

Notes and Background

Our CSUCI interviews, survey research, competitor/marketplace analysis, and review of CSUCI's current brand messaging have resulted in extensive reference material. As expected, our work both validates many assumed basics about your reputation and illustrates the gravity of upcoming decisions of substance you need to make.

While we are leveraging more to build the following Foundation than noted here, several considerations rose above others in determining what would be both compelling and believable for the work ahead.

- 1. Who do you want to be?** One of your most basic yet critical questions looming. A 20-year-old institution has only started to develop a clear and powerful brand, and this is exactly where CSUCI lives in 2022-23. You have an exceptional opportunity to define the next 20 years, building on what you have already achieved, make adjustments, and explore new and compelling assets.

One thing is clear – you have to extend far beyond the current brand introduction where you define yourself as *student-centered, innovative, and creative*. Little in the research we have just completed would hint at the latter two, and *student-centered* is superfluous as every college or university exists for that very reason. These are not attributes that can drive a distinct CSUCI brand.

- 2. Focus to raise overall brand reputation.** Per stakeholders, CSUCI can be described top-of-mind today as *a fine affordable and convenient university for students who want a supportive and welcoming environment*. “Affordable” and “convenient” are not positions of strengths for a Cal State University; “welcoming” (the leading descriptor by stakeholders) is laudable regarding a community, but strong and clear academic and outcome/success attributes would make so much difference.

As a guide to your challenges, these interrelated attributes as delivered by CSUCI currently fall below expectations of prospective students:

- Quality of my major/department
- Graduates get good jobs in their fields
- Opportunities for hands-on learning opportunities

Counselors share many of the same perceptions of CSUCI with you falling below expectations in these ways:

- Quality of majors
- Quality of academic advising
- Putting students first
- Overall academic reputation

- Active student life
- Location in a desirable city, town, or area
- Things to do off-campus for fun

Then, the self-assessment of CSUCI by your internal audiences who live the University every day, CSUCI does not live up to these attributes as desired by prospective students:

- Quality of my major
- Quality of academic advising
- Putting students first
- Employers value a degree from the university
- Graduates get great jobs in their field
- Cost of attendance
- Internship opportunities
- Overall value of the education
- Hands-on learning opportunities
- Things to do off-campus for fun

Finally, when asked in what areas they want CSUCI to improve its reputation, stakeholders listed the following top five (in order):

- Affordability (see #6)
- Student life
- Professional preparation
- Engaged learning opportunities
- Campus facilities

Right or wrong, perception is the ultimate reality, and so our collective goal is to change perception. This means that CSUCI must build trust in each of these with evidence, in the form of stories, data, and examples. But therein lies another consideration.

3. **Top findings and the most important thing.** Our detailed research led to a number of recommendations around themes, all important but in different ways to different audiences. These themes and how to address each included:

- Improve perceptions of outcomes
- Invest in student life
- Embrace/define location
- Elevate the confidence of your narrative
- “Safe” may be true, but has limits
- Counselors need to be engaged
- Build brand first with stakeholders
- Leverage your strong brand advocates

All of these are important and worthy of consideration in the brand messaging, but the data tells us that focusing on outcomes/success and its supporting attributes and actions is needed to become the appropriate top-of-mind associations with the University.

Between lack of awareness about this success from external audiences and internal both, nothing is more important to prove. And you may well have a powerful story to tell about life after CSUCI, but even stakeholders don't know and/or believe this.

4. **Brand is about behavior.** An ADV tenet is important here in our evaluation of current state and with the promises and pillars of your brand in the future. You must deliver on said topic before promoting it.

For example, there are issues with academic advising as the data suggests and CSUCI needs to first ensure academic advising is measurably improved and truly delivers to be worthy of strong promotion. Laudable objectives (as in the below Vision) are important and needed to set goals, but better promotion of a deficient area of the University means more people will find out you have a deficient area.

Our take here is that the way CSUCI *acts* is as important to your future than any brand expressions (tagline, storytelling, rankings). From what/how/when/where you offer academic programs to the intentionality of your student support, services, and opportunities, CSUCI needs to constantly align with the world so that promises and pillars are believable, provable, and ultimately build trust.

5. **Mission Informs Brand Foundation.** We always respect a client's stated (and lived) Mission and supporting elements (Vision, Core Values). To this end, we appreciate the current CSUCI Mission and supporting rhetoric and considered it all in this Brand Foundation.

Your Mission is a well-intentioned statement about the "now." It does not strongly describe CSUCI success (only the acquisition of a new perspective) and an inspirational point-of-view. It defines any university – student-centered with integrated learning, graduating broader-minded people.

Placing students at the center of the educational experience, California State University Channel Islands provides undergraduate and graduate education that facilitates learning within and across disciplines through integrative approaches, emphasizes experiential and service learning, and graduates students with multicultural and international perspectives.

Your four pillars about your education are far more important and appropriate to consider in our work ahead, *if you deliver on them*. You promise to each student a breadth of (presented as stated):

- ***Community engagement — valuable experience you need and a chance to make the world better***

- **Integrative** — *CSUCI’s signature interdisciplinary approach*¹
- **International** — *an internationalized curriculum, a diverse campus community, and studying abroad opportunities*
- **Multicultural** — *a campus that reflects the real world; a curriculum that prepares you for it*

6. **Location.** Your location has some theoretically strong positives (proximity to larger population centers and the ocean, beauty) but is not perceived in these terms to either internal or external audiences. In open-ends and interviews, Camarillo is defined as both remote, a small city, and pretty but uninteresting. Being considered isolated creates ambiguity that means location does not hold a leading role in the Brand Foundation.

However, unlike so many other attributes for which you can address substance, this one cannot change – your location in Camarillo is going to stay. The *perception* of that location is all that can be addressed.

While we believe that Camarillo is an asset if portrayed properly and that CSUCI is a regional resource as an educational engine, we need to find the way to talk about the City and location (both setting and proximity) in compelling and authentic ways.

7. **Good value and affordable – it is time to address this narrative.** In our interviews, the word “affordable” was used extensively by different audiences and it appears heavily in the research findings about the University. And true, CSUCI has a lower sticker cost than many other higher education options in California.

However, we feel the cost-only consideration of the “affordable” rubric is simply not as realistic in 2022-23 as so many people cannot simply afford college. Personal debt, grant eligibility v. loans, economic realities after a two-year pandemic – all are pressing families of college-bound children and working adults making a college claiming it is “affordable” is tone-deaf to so much of the audience you target.

Instead, we believe in the idea of *value*, focusing on the broader idea that CSUCI students get far more for what they pay. Such a return-on-investment messaging model is a more compelling approach to this important topic.

8. **Counselors as gatekeepers.** A surprising find in our research was the dearth of knowledge about you from regional high school counselors. More than half of those surveyed didn’t know enough to answer questions about your faculty and staff, internships, outcomes, academic advising, student research, or the value of a CSUCI degree – all very important factors to better guide students in choosing a college.

¹ *This is an interesting description (your “signature”) that is not well explained in benefit-minded terms. It might be a real opportunity not realized.*

The Brand Foundation is developed to consider the University holistically, so the lack of understanding about you from this audience is not a specific issue. However, knowing they do not know you will provide context for what must be a priority plan to engage and inform them once this foundation is accepted.

9. **Your future.** Brand needs to be respectful of the past and present, but as outlined in our research and recommendations, this effort has to be clearly focused on your future. You impact your path forward by every behavioral choice you make, from bold leaps of faith to small adjustments and everything in between. To this end:

- **Leveraging the System Brand.** The CSU system has an established brand, and you should weigh how it can better elevate your recognition locally and regionally. CSU’s expressed brand position is based on such attributes as:
 - Being the most affordable public university system in the U.S.
 - Leading educator for California’s teachers.
 - Produces more career-ready candidates than any other single source.
 - Being among the most diverse university systems in the country.
 - Leading the state’s economic growth, supporting over 150,000 jobs and generating spending of more than \$17 billion.

However, don’t be distracting by talking about being the youngest CSU (first, that’s a feature not a benefit; second, it implies more that you’re not established v. being “most innovative” due to your relative youth) or one of the smallest CSUs (does this make you more personal than anyone else?).

- **Naming.** “Channel Islands” has emerged as a complicated naming convention per our research. There is the practical issue (your main campus is not on an island/islands), the California issue (so if not the Channel Islands, where in California are you?), and the unfortunate legacy iteration (C-SUCKY). Throughout interviews there were shortened references to CI, the Islands, Channel Islands, and the popular CSUCI.

It will be important to establish a singular formal short-hand reference and then be consistent in your communication ahead. It won’t fully mitigate the varied name scenarios, but over time it will establish a narrative.

- **Tagline.** Your various taglines (*Channel Your...*) in play are well-received per our research That said, nothing about it was overwhelmingly beloved either (more than 1/3 of faculty, staff, students, and alumni don’t like it or are neutral).

The good: using part of your name in a tagline helps with awareness, half of the equation for brand reputation (with relevance).

The issue: is there something authentic that is more compelling and/or inspirational to lead future conversations about the University?

CSUCI Brand Foundation

Based on the work to date, we have developed this preliminary **Brand Foundation**. This document will serve as the unifying story that connects all CSUCI constituents and stakeholder groups to a single compelling message platform for the University's use ahead.

First, we need to be clear about what brand is and is not:

- Just as your mission, vision, core values, and strategic plan do, brand underlies all communications. It is the intentional, public face of your strategy. Brand gives order and priority to story selection, to the leading point in a press release, and to the lighting of a photo shoot.
- Brand is mission and strategy, oriented to the outside world—audiences, competitors, and partners. We harmonize your mission, vision, and values with our recent research to define and distinguish your brand position among your chief competitors.
- Though brand and its messaging are oriented to the outside world, your brand must align with stakeholders. How you represent the University must be believable and relevant to internal audiences (including alumni) so that it is genuine and true to CSUCI.
- A strong brand consists of both sharp awareness and compelling relevance—without one or the other, your brand is compromised.
- **Brand marketing** is the coordinated suite of expressions (verbal, visual, experiences) intended to persuade internal and external audiences about CSUCI's brand.
- **Brand marketing is not brand promotion**—such promotion (communication) which we focus on here is a subset of marketing that involves several other aspects of the CSUCI experience (price/cost, place/convenience, product/consumer).

Only when the core brand is solid and consistent can the rich variations of individual programs, initiatives, and goals stand out.

To sum:

- This document provides the brand foundation for both communications and marketing and generates the first layer of brand marketing. It is designed to guide the persuasive and creative expressions of the University and to align all communications, whether persuasive or not, around the brand story.
- The ultimate goal of this structure is to bring focus to CSUCI's complex brand and ensure that you prioritize the most important, impactful elements. It will take discipline to leverage this structure to its full potential, but the rewards to your future make this a worthy investment of time and attention right now.

This Brand Foundation has the following components:

- A **Brand Promise** is what CSUCI promises to deliver those who align with you. It is a statement that captures the differentiated audience benefit and clarifies what the University ultimately delivers to your target audiences. It is used as a compass when developing key messages and communication materials.
- **Brand Pillars** are how CSUCI demonstrates what you deliver to stakeholders. The key words and phrases that provide rationale and supporting proof points bring added dimension to the Brand Promise. These guide your marketing staff and other communicators when developing and executing communication programs.
- **Brand Character** refers to how CSUCI acts. Every brand has a personality, a way of presenting itself to the world. It is a set of human characteristics (adjectives) that define the college's brand's voice, look, and actions in the world. We want to clarify those traits and determine how they'll be expressed and reinforced for subsequent phases.

Promise Statement (the *What*)

What promise CSUCI makes to its priority audiences (in this case, students). It is intentionally succinct and focuses on the primary audience, prospective students.

CSUCI is an inspiring, supportive, and opportunity-rich community that engages and empowers students with a relevant life-changing education.

The Promise De-Constructed

Inspiring: You will find inspiration throughout the CSUCI community in your classrooms, labs, and campus social life. In every action and opportunity, you experience, our University fosters a strong culture of motivation that both evolves the interests you bring with you and ignites new curiosities in driving you forward in life.

Supportive: We are proud of who we are and why we are here. Our students, faculty, and staff work together, push each other, and are dedicated to ensuring you are well-prepared for success in any first, new, or reimagined career. We strive to work with every student, no matter your level, background, goal, or dream. CSUCI is far more than brick-and-mortar, labels, and lectures. Ours is a human-driven education alive with energy and purpose in and beyond the classroom.

Opportunity-rich: CSUCI is an ideal size to foster engagement of all kinds, so student opportunity abounds. From academics to co-curricular offerings to community and regional programming, CSUCI provides students a wealth of choices in a collaborative environment. The University offers a balanced, well-rounded way of life in an active and energetic atmosphere for you to live and learn. These also apply similarly—but distinctly—to our varied student audiences. CSUCI supports our students equally and provides them opportunities in the ways that are appropriate for them.

Community: We are making the conscious choice to define community broadly, as something that includes your academics/learning as well as your living/student life. This focuses then on a holistic “university experience” that defines the CSUCI community – not any one element is more important than another.

Engages and empowers: Our research helped define the best of CSUCI and how the University most effectively impacts you and your fellow students. Everything hinges on participation in your education and building self-worth. Applied learning – hands-on, real-time experiential opportunities – ensures your preparation for your future is relevant. And it helps that our best-fit students share a commonality – they are driven to take initiative and action to find their path. CSUCI is a catalyst for student confidence.

Relevant, life-changing education: CSUCI offers excellent opportunities for you to apply your new knowledge and talents in real-world situations such as hands-on clinical settings, applied research, relevant internships, and a wide range of study abroad possibilities. We provide substance in our academic programs that has real-world applications.

Our students apply the knowledge and skills learned here to their own lives every day, impacting themselves and others in tangible and meaningful ways. Your CSUCI education will make a difference to the businesses, organizations, families, and broader communities with whom you engage. That is the heart of our purpose – to foster a culture where you can experience a life evolution that helps you find your desired future.

Our reason for being is to prepare you for professional and personal success. To this end, we care about traditional professional measures (job placement statistics, individual job performances, graduate school matriculations, roles in society) as well as personal ones (*Did you get the job you planned for? Did you get into the right graduate program? Is this what you wanted in life?*). Regardless, we are committed to aiding each CSUCI student along their journey to find their own way, realizing how each defines “success” will be distinct to the individual.

Brand Pillars (the *How*)

How CSUCI delivers the promise to your audiences.

1. Talented faculty and dedicated staff shape your future

CSUCI is committed to, and driven by, relationships. We achieve greater things by working collectively, coming together to share our ideas and inspire new ones. We find that individual talents, viewpoints, life experiences, and hopes are better when shared.

In particular, faculty and staff are the driving force of CSUCI. In our teaching-first and inclusive community, they are mentors who give emphasis and direction to your life-shaping education. We believe in a strong commitment to the individual. The result—not only a successful future, but the *right* future.

Being committed to each other like this, CSUCI offers engagement *with purpose*. It is a constant with everything we do — the opportunities, the community, real-world learning, and all the exploring, encouraging, and life preparation that happens here every day.

2. Building better futures through interdisciplinary experiences

CSUCI's signature interdisciplinary approach to education is the best preparation for your future. Dynamic classroom learning embracing a multicultural world, an internationalized curriculum, and intentional hands-on experiences here and abroad are all part of your CSUCI experience. And student research opportunities including our extraordinary Santa Rosa Island Research Station foster more complete perspectives on any subject and prepare you to make the world a better place. Such a broad and deep education is a major reason CSUCI is an agent for social mobility – helping people live better lives.

3. Access to resources to help all students

CSUCI provides access to a wealth of supporting resources to use in your pursuit of the right path, be it in your academics, co-curricular experiences, or life choices. Our dedicated community of advisors, counselors, and support staff is here to give a guiding hand in helping you explore your opportunities and shape the right future for you. Take advantage of them and see the result.

4. Right-sized and well-situated

CSUCI is an ideally sized campus within the exceptional California State University system, allowing for personal attention and support while delivering a robust globally minded education.

Similarly, Ventura County and Camarillo make an excellent home, offering a more deliberate pace of life while still providing all the amenities you might need as a college student. And CSUCI is in close proximity to many of California's best natural and man-made offerings – the best of all worlds for the right student.

5. A commitment to open arms and open minds

CSUCI is not just friendly or supportive – most colleges are. Our culture is more than smiles and nods, it is more substantive, a true welcoming environment that welcomes thinking and innovation. And ours is a spirited and special place that sets CSUCI apart from so many similar universities with the way we welcome the world to our campus. Our clubs, organizations, residence halls, and the self-contained community in and out of the classroom builds a bond. And our dedication to community equity and inclusiveness drives all we do.

Best of all, you will always be a proud part of the Channel Islands family – your place in it doesn't end when your education does.

6. A smart investment

The value of your CSUCI degree will be the result of your commitment. Measuring your return on this investment is twofold. There is professional success—being CSUCI-prepared means you get into your desired career and take relevant skills with you into life. Then there is your personal success, the empowerment that comes by growing and succeeding as a person meeting the challenge we offer. By either definition of success, CSUCI is time and money well spent.

Brand Character (Personality)

Empowering. Proud. Practical. Relevant. Collaborative. Transformative. Welcoming. Accepting. Life-Shaping.