



# *From Similar to Standout:* Differentiating Graduate Programs for Competitive Advantage

*Val Fox, Consultant and Principal*

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The Case for Competitive Differentiation

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Differentiation Exercise



# The Case for Competitive Differentiation

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1

# Success Requires Standing Out



## Students Have More Options and Less Mindshare

### Program Proliferation

- Program growth has outpaced conferrals in the past decade
- New non-academic providers have entered the market

### Short Lists are Shorter

Graduate and adult degree completion students apply to fewer schools than undergraduate students.



### Student Mindshare Is Maxed Out

- Average adult is exposed to 4-10K brands/day
- Prospects spend only 90 seconds on a .edu webpage

### Independent Research

80% of applicants are stealth and rely on program information found across digital channels

# Case Study: Who Does This Describe?



## **A Variety of Graduate Degree Programs**

At the University of X, we have dozens of graduate programs across a variety of disciplines so you can design a course of study that aligns with your interests and career objectives.

## **Flexible, Customizable Options**

At UX, our degrees are offered online or in a hybrid format to meet your busy schedule. Many of our degrees offer a variety of concentrations so you can customize your degree for a specialization or industry.

## **Career Advancement**

Gain a competitive edge in your career by pursuing your master's degree at UX. You'll leave with in-demand skills preparing you for leadership positions in a wide array of agencies, organizations and corporations.

## **Academic Excellence**

Unlock your potential in our top-ranked programs helmed by distinguished and dedicated faculty who will help you grow your expertise, access unique research opportunities, and gain real-world experience.

## **Affordability**

Your future is within reach at UX. We are committed to helping you achieve your educational goals with our affordable tuition and merit-based scholarships.



# Many Claims Commonplace or Unreliable

## Twin Pillars of Traditional Branding Don't Help You Stand Out

**Appealing, but Assumed**

**Online**      **Specializations**  
**Flexible**   **In-demand skills**  
**50+ Degrees**   **Global**  
**ROI**      **Innovative**  
**Career Impact**   **Affordable**  
**Academic Excellence**  
**Alumni Network**

**Distinctive, but Unconnected to Audience**



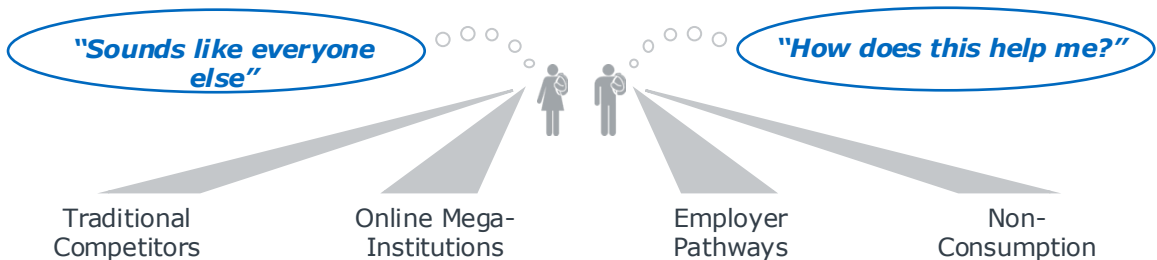
**Traditions and Accolades**

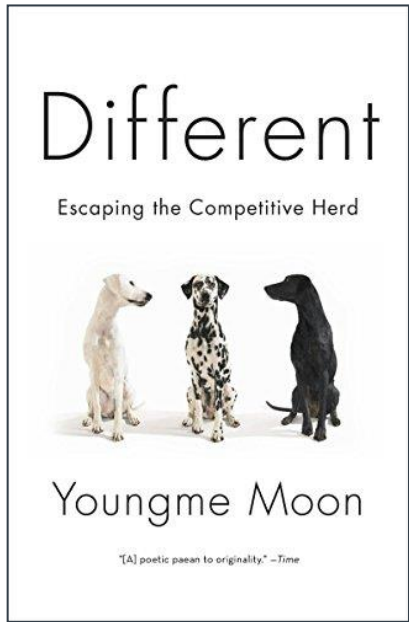
*"Largest research university in a metropolitan setting"*  
*"Oldest liberal arts college in the Plains States"*  
*"First accounting program in New England"*



**Signature Initiatives**

*Experiential Learning*  
*Interdisciplinary Research Center*  
*Holistic Wellness Curriculum*  
*State-of-the-Art Innovation Labs*





- 1 **Augmentation-by-addition** (“New and Improved!”) and **augmentation-by-multiplication** (“32 Flavors!”) are making consumers numb to choices
- 2 In many mature markets, **the differences between products become imperceptible to all but true connoisseurs**, reducing most choices to a simple formula (cheapest, most popular, etc.)
- 3 **When asked what they want, consumers mostly point to our weaknesses**—driving businesses to become more like their competitors instead of focusing on strengths
- 4 **What results is “Herd Mentality” within product categories**—businesses racing to keep up with each other and arriving at the same place despite no actual coordination

“Differentiation is not a competitive strategy.  
It is a means of avoiding competition altogether.”

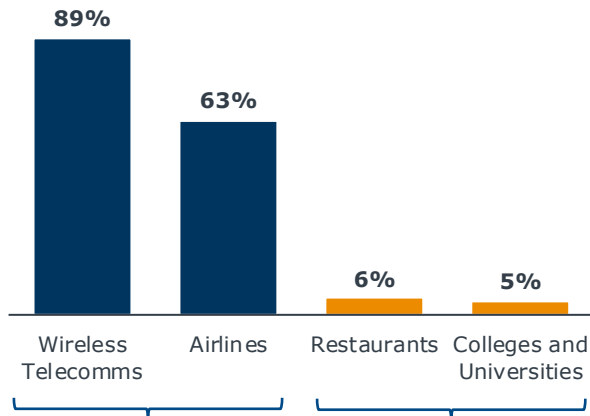
# What Is Your Special Sauce?



## Insights from the Restaurant Industry Apply to Higher Ed

### Higher Ed is a Competitive Market

Market Share of Top 4 Competitors by Industry (Revenue)



#### Oligopolies

- National competition
- Large competitors dominate market
- Little room for new entrants

#### Competitive Markets

- Regional and national competition
- Room for new entrants
- Still competition from market leaders

### Regional Players Can Carve out Share

#### Regional Player

#### Market Leader



#### Regional Players

- Strong regional brand affinity
- Large online and on-ground presence
- Low cost or elite brand

#### Market Leaders

- National marketing reach
- Massive online scale
- Low cost



# A Framework for Differentiation

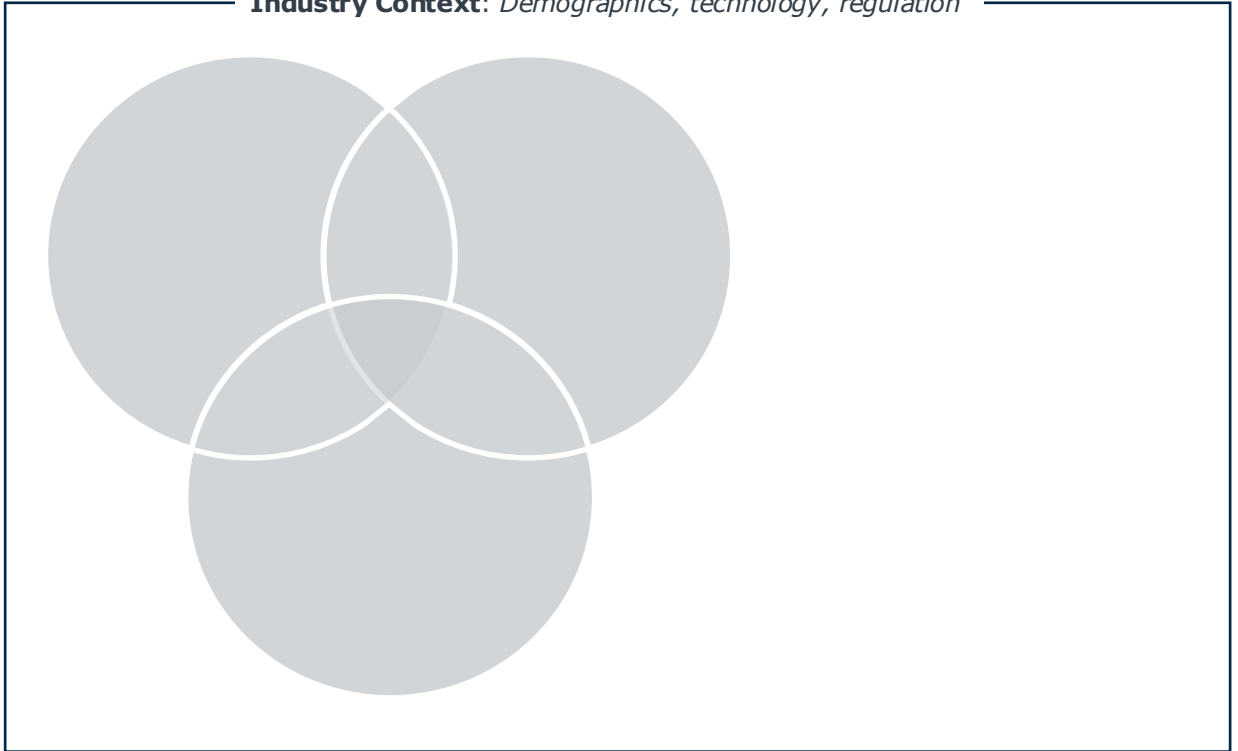
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# 2

# Focusing on Your Differentiation Sweet Spot



**Industry Context:** *Demographics, technology, regulation*

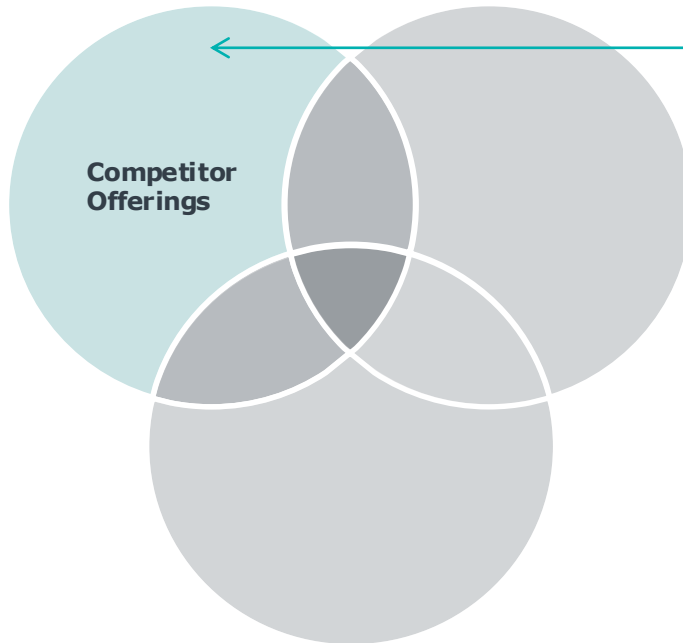


# Focusing on Your Differentiation Sweet Spot



11

**Industry Context:** *Demographics, technology, regulation*



## **Competitors (by Program)**

Who are we competing with?  
When they 'win,' why?

When you 'win,' why?

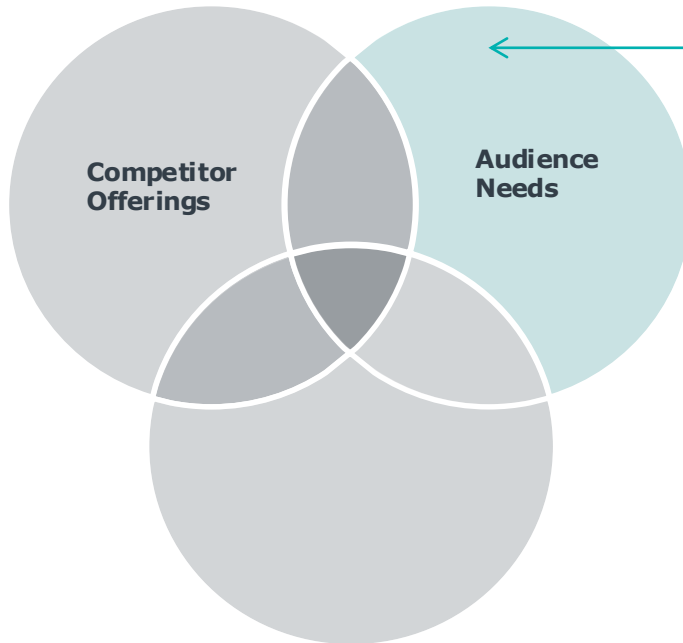
What does this say about your  
reputation and value  
proposition(s) in your regional  
competitive set?

# Focusing on Your Differentiation Sweet Spot



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**Industry Context:** *Demographics, technology, regulation*



## **Target Audience (by Program)**

Who are our “right fit” students?  
How has the answer to that changed, and how will it continue to change?

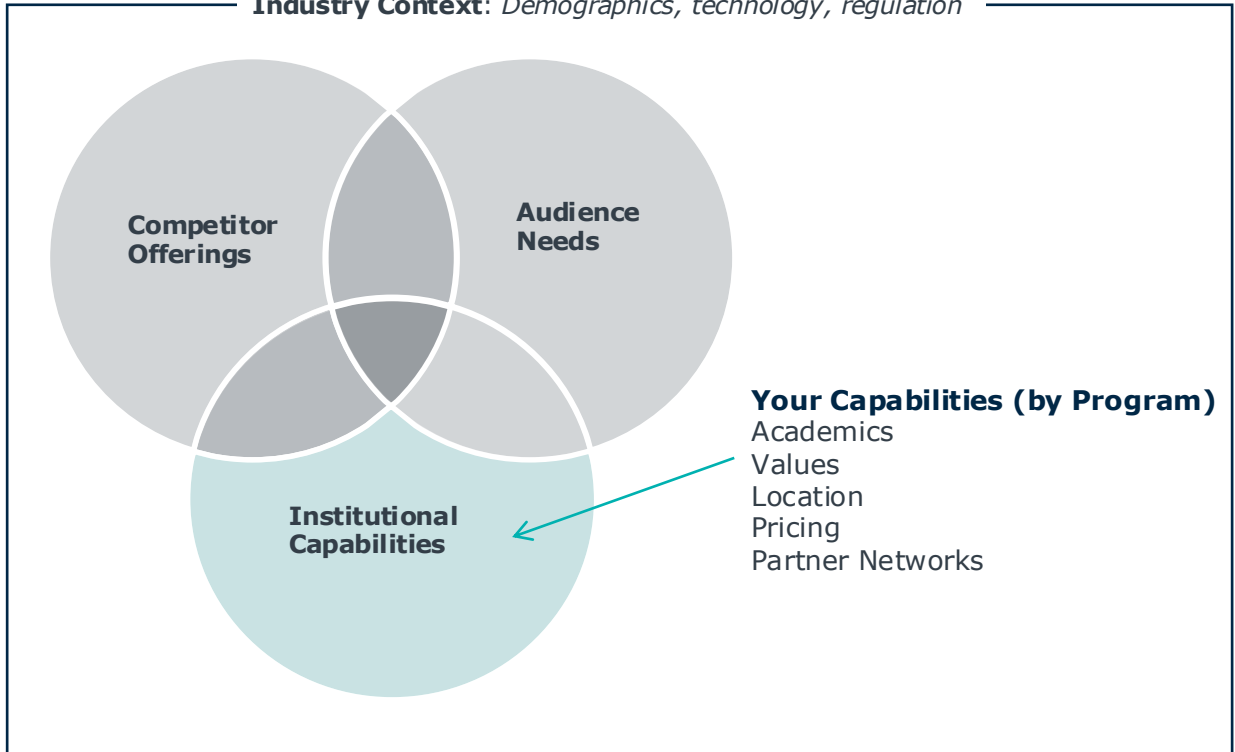
For whom are we NOT the best fit? Why?

What’s changing about what prospective students value?

# Focusing on Your Differentiation Sweet Spot



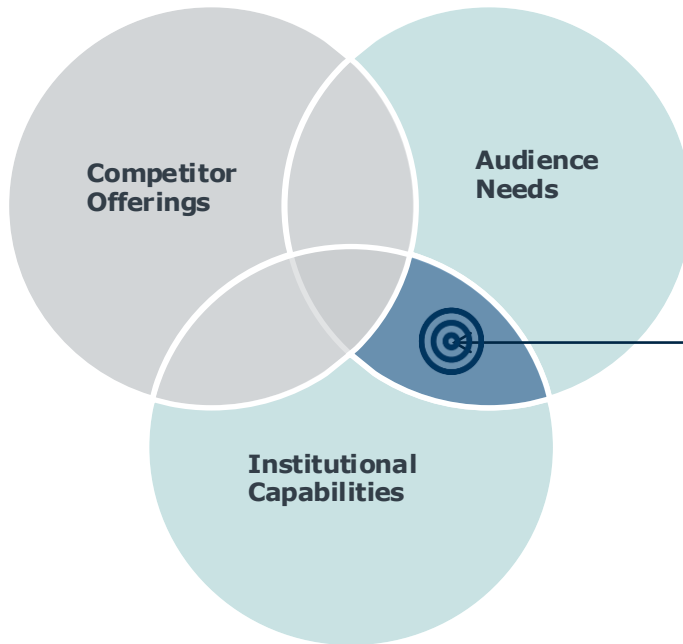
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# Focusing on Your Differentiation Sweet Spot



**Industry Context:** *Demographics, technology, regulation*



**Differentiation Sweet Spot**  
Where your institution meets audience needs in ways competitors can't

*It's the reason your audience chooses you over competitors*

# Evolving Common Claims to Distinct Value Drivers

## Stress-Test Claims Against These Four Criteria



***A Strong Differentiated  
Value Proposition***



### **It's Relevant**

Addresses needs, pains, and gains that matter most to audience

Expressed in audience's language



### **It's Difficult to Replicate**

Unique approach or asset

Outperforms competition substantially on at least one dimension



### **It Reaches the Majority**

Most, if not all audience members participate and receive its benefits

Integrated into core experience (non-optional)



### **It's Provable to the Market**

Outcomes data, social proof, external recognition

Aligned with how audience measures success

# In Action: Evolving from Common Claims



**Audience:** Early career students pursuing a MA in Global Public Policy worried about breaking into field without a network.



**Common Claim:** *Our Masters in Global Public Policy graduates build networks that lead to great careers and global impact.*



## Relevant to Audience

From Day 1, our students gain real-world connections with an orientation led by NGO partners



## Difficulty to Copy

We don't just say "global," we have branch campuses around the world and global partner organizations where students get real-world experience



## Majority of Audience Benefits

All students participate in a semester-long global fieldwork program



## Provable to the Market

- Many students get offers from partner organizations after fieldwork
- Dozens of alumni stories on our website
- Alumni profiled by media outlets



# The Compounding Advantage

Build a defensible and truly unique position in the market

## Distinctive Academics

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

## Student Outcomes

Employment  
 Earnings  
 In-demand Skills  
 Industries  
 Portfolio

## Partner Networks

Alumni  
 Community  
 Employers  
 Industries  
 Global  
 Research

## Staff Characteristics

Credentials  
 Background  
 Teaching Experience  
 Industry Experience  
 Technical Expertise  
 Availability

## Special Services for Target Students

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

## Service Quality Levels

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

## Student Experience

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

## Shared Values

Sustainability  
 Faith-based  
 Social Justice  
 Community Service  
 Wellness  
 Outdoor Life  
 Innovation

## Distinctive Location

Proximity  
 Beauty and Climate  
 Cultural Attractions  
 Recreation Options  
 Regional Economy

## Distinctive Student Services

Advising  
 Mental Health  
 Career Services  
 Financial Aid Support  
 Technology

## Pricing

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

## Brand Character

Exclusivity  
 Quality  
 Higher Purpose  
 Value for Money  
 Lifestyle  
 Disruptive



# Compounding Amplifies Distinction

## 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 dozens of Inc. 5000 companies

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# Compounding Amplifies Distinction

## Community Service

All students in community leadership training



## Global

International field placement with NGO



## Mental Health

Daily mindfulness and meditation programming

### Distinctive Academics

Program Variety  
Program Quality  
Unique Programs  
Stackable Credentials  
Flexible Delivery  
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# Differentiation Exercise

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## 1 Identify a Graduate Program

## 2 Using Differentiation “Starter Kit”

- What are your top competitors claiming? Cross those OFF the list
- Highlight 1-2 remaining items you can claim.

## 3 Using “Value Driver Imperatives”

Brainstorm how you can make each relevant, difficult to replicate, reach majority, and provable.

## 4 Peer Discussion: Grade your Value Drivers

# Differentiation “Starter Kit”



## 70+ Potential Value Drivers

### Distinctive Academics

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# Value Driver Imperatives



**Relevance to Audience**



**Difficulty for Competitors to Copy**



**Share of Audience Enjoying Benefits**



**Provability to the Market**



# Grade Your Value Drivers



## Relevance to Audience

Grade:

*How will you improve your grade?*

*When can you realistically achieve your goal?*

*What resources or investments are needed?*



## Difficulty for Competitors to Copy

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