

SAINT MARY'S COLLEGE
OF CALIFORNIA

Results *from the* Audit and
Positioning Recommendations

February 24, 2005

PROJECT OBJECTIVES

GOAL

To create a central positioning strategy and communications system for undergraduate student recruitment. To impress on prospective students – and those individuals who influence their college selection decisions – the College's distinctive identity and a recognition of the benefits of the institution's education.

PURPOSE

Strengthen and expand its applicant pool. Increase diversity (ethnic, geographic, socioeconomic) and improve selectivity. Enhance the stature and visibility of the institution. Build momentum and pride in the College among alumni, current students, faculty, administrators, parents and friends.

PROCESS

Working under the supervision of the client committee, conducted a qualitative audit of the views of Saint Mary's administrators, faculty and students. Based on the findings from the audit, develop an institutional positioning and core messages that inform the creation of student recruitment publications and electronic media.

WHAT WE LEARNED *from*
ADMINISTRATORS, FACULTY,
PARENTS, *and* STUDENTS
at SAINT MARY'S COLLEGE

Results *from the* Institutional Audit

THE INTERVIEWS REVEALED A NUMBER OF INSTITUTIONAL STRENGTHS

The Saint Mary's experience offers a transformative education.

The College's Lasallian character profoundly enriches the academic, social and spiritual life of the campus.

The Saint Mary's campus is beautiful, gracious and serene.

Saint Mary's offers an ideal Bay Area location.

Saint Mary's has a rich history of athletic success and offers the excitement of Division 1 athletics.

Saint Mary's has survived a well-chronicled "time of troubles."

A lasting national reputation is within the College's grasp.

Saint Mary's students are from every ethnic and socioeconomic subgroup.

Collegiate seminars and the integral major place the Great Books at the center of the Saint Mary's experience.

Saint Mary's is the perfect size: the intimacy of a liberal arts college with the resources of a small university.

The faculty at Saint Mary's are acknowledged to be talented, committed, student-centered teachers.

The student body is made up of determined, hard-working students.

Saint Mary's has several distinguishing characteristics—Collegiate Seminars, the January term, LaSallian values—that should make it a singular institution in the minds of prospective students.

Saint Mary's has many alumni who are successful, well-respected contributors to their professions and to their communities.

WE ALSO HEARD ABOUT A NUMBER OF WEAKNESSES

The Lasallian tradition is only fully understood by insiders.

To some students, the serenity of the campus can be disquieting.

Saint Mary's fails to fully capitalize on associations with the Bay Area.

Athletic success has been uneven, at times disproportionately affecting much of the school's spirit and morale.

The College seems to have a preoccupation with bad news.

Saint Mary's lives in the shadows of Berkeley and Stanford, and to a lesser extent Santa Clara.

Saint Mary's struggles to talk about diversity in a way that distinguishes it meaningfully from its peers.

Many high school students think the Great Books are irrelevant.

Some alumni view professional programs as an attack on the College's integrity and mission.

Some younger professors feel that the faculty lacks unity and that the College does not sufficiently value scholarship.

Too few students demonstrate genuine curiosity and are willing to take risks

Despite several distinctive qualities, too many prospects see Saint Mary's simply as a Catholic liberal arts college.

Too few graduates recognize the intellectual and spiritual debt that they owe to Saint Mary's.

Saint Mary's has few recognizable "stars" who have risen to prominence in the most prestigious professions and occupations.

POSITIONING RECOMMENDATIONS

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN POSITION *and* POSITIONING

Position is a no-nonsense statement of how an institution is perceived by its external constituencies.

Positioning, on the other hand, communicates how Saint Mary's *wishes to be perceived*. It dictates the words and images the College should use to describe the institution and to make its case to prospective applicants, donors, and other constituencies whose high regard and support are essential to realizing the institution's vision.

The goal of positioning is to orchestrate a unique set of associations that distinguish the institution from all others. These associations determine an institution's image in the public's mind.

Over time, the institutional *position* should mirror Saint Mary's *positioning*.

THE EXISTING POSITION *of* SAINT MARY'S

Words often used to describe Saint Mary's as:

a little bit different

balanced

removed

safe

excellent

academic

traditional

religious

supportive

beautiful

serene

GUIDELINES *for* POSITIONING

1. **Don't start by positioning the College. Instead, leverage the position Saint Mary's already has.** Marketing must deal realistically with existing perceptions and with the fact that people cannot make huge perceptual leaps. The messages and images Saint Mary's uses to influence perceptions must be credible and believable.

Does Saint Mary's position vary from constituency to constituency?

2. **Don't confuse positioning with vision.** Have big goals and an ambitious vision, but understand that these do not constitute your positioning statement. Vision is an institution's internal formulation of what it wants to be and where it wants to go. Positioning is how you want external constituencies to think of you.

What are Saint Mary's goals? Is there a clear consensus on the College's vision of itself?

3. While it may sound counterintuitive, to broaden appeal narrow the position.

The attention span of the marketplace is extremely short. Attempting to be all things to all people dilutes the positioning and results in a fuzzy image. Positioning Saint Mary's as a leader in one or two areas will result in other positive associations as well.

What are the one or two things that Saint Mary's should stand for to attract the attention and support of key external audiences? Do other institutions promise the same things?

4. Getting prospects to move from how they see you – your position – to how you wish them to see you – your positioning statement – requires bold action.

The wider the gap between the position and positioning, the more boldly you must promote the College. Yet overly ambitious claims may make the audience incredulous.

Given Saint Mary's position, will people believe its positioning statement?

POSITIONING STATEMENT

Saint Mary's College of California is a breakthrough school: a college fundamentally designed to transform the way in which its students understand themselves and engage with the world. Saint Mary's encourages students to embrace complexity, re-imagine their place and purpose in the world, and undertake a searching examination of self, spirit, and society. The result is a breakthrough education: students discover their capacity for transformative action as well as profound reflection.

CORE MESSAGES *for* SAINT MARY'S

LASALLIAN: A COMMITMENT TO TRANSFORMATIVE TEACHING

Saint Mary's College of California is committed to teaching as a transformative practice. This commitment is rooted in the College's Lasallian tradition and the longtime stewardship of the Christian Brothers. To teach—and learn—in the Lasallian tradition is to broaden the reach of education, to promote social justice, and to pursue scholarship in a community of equals. Saint Mary's students participate in a transformation of self and society, mind and spirit.

CATHOLIC: AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE WHOLE PERSON

Saint Mary's College of California is dedicated to an understanding of the whole person. This dedication is rooted in the College's Catholic tradition. Every member of the College community is treated with dignity and is granted license to explore the tension between faith and reason, law and morality, individual liberty and social justice. Not all Saint Mary's students are Catholic, but every Saint Mary's student benefits from the College's Catholic tradition. The College is a welcoming, searching, spirited educational community.

LIBERAL ARTS: A BROADENING OF MIND

Saint Mary's College of California sees education as a broadening and deepening of mind and spirit. This vision is rooted in the College's liberal arts tradition. In its curriculum—shaped around the Collegiate Seminars—Saint Mary's offers rigorous training in critical thinking and the careful use of language in writing and speech, and a close examination of foundational texts in the arts and sciences. Saint Mary's students become disciplined, expansive thinkers capable of exemplary scholarship and meaningful action.

LOCATION: THE BAY AREA

Saint Mary's College of California is located in one of the country's social, cultural, and commercial capitals. The Bay Area—including San Francisco, Berkeley, and Oakland—is an especially fertile setting for a liberal arts college: progressive, broad-minded, and sophisticated, rich in museums and bookstores, cafés and cutting-edge research, major nonprofits and Fortune 500 companies. Saint Mary's students gain access to the Bay Area's incomparable resources.

COMMUNITY: A DIVERSE CAMPUS

The community of Saint Mary's College of California is unusually diverse. In part because of its Lasallian philosophy, the College makes a special effort to serve students who are traditionally underrepresented in higher education. As a result, the campus brings together students and teachers from all backgrounds. Saint Mary's students broaden their understanding of the world simply by living and working within the College community.

FACULTY: A BELIEF IN SHARED INQUIRY

The faculty of Saint Mary's College of California believe in the practice of shared inquiry. In the classroom, they treat students as equal partners in the examination of important questions. Outside the classroom, they serve as mentors, guides, and friends. Though their scholarship is urgent and essential, teaching is their priority. Saint Mary's students are at the center of the College's academic community.

THE CHALLENGES WE FACE
IN STUDENT RECRUITMENT

Because of California's outstanding public university system, it is difficult to persuade many in-state students that a private college is worth the extra investment. *How can we convince families to pay more for Saint Mary's than they will for other well-known, less expensive public institutions?*

Saint Mary's possesses several distinguishing characteristics – Collegiate Seminars, January term, Lasallian values – yet many prospective students struggle to understand their relevance and end up comparing Saint Mary's on common and reductive terms. *How can we sustain a deeper conversation with families and heighten their sensitivity to Saint Mary's singular strengths?*

Saint Mary's is a college that is in and of California. *How can we expand the College's definition of itself to project the image of a national institution?*

Saint Mary's, like most private colleges, has difficulty achieving a gender balance. *Given demographic trends in higher education — and without making “male-friendly” programmatic adjustments to the institution — how can Saint Mary's recruitment materials attract more male students?*

Saint Mary's is true to its roots and deeply committed to encouraging students to examine their own faith and spirituality. *At a time when religion in America is seen as narrowing and restrictive, how can Saint Mary's talk about its Lasallian, Catholic identity without turning off those who question organized religion, especially those who are not Catholic?*

We must demonstrate that something happens to students at Saint Mary's that is unlikely to happen at other institutions. Families must come to see that attending another institution means making a sacrifice and settling for a diminished set of outcomes. Simply put: Saint Mary's offers an education like no other.

It is a breakthrough college that offers a breakthrough education.

THE COLLEGE *vs.* UNIVERSITY DIALOGUE

The audit interviews revealed the ongoing discussion on campus about whether or not Saint Mary's should consider becoming a university. Naturally, there are benefits and liabilities to this decision.

The sentiment on campus seems to suggest that it is only a matter of time until Saint Mary's College becomes Saint Mary's University. The reasons we heard in favor of becoming a university include:

- > Californians may not sufficiently value colleges and may consider them to be “second-class citizens” in comparison to universities.
- > Universities in California garner much of the media's and public's attention. It is very hard to be heard when you are in the same constellation as the University of California system, Stanford and Caltech.
- > Saint Mary's is already more than a college. Some of its graduate programs have strong followings.
- > Saint Mary's is the odd one out in the West Coast Conference. Athletic recruiting could be enhanced by becoming a University.

While internal sentiment seems to favor becoming a university, we have some concerns about moving in this direction. As Saint Mary's considers the issue, the institution should be mindful of the following:

To many in the Saint Mary's community, the institution is essentially a college rather than a university. Its defining character is expressed in Collegiate seminars, a commitment to teaching, the Lasallian concern for the whole student, and close student-faculty interaction. Many expressed a fear that universities are focused on interests that have little relevance to what makes Saint Mary's special.

Furthermore, a sizable group of alumni still dismiss the College's graduate and professional programs as motivated by profit—at the expense of the institution as a whole.

While it is true, that with a few notable exceptions, higher education in California is dominated by public and private universities, that is not the case everywhere. There are superb national colleges in every part of the country, and even California has the Claremont Colleges. While becoming known as a university may be of some immediate benefit in local markets, it is not at all certain that the name change would strengthen Saint Mary's in the wider market.

Saint Mary's could well ask itself what are its long-term goals. We think there is every reason to believe that the institution is on the cusp of cementing a singular position among the nation's liberal arts colleges.

Saint Mary's offers something meaningfully different from its peers. Renaming itself a university may obscure Saint Mary's distinction. Without several outstanding advanced degree programs to match its outstanding undergraduate education, Saint Mary's has little hope of rising to prominence among the numerous outstanding universities on the West Coast.

There are simply too many unknowns to make a definitive recommendation about changing the name. We strongly recommend that reliable quantitative and qualitative research be considered prior to any decision. This type of research was conducted when we assisted the California College of Arts and Crafts in making a decision about changing its name. That project revealed attitudes that were unexpected — and directly contributed to the name change to California College of the Arts.

Another benefit: The process of deciding whether or not to change Saint Mary's name offers an opportunity to bring together all of the institution's key constituencies and engage them in a substantive conversation about the future. This could be a very useful launching pad for a capital campaign.

PROJECT STATUS *and* NEXT STEPS

- > Generation is developing a concept and visual direction for a new set of student recruitment materials and admissions-relevant sections of the Web site. All forms of communication will balance the College's brand with using graphic elements that will make the greatest impression on high school students.
- > After refining this approach Generation will test the positioning and the view book concept with four focus groups of prospective Saint Mary's students in two different geographic markets: Walnut Creek and Burbank. Groups will be segmented based on their degree of interest in Saint Mary's: unlikely applicants and likely matriculants.
- > Based on the findings from the focus groups, Generation will further refine the concept and write the text and take the photographs for all of the recruitment pieces and Web enhancements.