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## Seven Essential Characteristics of Sustainable Schools and Colleges

As we brave our way through economic uncertainty, a rapidly shifting education industry, and changing consumer mindsets, I have been thinking a lot lately about the most successful characteristics of independent schools and colleges. In our work with clients throughout the nation, what are the attributes of the institutions that are thriving? While there are numerous explanations for success, there are seven characteristics that set these schools apart.

1. **Clear Value Proposition** - Sustainable schools and colleges have a clear value proposition. They are client-centered, understanding their students and parents, what they want, and how they define success. They have identified a small number of important consumer benefits that differentiate them from their competitors, focus on them in their program development, and communicate them relentlessly to the consumers.
2. **Strategic Enrollment Management and Marketing** - Sustainable schools have learned how to effectively integrate the best practices of recruitment, retention, financial aid, information management, research, and marketing. They have identified funding sources - from the right fit audiences and proper programs - and they know the strategic relationship between price, aid, and their consumer. They are disciplined, hire excellent staff, and have a strategic enrollment and marketing plan in place. They take the guesswork out of enrollment and have effectively leveraged this area of the institution, funding it properly and self-organizing accordingly.
3. **Clear and Established Identity** - Sustainable schools and colleges have an institutional identity that is both remarkable and memorable. They understand who they are - and who they are not - and they long ago stopped trying to be all things to all people. They have short, memorable mission, vision, and core values statements, a mature and effective educational philosophy, and they infuse them into their promotional materials. In fact, their promotion is at best merely revelation, not quirky taglines that sound like other schools.
4. **Distinctive Culture** - Culture eats strategy for breakfast. Sustainable schools and colleges have developed a culture that attracts people. They have a "secret sauce" and have learned how to bottle it. They evoke a palpable feeling to visitors, demonstrating that there is something different and authentic about them. Visitors can feel that there is something special about the place, and they share that feeling with others.
5. **Excellent Product** - Sustainable schools and colleges have an excellent academic program. Whether it is a small collection of flagship or signature programs, a



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distinctive setting for learning, or an unusually gifted faculty, they attract students from further distances and with higher capacity to afford them because they perceive the product is superior. And, it is.

6. **Strategically Oriented** - Sustainable schools and colleges are always strategically poised, operating with a three to five year strategic plan in place, but revisiting it year to year. They are culturally agile and externally oriented, reading the tea leaves of culture, and constantly challenging their assumptions about the future. They have set a strategic course of direction, but are nimble enough annually to make adjustments. And, they only focus on five or fewer strategic priorities at any given time. They are focused.
7. **Luck** - Call it the X Factor, but sustainable schools and colleges have some luck. Something external to them is working in their favor. Perhaps it is a booming city, a stunning setting, or deteriorating alternative choices in their market. They have identified this market opportunity or gap and have exploited it.

While there are many other elements of great schools and colleges, these are the characteristics that we see most often. Use it as a checklist and ask yourself and your colleagues how your institution stacks up. And, share it with others.