



Redrawing Boundary Lines: Becoming a Place-Based University

For centuries one could safely assume that a great university was contained within the perimeter of its campus. Replete with a library, lecture halls, and other accouterments for learning, it was first and foremost a place, a built environment that required the physical presence of its students, faculty, and staff. Even today, as we head further into the third decade of the 21st century, we still think of universities this way. Their “placeness” seems completely obvious.

Over the years, various technologies have worked to change the way we think about education and “place” — including radio, television, and the internet. Yet “placeness” has remained paramount, even with the rise of wholly online universities. In fact, most institutions of higher education in the U.S. have embraced online instruction, even as they emphasize the primacy of their physical locations and treat their campuses as being nearly synonymous with their identity.

Today there is an emerging profile of a different kind of university: a “place-based” institution not bound to one location, as illustrated in figure 1. Often operating multiple campuses, “place-based” institutions are expanding brand visibility by delivering academic offerings in person and online irrespective of location. They see each instance of “placeness” as an asset and a means to better realizing their individual missions.



Expect more universities in the decade ahead to move from a place-bound to a place-based conceptualization as they seek to maximize the value and extend the reach of their educational assets and enhance their impact and economic sustainability.

Actions to Consider

- **Strategically select physical operations:**
Crucial to conceptualizing place-based higher education is selecting the most relevant places to operate — where the institution's value proposition is aligned to the needs of the market and where the interests of economic development, education, industry, and human capital intersect and are mutually reinforcing. Doing this effectively requires awareness of the institution's value proposition — that is, an understanding of the institution's true competencies, limitations, and complementarities with its community and linked industries and organizations.

- **Integrate the physical and the virtual:**
Universities that succeed in being place-based institutions integrate in-person, hybrid, and fully online instruction to reach the learners

they are best positioned to serve. Doing this effectively requires understanding the dynamic needs of audiences in a market, the kinds of education offerings — the credentials, skills, or experiences — that will address those needs, and the university's role as an agent of economic development for its regions.

It is no longer necessary for universities to operate solely where they first emerged simply because that is where their brand first took root. The best universities will seek to serve in multiple geographies where the value they can provide will extend the mission.



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