In the example to the right, we identified value drivers for an MBA program (i.e., alumni, real-world projects, and industry experience) and combined them to create a differentiated value proposition. Follow the steps below to begin to create a distinct value proposition for your program.

Exercise

- ▶ Revisit the differentiators you identified on the previous page and combine them to begin to create a value proposition, similar to the example to the right.

Sample MBA Program Value Proposition

Using Differentiators From p. 4

Student Experience

- ☐ Global Experience
- ☐ Small Cohort
- ☐ Student Organizations
- ☒ **Real-World Projects**
- ☐ Research/Lab Facilities

Staff Characteristics

- ☐ Credentials
- ☐ Background
- ☐ Teaching Experience
- ☒ **Industry Experience**
- ☐ Technical Expertise
- ☐ Availability

Partner Networks

- ☒ **Alumni**
- ☐ Community
- ☐ Employers
- ☐ Industries
- ☐ Global
- ☐ Research

Real-World Projects

Students build an online portfolio in each class



Industry Experience

Industry expert liaison assigned to each course



Alumni Network

Our graduates lead 100+ Inc. 5000 companies

Your Program's Value Proposition

Using Differentiators From p. 4



Ensure Your Value Proposition Is Distinct, Provable, and Relevant to Most

Evaluate Your Value Proposition

Not every positive attribute is a differentiator. For your value proposition to help your program stand out, it must be relevant to your audience (e.g., prospective graduate students), difficult for a competitor to replicate, applicable to most of your audience, and provable to your audience.

Exercise

- ▶ Rewrite the value propositions from the previous page into one sentence.
- ▶ In the boxes on the right, brainstorm ways that your value proposition is relevant, distinct, provable, and applicable to most of your audience.

Your Program's Value Proposition (from p. 5)

Sample MBA Value Proposition: "Our MBA students acquire the skills and industry network to accelerate career success."

Key Criteria for a Differentiated Value Proposition



Relevance to Audience



Difficulty for Competitors to Copy



Share of Audience Enjoying Benefits



Provability to the Market

Optimize Your Value Proposition

Stress Testing Your Value Proposition

Defining your value proposition is often an iterative process that requires close collaboration with and buy-in from stakeholders across campus.

Consider testing your value proposition with current students via interviews, focus groups, or surveys to ensure your value proposition resonates with your historical students, who share many similarities with the students most likely to enroll in your program in the future.

Exercise

Grade your claims from the previous page against the four criteria at right. Then consider:

- ▶ How will you improve your grade?
- ▶ When can you realistically achieve your goal?
- ▶ What resources or investments are needed?
- ▶ How can you make this work a priority at your institution?

Identify Opportunities to Improve Your Value Proposition



Relevance to Audience

Grade:



Difficulty for Competitors to Copy

Grade:



Share of Audience Enjoying Benefits

Grade:



Provability to the Market

Grade:

▶ Bringing Your Value Proposition to Life

This resource is designed to help in setting your program apart from competitor offerings. But determining your program's differentiators requires a clear understanding of your competitor set and often, an outside perspective to challenge assumptions and help uncover what makes your program unique.

EAB's Adult Learner Recruitment team is here to help leaders in graduate, online, and adult education bring their program differentiators to life through full-funnel marketing and strategy support. **Learn more at eab.com/ALR or email LexRubyHowe@eab.com.**

EAB Adult Learner Recruitment

Secure Your Future in a Changing Graduate, Online, and Adult Learner Market

Outperform the Market at Every Stage of the Funnel



Strategize

Identify and build market-ready programs for competitive advantage



Curate

Expand and diversify your pool of right-fit students



Cultivate

Customized campaigns to drive students to application



Convert

Improve yield and retention to maximize enrollment potential

What Makes Us Different

40+ Years of
**Higher Ed
Expertise**

**Unrivaled
Access** to New
Audiences

Seamless
**Marketing
Orchestration**

Visibility into
Full-Funnel
Performance

Proven Results in a Dynamic Landscape

200+

Partner institutions

6:1

Average ROI across
multiyear partnership

18%

Average graduate
enrollment growth

\$2M

Average NTR influenced
per partner

To learn more, visit eab.com/ALR or email LexRubyHowe@eab.com



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