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# Suffolk University ad campaign plays up identity, value

By Taryn Luna | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JUNE 27, 2014

Suffolk University, a smaller school surrounded by some of the world's most famous colleges, is launching a new ad campaign that takes a sharp poke at academic elites and snobby students.

In one ad, the Boston school portrays itself as “a university whose students have their nose to the grindstone instead of stuck up in the air.” Another describes Suffolk as a school for students who “rely on their will to succeed, not their father’s will.”

The edgy new campaign that brands Suffolk as a school for the common student will be launched Friday with ads in print, radio, television, online, and inside MBTA trains. It is the first university-wide marketing effort at Suffolk in eight years.

Earlier this month, the university decided to freeze salaries for the coming fiscal year due to an anticipated \$11 million revenue shortfall and a “challenging enrollment environment.” Administrators expect a smaller-than-anticipated law school class, a slight decline in the ranks of their new undergraduates, and flat graduate enrollment.

The ad campaign aims to give the school of fewer than 9,000 students a clearer identity in a region where it can be overshadowed by better-known colleges and universities.

“Most people know Suffolk is here, but if you polled people and asked them about Suffolk, they might not have anything very specific to say,” said James McCarthy, the president of the university. “What we’re trying to do is deepen awareness and tell people who we are and what we do and the type of students that we have.”

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Most Suffolk students cannot count on an inheritance. Nor can they rely on an influential parent to pull strings on their behalf. But they can rely on a work ethic fueled by passion, grit, and determination. Which is both recognized and appreciated. In fact, employers in the region maintain that Suffolk grads are the best to hire. For more information, visit [suffolk.edu](http://suffolk.edu).

Suffolk University

Devito/Verdi, a New York agency, created the tongue-in-cheek ads to help Suffolk University stand out from the pack of Boston colleges.

Suffolk hired DeVito/Verdi, a midsize ad agency in New York with a record of creating clever, attention-grabbing campaigns for Legal Sea Foods, to help the university stand out from the pack of Boston colleges.

The agency interviewed students, alumni, administrators, and others to “uncover the truthful essence of the school,” said Ellis Verdi, president of the agency.

One recurring theme: The school’s history serving local students who may not have received a university education otherwise. Suffolk began in 1906 as an evening law school educating young immigrants in the parlor of founder Gleason L. Archer’s Roxbury home.

“Suffolk came to be the place where smart, hard-working, dedicated people could get an education and do something with it,” McCarthy said. “These were people who came from the Boston neighborhoods. That’s still the case.”

Fifty-four percent of undergraduates are in-state residents, and 69 percent of alumni live in Massachusetts.

Despite its working-class roots, Suffolk ranks among the more expensive universities in Massachusetts for undergraduates, according to a recent Globe analysis of tuition expenses.

During the 2012 to 2013 academic year, the “net” tuition cost at Suffolk was \$31,263 — a figure that takes financial aid into account. That net tuition figure puts Suffolk on par with the likes of Boston College and Boston University.

The net tuition costs at elite universities like Harvard and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology are much lower, thanks mostly to income from huge endowments used to offer generous financial aid to students.

One of the new Suffolk ads points out that its law school has produced more Massachusetts state judges — 119 to date — “than Harvard, Yale, and Columbia combined.” Another draws attention to 30 of the 76 radiation therapists employed by Mass General Hospital being Suffolk alumni.

The only television commercial in the campaign is a scene from the 1954 film “On the Waterfront,” in which actor Marlon Brando utters the famous “I coulda been a contender” line. The scene is followed by the words: “Be a contender.”

Verdi hopes the cumulative message of the campaign is that students with passion and desire can receive a great education at Suffolk. If it’s successful, he said, the university will move up a few spots on students’ lists of potential colleges and make others consider it for the first time.

“After you see the ads, you’re not going to call up Suffolk and say you want to go there, and I don’t expect you to,” Verdi said. “But I do expect you over time to have a more positive predisposition to the school.”

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