



Brian Wm. Niles

Overthrowing Dead Culture

**A Vision to Change the
World of College Recruiting**

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We started TargetX in 1998 on the idea that there is a growing disconnect between how students search for and select the right college and how colleges communicate with them. Over the past twelve years, the TargetX team has challenged the status quo of college admissions and recruiting through regular speaking engagements, blogging, tweeting, podcasting, and webcasting in an endless pursuit to reduce this disconnect and help our clients succeed and prosper in the new world of college admissions.

This book, *Overthrowing Dead Culture*, is a culmination of that effort to date.

And while my name is on it, it has come together thanks to the talent and dedication of the TargetX team. While our clients get to work with these wonderful folks on an occasional basis, I get to work with them every day.

I couldn't imagine doing it with anyone else.

We hope you enjoy reading *Overthrowing Dead Culture*.

I welcome your feedback to me personally
at niles@targetx.com. Best wishes and peace.

—Brian Wm. Niles, CEO

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The Change

We ourselves must be the change we want to see in the world.
—Mahatma Gandhi

It seems that over the past one to two decades, colleges have lived in the world of “if we build it, they will come.”

Over this period of time, demographics and easy access to funding for families have converged to provide colleges a well-lit path to profitability and perhaps a false sense of comfort. Tuition has continued to outpace the consumer price index and yet relatively few colleges have had to close their doors because of a lack of demand. The number of high school graduates going on to college has continued to increase and colleges have met consumers’ materialistic needs by building fancy residence halls, fitness centers, and technology infrastructure. In addition, funding for college, primarily via student loans, has been abundant and widely accessible.

But that was then and this is now. Today we have reached a tipping point—the point where what seemed to make sense before suddenly doesn’t, and not seeing it and adjusting to it threatens our survival. And yet many of us saw this coming. As in the 1990s when the technology boom led to overinflated stock prices of companies that didn’t have a business model to support them, the education bubble may be about to burst. We’ll discuss this further in other chapters, but suffice it to say I’m not the only one wondering what’s next.

Colleges need to learn how to do one thing right now, more than anything: manage and embrace change. While it’s easy to pay lip service to change, actually implementing it is another matter.

I say so not just from a thorough review of the past and current collegiate management culture but also from personal experience. Working as an academic recruiter

Instituting Change in College Admissions

As humans, we tend to be change averse—and no more so than in the higher education industry. You’ve heard the definition of insanity—constantly doing the same thing over, and over expecting a different result.

Genuine progress requires three big changes, and we’ll detail those changes later in the book. Success in admissions recruiting requires the following:

- a change in campus culture: “it takes a campus to recruit a student”
- a focus on authenticity: an acceptance of who you are (and who you are not)
- a forward-thinking attitude versus “we’ve always done it this way”

first at my alma mater and then as a director at a midsize regional university, I found attempts to innovate a tired, “we’ve always done it this way” system was like beating my head against the wall. Leadership didn’t see the value in new technology—it kept adding programs because competitors had them. Plus, we didn’t get the resources we needed to do our job and college admissions staffers were some of the most underpaid people on campus.

But with each new idea and each investment into the principles I felt would work, I eventually laid the groundwork for TargetX, the company that would make “overthrowing dead culture” a mantra to live by for college admissions.

But as I said, change isn’t easy. The first step is having a plan. As Winston Churchill once said, there is nothing wrong with change, if it is in the right direction. However, this assumes that leadership and others see the need for change. I felt I could be more successful in facilitating change with many universities than while working at one.

For more than a decade, we’ve worked hard to develop a personal attitude and philosophy to help colleges overcome the old ways of thinking—ways that were holding college recruiters in the technological dark ages. At the root of our thinking was a belief in authenticity—the idea that, when you boil everything down, what consumers really want to know is that you’re being true to yourself.

Part of the need to be authentic is that the marketplace demands it these days. In the 1980s, when the baby boomer generation dried up and we didn’t have enough people in our dormitory rooms, colleges embraced marketing. Only a few years earlier the College Board launched the student search service, so we at least had a platform to begin fostering change—a place to buy names of prospective students.

Before that, colleges really didn't do "marketing" (in fact not until the 1990s did we even feel comfortable using that word). Back in the 1980s and even before that you pretty much had a catalog, a simple application form and a letter of acceptance or denial—and that was it.

But demographics altered, at least temporarily, the college admissions landscape. All of a sudden we had to get aggressive about marketing because most schools are tuition driven and in the mid-1980s there was a dearth of high school graduates. The proverbial viewbook and admissions video were born, recruiters hit the road for weeks at a time going to high schools and attending college fairs, telemarketing was used, and admissions processes were expanded upon.

Marketing concepts began to solidify in collegiate admissions departments in the 1990s. Companies started talking about branding. "What's your brand?" and "Everyone's got to have a brand" were the buzzwords of the day. I remember it well. You would talk to a new university president back then and, invariably, he or she would expound on the school's branding initiative and tout the new "tagline" developed by an expensive creative marketing firm.

But, as I said earlier, that was then and this is now. Branding was an interesting concept, but in college admissions there is theory and there is execution. Branding fit the bill for the former, but not for the latter. Brand efforts ended up being more who the college wanted to be seen as, not what was seen as reality by their audience.

Today, we increasingly know what works. We believe that now you're going to be hearing more and more about the term "authenticity." But in the insulated world of many in higher education administration, the idea of authenticity becomes lost among the more mainstream marketing approaches governing recruiting. Most schools are more interested in pushing a brand made physical by a glossy, idealized version of the truth. Yet, ironically, most have "Lux" or "Veritas" in their motto or on their seal.

As Jeff Kallay, vice president of consulting at TargetX and self-anointed "Apostle of Authenticity," explains, "Most marketing and advertising render inauthenticity. It's a phoniness-generating machine. College websites, viewbooks—the photography is completely phony." You know those shots—the backpack-toting, awkwardly assembled, very attractive (and very diverse) group of smiling students, posing in front of the most "collegiate" building on campus. They attempt to show an environment that just doesn't exist.

Search Youtube.com for "honest college ad"—a television commercial for the fictitious "Quendelton State University." It explains inauthenticity in a very funny way ending with, "If we were a good university, we wouldn't have a commercial." *Ouch!*

But here is the reality. Jeff tours five to seven campuses a month and talks to many students, asking them, “Why did you choose this school?” Most of them tell Jeff, “I visited and it felt right.” That’s it, but the answer is a powerful one. In today’s hyper-capitalistic consumption society brands are mirrors. A lot of schools are holding up mirrors that are dirty and foggy and are not reflective of the true nature of the school.

Consequently, despite all the effort schools put into their slick, focus-group-like marketing, the fact remains that a student’s thought process when choosing a college is based more on feeling than logic. Rather than point to statistics or testimony or reputation, most students choose their college because it feels like “the right-fit.”

And yet if the college isn’t going to be true to itself in its marketing and recruiting efforts, its retention rate will surely display its mistakes. There are two main reasons why 60 percent of students attend more than one college before graduating (U.S. Department of Education, 2006) and 53 percent take up to six years to complete their degree (U.S. Department of Education, 2009): they cannot afford it or they wanted something else.

The second reason bothers me because it is avoidable. If the college is authentic in its promotion and gives students the full opportunity to experience what is real before they make the decision to enroll, they are more likely to persist through to graduation at that institution. But instead, colleges continue to try to control a barely honest depiction of their school at the expense of the student (and eventually the college).

Getting Real: Staging an Experience

Of course the problem with terms and phrases like “authenticity” and “the right-fit” is that they don’t lend themselves to images or statistics—the kind of information schools use in their attempt to win over recruits. Yet, students are looking for something unquantifiable and intangible. How can schools give students what they really want?

That question is the crux of the “experience economy”—a concept that is at the foundation of what TargetX is attempting to do in the college recruiting game. Coined by authors B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore in their 1999 Harvard Business School Press book of the same name, the experience economy is one in which consumers are no longer seeking out goods or services—they want experiences. And what businesses must to do to thrive in this type of economy is give consumers that experience, which can be anything from a pleasant memory to, in the case of colleges and universities, a transformation.

According to Pine and Gilmore, the experience economy has five ways of marketing a product or service. The five themes are based on one of the authors’ key points—because of technology, increasing competition, and the increasing expectations of

consumers, services today are starting to look like commodities. Pine and Gilmore say that products can be placed on a continuum from undifferentiated (referred to as commodities) to highly differentiated. Just as service markets build on goods markets, which in turn build on commodity markets, so transformation and experience markets build on these newly commoditized services, such as Internet bandwidth and consulting help.

The classification for each stage in the evolution of products is the following:

- A commodity business charges for undifferentiated products.
- A goods business charges for distinctive, tangible things.
- A service business charges for the activities you perform.
- An experience business charges for the feeling customers get by engaging it.
- A transformation business charges for the benefit customers (or “guests”) receive by spending time there.

Higher education is ultimately selling a transformative experience. Students view college as not only a means to secure a good career, but a chance to grow and evolve as a human being. Being away from family, meeting new friends, going to parties—the transformation experience is already formed in the student’s mind before he even steps foot on a real campus.

In the experience economy, the idea of providing that experience and a college’s need to be authentic go hand in hand. As Pine and Gilmore point out in their other book, *Authenticity*, people are looking for something deeper from companies these days. Consumers are more sophisticated; the ways in which they interact with companies are more varied and have fewer controls in place. As mentioned before, consumers—especially teenagers—are adept in the art of sniffing out corporate marketing and other perceived inauthentic modes of communication. Brochures with photos of perfectly groomed, neatly posed students? Statistics reaped from some faceless polling organization? Those are inauthentic, and it’s why they don’t work that well anymore in college recruiting.

Colleges are also selling a premium-priced service. Think Starbucks. It’s still coffee at the heart of it, but they are selling the experience and customization. Sound familiar? And they get away with selling it at a premium price (if you had asked me ten years ago whether I would spend \$3.50 on a cup of coffee some day, I’d think you were off your rocker!). But instead of embracing the experience and justifying the premium price accordingly, we discount our price, devaluing the benefit derived from attending our institution.

The Experience Economy

In *The Experience Economy*, Pine and Gilmore describe the experience economy as the one following the agrarian, the industrial, and the most recent service economy.

Businesses must orchestrate memorable events for their customers, they argue, and that memory itself becomes the product—the “experience.” More advanced experience businesses can begin charging for the value of the “transformation” that an experience offers, for example as education offerings might do if they were able to participate in the value that is created by the educated individual. This, they argue, is a natural progression in the value added by the business over and above its inputs.

Although the concept of the experience economy was born in the business field, it has crossed frontiers to tourism, architecture, nursing, urban planning and other fields. The experience economy is also considered a main underpinning for customer experience management—an important theme for twenty-first century colleges and universities.

The Business of Education

So, what does TargetX do to help colleges be themselves online, in print, and in person? Well, let's put aside, just for a moment, everything that's been discussed so far. Forget about authenticity and put the Internet out of your mind. What TargetX really does to change recruiting is abide by a principle that, while seemingly obvious, often gets overlooked in the high-minded, noble world of higher education. And that principle is that colleges are first and foremost a business, and recruiting is a sales effort.

Colleges are businesses and students (and their parents) are their customers. Colleges provide a product or service, they take money in return for that product or service, they have expenses and pay employees, and they may or may not make a profit at the end of the day. That's a business. Once we accept that, we will start to rethink a few things including our vision, who we hire, what resources we provide, and where we invest.

In the multitude of seminars and presentations I give, I invariably point out that the main problem inherent in the old college recruiting model is that we forget that, as admissions professionals, we are really salespeople.

Now before you get angry and slam down this book, let's make sure we're not thinking about the traditional type of salesperson. The first thing most people envision when they think of a salesperson is the one found on a used car lot who is stereotyped as dishonest, manipulative and heartless. That is not a good salesperson.

A good salesperson is one who has something to provide that he or she believes in and is looking for people who are looking for that something. It's matching a product or service to the right customer. Sounds a lot like how I was trained as an admissions counselor almost twenty years ago.

If you accept the premise that admissions professionals are actually sales people, you may start to make some different decisions. Is it really in your best interest to hire a recent graduate who has no experience selling anything? Do you think it would be a better idea to provide your admissions staff regular professional sales training programs? What technology choices would you make? Would you give them the tools (computer, cell phone, customer relationship management, etc.) they need to get the job done?

What TargetX recognizes—and what is at the heart of its approach to recruiting—is that a school needs to balance the need for authenticity with the real business skills it takes to be successful. A school needs to find the right people for the job, and then needs to give them the right training to get the job done. This has been the human resources philosophy of TargetX from day one. Hire the best people you can afford, pay them well, give them what they need, and get out of their way.

Stories Not Stats, People Not Programs

So, colleges need to be authentic, and they need to develop a keen business mind-set. Clearly, the old ways of trying to reach out to students are seen as out of touch by today's college-bound population.

So there's that *change* issue again. How to adapt? How to revolutionize? How to overcome decades of atrophied admissions strategies?

It's all too easy to simply say "go online" because that's just a medium. The message is as important and is common to online, print, and in-person activities.

Many years ago I heard Michael Sexton, the director of admissions at Lewis and Clark College, say, "Stories not stats. People not programs." It was my professional "ah ha!" moment. Look at most college websites or viewbooks and what you'll find is a bunch of statistics about the school ("founded in 1856, we have over 5,000 students and a student-to-faculty ratio of ... blah blah blah") and a list of programs and activities—most of which you could slap another college's logo on and call it a day.

Up until the advent of the Internet, much of what college recruiting had been about was what we call “talk-at” marketing—where the medium, the message and the timing are all controlled by the admissions office when in fact today’s young generation grew up experiencing interactive (or *talk with*) media, particularly online.

The most authentic thing about a college is the people who go there and the stories they can share. Embrace stories—online, in print, and in person.

After all, authenticity thrives on the Internet. It’s the breeding ground for the revolutionary, warts-and-all social media giants like MySpace, Facebook, and Twitter. There’s no branding or marketing involved—users create the content, usually with no larger audience in mind than their friends. Social media is the natural response from a generation that had grown cynical of the transparent, inauthentic ways mega corporations have tried to curry their favor. And colleges are in the perfect position to harness it.

When we started TargetX in 1998, we were looking for a way to reach students online. They weren’t coming out to college and graduate fairs like they used to—they were going online and getting the information they needed. And it wasn’t always accurate and sometimes simply not what we wanted out there. But it was as real as it could get and we couldn’t hide the warts anymore. And yet still some colleges believe they control the message, eschewing social networks, blogs, and instant messaging, fearing something bad might be said.

And by the way, the only step of the recruiting funnel a college controls is if they decide to accept or reject the student’s application. That’s it. The student controls every other stage of the process (if they inquire, apply, deposit, enroll, persist), as well as what they decide to read and write online about you.

Back then, of course, there was no Facebook or MySpace and the Internet was still in its infancy as far as being a mass communication tool. I’m not going to snow you—we did see some promise in technology tools geared toward college admissions; we just needed to figure out how to fit the stodgy, formal world of college recruiting into this exciting new online frontier. We started with email recruiting—what has become commonplace today (spam and all) was new and exciting—which was an easy, inexpensive way to reach a lot of people quickly and measure the results in real time.

In fact, the night we figured that out was the night we scribbled everything down on a cocktail napkin, the night TargetX was born.

Ten Ways to Manage Change

Over the past ten years of trying to figure this stuff out, I've come up with ten key themes in fostering change in college admissions and higher education leadership.

1. **Differentiate or Die** Each college must dig deep inside and determine who they are and, perhaps more important, who they are not. This takes visionary leaders who must make more strategic decisions where the answer is “no” than they may be comfortable with. Passing on perceived good opportunities in favor of other, more authentic ones is sound strategy. It starts at the top and must be fed to the front line to communicate why your institution should be chosen over another. Positioning against your competitors (note I didn't call them “peer institutions”) takes skill and experience. But it also takes a visionary to get the ball rolling.
2. **Do What You Do Best (and Outsource the Rest)** Colleges are in business to educate. They are not in business to provide food services, run a bookstore, manage administrative technology, or oversee housing, just to name a few. Find the areas where someone else has figured out a more cost-effective way to provide them and get them off your plate. Then focus on what you do best. You'll thank yourself in the morning.
3. **Get Everyone Onboard (or Get Them Off)** Look first at your management team. Are they the right players? Are they in the right position? Who are you looking out for as future leaders and who saps you of your energy because they “just don't get it”? You need the right players on your team, and not always those who agree with you. Our philosophy is *hire people smarter than us*. Do you? Does your campus entirely embrace recruiting? Read the story about Elon University in George Keller's *Transforming a College*.
4. **Share Information (Especially Financials)** Information is power. Empower your people. Give them the information they need to make sound decisions. Sometimes this is financial: many times this is your vision as a department or institutional leader. Don't hold anything back (except for compensation data). The more they know, the more they can help (if you follow the previous tip).
5. **Question Everything** Get out of your office, eat lunch with your students, ask them questions—they are the only ones who can tell you what it is like to be a “customer” of your college or university. Ask your prospective students at each stage of the funnel, “Are you still interested in us?” “Is there something that might not make us a good fit?” “What do you need me to do to make this happen?”
6. **Watch Your Language** Start using words like *business, sales, customers, return on investment*. People may at first look at you funny, but they'll catch on. It wasn't too long ago the word *marketing* bothered people in higher education, but we got over it and ended up embracing it.

7. **Read Different Stuff** It's fine to read the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Campus Technology*, *Academic Impressions*, and other industry-based publications; you are not the only ones marketing to this audience. There are others with more resources from which you can learn. Get a subscription to the magazine *Fast Company*. Pick up a copy of *Advertising Age* and subscribe to the daily email newsletter. The same goes for professional development. Instead of attending an industry event, go to All Things Digital or Think About or YPulse, to name a few.
8. **Avoid Paralysis through Leadership** Higher education administration was founded on the idea of *shared governance*, meaning basically all have a place at the table. And while the "it takes a community" approach makes for a unique and special environment, it can't paralyze us from decision-making. A committee cannot be made accountable—only individuals can be. That doesn't take away from involving others in the information-gathering process. But colleges today, more than ever, need clear vision and decisive leadership. Hire great people, give them the resources they need, get out of their way, and hold them accountable for their actions or inactions.
9. **Embrace Urgency** Now is not the time to have a group of team members who are complacent or have what John Kotter termed "false urgency" in his book *A Sense of Urgency* (being always busy but not really getting anything significant accomplished). If you find yourself hiring lots of consultants, setting deadlines but always missing them, or having a hard time scheduling meetings, you have an organizational problem embracing urgency. Today's business requires a continual sense of urgency that is not only fast-paced but, more important, smart and focused.
10. **Take the Chairs Away** Again, committees can't be held accountable, only individuals can be. And colleges are riddled with committees and standing meetings with little accountability or goals taking place in comfy conference rooms, allowing attendees to get comfortable for hours at a time. A president at a Northeast college planted the idea in my mind many years ago that conference rooms shouldn't have chairs. People have to meet, but they don't always have to sit down to get something accomplished. Take away the chairs and the standing committees. Instead, embrace task forces that have a clear end and a decision-maker running them.

Chapter 2: The Change

What aspect of your college or university could be more effectively told as a personal story?

What is the most “inauthentic” aspect of your college’s marketing efforts?

Do any of these describe the culture at your college or university?

- Regularly hire external consultants
- Difficulty scheduling meetings on important issues
- Have a committee that is charged with creating other committees
- Frequently missing deadlines on critical action steps
- Discussions focused inward instead of based on market forces
- Failures of the past stop or stall new initiatives



About Brian Wm. Niles

Over twenty years ago, Brian Niles started his career in admissions at a small, liberal arts college. He was a constant thorn in the director's side—always wanting to try new ideas and technology. He took his energy to lead the graduate and adult enrollment and marketing at a national university. In this leadership position, he helped differentiate his employer in one of the most crowded higher education marketplaces in the country and pioneered the use of the Internet in recruitment marketing. His passion sparked the genesis of TargetX, the company he has served for over 12 years as its co-founder and CEO. Along the way he earned his master's degree in education at the University of Pennsylvania and built TargetX into a multi-million dollar technology and consulting firm serving over 400 colleges and universities.

Brian is now a voice of change in an industry at its tipping point, helping colleges who have the gumption to embrace more effective recruiting techniques as traditional methods wither away.

When not helping colleges “overthrow dead culture,” he enjoys tickling the ivories at his home in Haddonfield, NJ, pacing the sidelines and improving his sports photography while his daughter plays soccer, and sharing a bottle of wine with friends on the front porch.



About TargetX

Since 1998, TargetX has been higher education's most innovative recruiting company, continually developing new technologies and strategies to help colleges enroll best-fit students. TargetX blends a bold approach to consulting with the industry's leading technology and a reputation for unmatched expertise so schools can build stronger relationships and increase yield.

The company is the leading provider of interactive recruiting solutions, helping over 400 schools communicate more effectively with prospective students. It has revolutionized Customer Relationship Management (CRM) in college admissions with its development of the Student Recruitment Manager (SRM). And it is recognized as the leading authority on building campus visit experiences that meet the needs of today's Millennial generation.

In addition, TargetX has built a reputation among admissions officers for objective and expert counsel. The company offers a popular series of webcasts, workshops and seminars; presents at dozens of conferences around the country; and generates seven different blogs for admissions officers; and produces the only mobile application devoted to student recruiting and college marketing.

overthrowingdeadculture.com

