Capturing The Height Of The Market: An Appreciative Inquiry on the Marketing Strategies of an Adventist Higher Education Institution

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ABSTRACT

In an era defined by increasing competition, changing demographics, and evolving student expectations, marketing has emerged as a critical tool for higher education institutions to attract, retain, and engage students effectively. Students not attending SDA academies and colleges are increasing. Within the context of Adventist higher education institutions, which are guided by a commitment to holistic education and values-based learning, the need for strategic marketing initiatives is more pronounced than ever. Anchored on Marketing Mix theoretical framework, espousing appreciative inquiry, the study intends to initiate change to the current marketing practices among Adventist HEIs. The setting of the study is an Adventist college located in the Southern Philippines. The study was participated by four administrators, and two groups of chairpersons and senior students. Data was gathered through in-depth interviews, focus group discussion, and document analysis. In analyzing, the spiral data analysis of Creswell and Poth and 4D design of Cooperrider, Whitney, and Stavros was adopted. The study aims to develop comprehensive marketing strategies to make this integral process exhaustive, efficient, and sustainable. In conclusion, the findings of the study highlight the importance of aligning marketing strategies with the institution's mission and vision, emphasizing accessibility to education, fostering a connection to God, and committing to service. While current practices include vigorous promotional efforts, the ideal strategies should focus on establishing a center of excellence that embodies Adventist values, expanding educational opportunities, and enhancing promotional structures. Achieving these goals requires a consistent review of strategic plans, effective market research, collaborative partnerships, compliance with best practices, and the implementation of data-driven approaches. By adopting these strategies, Adventist higher education institutions can strengthen their marketing efforts and better serve their communities. Conducting quantitative research on marketing strategies fit among Adventist HEI is recommended.

Keywords: *Adventist Higher Education Institution, Appreciative Inquiry, Marketing Strategy*

INTRODUCTION

According to American Marketing Association, marketing is defined as the activity, set of institutions, and processes for creating, communicating, delivering, and exchanging offerings that have value for customers, clients, partners, and society at large. Marketing involves linking the appropriate customers with the suitable product. It supports sales teams and individuals across the organization in considering offerings from the perspective of customers, communicating their value in ways that resonate with customers, and overcoming obstacles that require a deep understanding of customers and their insights (Yohn, 2019).

Renowned management expert Peter Drucker famously stated that "the business enterprise has two fundamental functions: marketing and innovation, as its purpose is to create a customer." While innovation is widely recognized as crucial for business success today, the importance of marketing has been diminished in some organizations, often being viewed as a staff-driven cost center. This shift has led to inefficiencies, overlooked opportunities, and failure for many businesses. Marketing should not be confined to a specific department or limited by budget constraints. Marketing should be embraced as a business discipline throughout the organization (Yohn, 2019).

Hamond (2007) outlines distinct phases in the development of marketing within higher education. These stages progress from the belief that "marketing is unnecessary", to viewing "marketing as solely promotional", then recognizing "marketing as a tool for positioning". Finally, marketing is integrated into the strategic planning process of higher education institutions. When higher education institutions focus on having a mindset or discipline of marketing, there will be a thorough understanding of what the market needs.

The Seventh-day Adventist Church (SDAC) is one of the religious groups that owns and manages the largest system of colleges and universities worldwide (Office of the Archives, Statistics, and Research, 2017). Most school leaders are understandably are not marketing professionals and may lack the money, time and resources to become marketing-savvy (Anderson, 2009). The need for marketing must first be understood. Too many times school Directors, Administrators, and School Board Members do not understand the meaning nor the need for marketing (Compas-Polo, 2015).

Espousing appreciative inquiry, the study intends to initiate change to the current marketing practices among Adventist HEIs. The study aims to develop comprehensive marketing strategies to make this integral process exhaustive, efficient, and sustainable.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The article "President to President: The Joys and Challenges of Adventist Higher Education" (2024) discusses the significant enrollment decline (24% on average over the last decade) in Adventist colleges and universities in North America. The conversation highlights the external pressures on families regarding the value of higher education and inflation, which complicate recruitment efforts for these institutions.

The study titled "Marketing Seventh-day Adventist Higher Education: College-Choice Motivators and Barriers" investigates the factors influencing college choices among Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) youth in North America. It highlights that approximately 75% of college-bound SDA students do not enroll in the church's colleges, presenting a significant challenge for these institutions. Students not attending SDA academies often lack awareness of SDA colleges and report minimal recruitment efforts from these institutions. This group is more than twice as unaware of SDA colleges compared to those who attended SDA academies. The findings underscore the necessity for collaboration between the SDA Church and its educational institutions to effectively address the barriers to enrollment and leverage identified motivators to attract more students to Adventist higher education (Dart, 2021).

This study is anchored on the Marketing mix theory which is a foundational concept in marketing that outlines the key elements involved in promoting and selling a product or service, traditionally encapsulated in the 4 Ps: Product, Price, Place, and Promotion. This framework helps organizations strategically position their offerings to meet consumer needs and achieve business objectives. In the context of the study on Adventist higher education, the marketing mix theory supports best practices by providing a structured approach to identify and address motivators and barriers influencing student enrollment. For instance, it emphasizes the importance of creating a compelling educational product that aligns with students' spiritual values, setting competitive pricing to alleviate financial concerns, utilizing effective promotional strategies to raise awareness, and ensuring accessibility through strategic placement in local communities. By applying this theory, Adventist colleges can enhance their marketing strategies to attract more students effectively.

METHODS

Research Design

This study employs qualitative research methods. According to McLeod (2019), qualitative research is exploratory in nature and seeks to understand the "how" and "why" behind specific phenomena or behaviors within particular contexts. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) explain that qualitative researchers aim to comprehend how individuals interpret their experiences, construct their realities, and the significance they attribute to their personal encounters.

This study used appreciative inquiry (AI) as its research approach. Cooperrider and Srivastva (1987), who are considered pioneers in AI, described it as both a theory of organizing and a method for transforming social systems. Building on this, Cooperrider, Whitney, and Stavros (2008) expanded the definition, explaining that AI involves a collaborative exploration for uncovering the strengths and positive aspects of individuals and organizations. They emphasized the importance of identifying what brings vitality and effectiveness to a system. Similarly, Whitney and Bloom (2010) defined AI as an examination of the factors that contribute to the optimal functioning of human systems. Berkessel (2010) characterized AI as a participatory methodology that focuses on strengths and positivity, aiming to reveal the best qualities within people and organizations.

Phases of Appreciative Inquiry. This study followed the 4D cycle developed by Cooperrider, Whitney, and Stavros (2008). The 4D cycle comprises the stages of defining, discovery, dream, design, and destiny. Each stage serves as a foundation for the subsequent one.

Discovery. In the discovery phase, this involves reflecting on the most successful moments experienced by individuals during a marketing strategy process and identifying the key positive elements that contributed to these moments. The main focus is on recognizing and defining the most positive aspects of the current situation (Cooperrider et al., 2008). Participants engage in discussions where they share stories of outstanding achievements and the fundamental factors that enabled these achievements. They talk about the aspects of successful marketing strategies that they appreciate the most and aim to incorporate into future endeavors.

Dream. During this stage, participants imagine a better and more vibrant future built on the group's abilities showcased by past achievements, existing strengths, and future potentials (Cooperrider et al., 2008). In this phase, participants collaborate to develop a more dynamic and inspiring vision of the future. Additionally, this stage aims to broaden the participants' outlook on what is achievable. By tapping into the creativity, innovation, and resourcefulness of the participants, this phase echoes a strong message of hope and potential.

Design. In the design phase, participants worked together to create the social framework that supports the vision and growth of the organization (Cooperrider et al., 2008). This framework includes elements like structure, systems, policies, processes, roles, relationships, leadership, and reputation that lay the foundation for the organization's aspirations. As a result of this phase, a bold and motivating statement of purpose was developed, drawing from past successes and new concepts to shape the future. These compelling ideas will act as a driving force for exploring and realizing the organization's destiny.

Destiny. The destiny phase focuses on creating fresh visions of the future supported by a shared sense of purpose and progress (Cooperrider et al., 2008). In this phase, organization members were encouraged to collaborate in shaping the future together. Additionally, stakeholders were invited to participate in open discussions to determine how they can contribute to making the organizational vision a reality, as outlined in the inspiring ideas. The goal of this phase is for the organization to continuously engage in a cycle of learning, adapting, discovery, dream, and design to ensure ongoing growth and commitment to its goals.

Research Setting

This study was conducted in an Adventist higher education institution in Southern Philippines. It has been existing for seventy-five (75) years and has access to major cities. It is the lone HEI in the province and is tertiary educations subsidy recipient. Marketing department is not present in the institution.

Population and Sampling Technique

Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling technique in which participants are selected based on specific characteristics or qualities that align with the

research objective (Chetty, Partanen, Rasmussen, & Servais, 2014). For this study, purposive sampling was employed to select participants. The sample consisted specifically of (4) four Administrators who has been involved in strategic planning of the institution, (5) five department chair served or currently serving for five (5) years and above and (5) five senior students that participated in the marketing activities. Data was gathered through in-depth interviews, focus group discussions and document analysis.

Data Collection Method

Face to face interviews and focus group discussions were done. All appreciative interviews and FGDs were audiotaped to ensure no information were missed or lost.

Appreciative interview. An appreciative interview is a type of interview that emphasizes discussing positive experiences, strengths, and achievements to identify areas for growth and enhancement. It is based on the principles of Appreciative Inquiry, a methodology developed by David Cooperrider and Diana Whitney. Rather than focusing on problems and shortcomings, appreciative interviews aim to uncover what is functioning effectively within an organization or individual and how those strengths can be utilized to reach future objectives. This approach helps to create a positive and collaborative atmosphere that fosters innovation and progress. In this study, the appreciative interview was participated by four members of the administration. The appreciative interview with the participants lasted an average of one hour for each session.

Focus group discussion. The focus group discussion brings together individuals with similar backgrounds or experiences to talk about a particular topic. This type of research involves asking questions about their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, opinions, or ideas. In a focus group discussion, participants can freely interact with one another, unlike some other research methods that may not allow for group conversations.

The process of conducting FGD included purposeful sampling in the selection of members. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) mentioned that there are no specific rules on the size of participants in an FGD, and it is preferred that the participants are strangers to each other. In this study, the FGD sessions among department chairs and students were conducted separately; on average, each session was participated by 5 to 6 department chairs and students. The FGD sessions were conducted face-to-face.

Documents as Data. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) describe documents as a broad term covering various types of written, visual, digital, and physical materials relevant to a study. Documents are highly valued as a data source in research because they naturally exist in the research setting without disrupting it. They are also convenient sources of information that researchers can easily access. In this study, documents like administrative meeting notes on marketing strategies and studies by other authors on marketing strategies in the context of Adventist HEI were examined.

Data Analysis

The research used Swansi and Sigauke's (2022) data analysis framework tailored for appreciative inquiry. This framework outlines the phases and expected outcomes, emphasizing iterative qualitative research processes. Notably, it includes creating bold proposals in the initial phases to translate aspirations into actionable plans. Figure 1 illustrates the 4D model with an extra definition phase at the beginning of the inquiry.
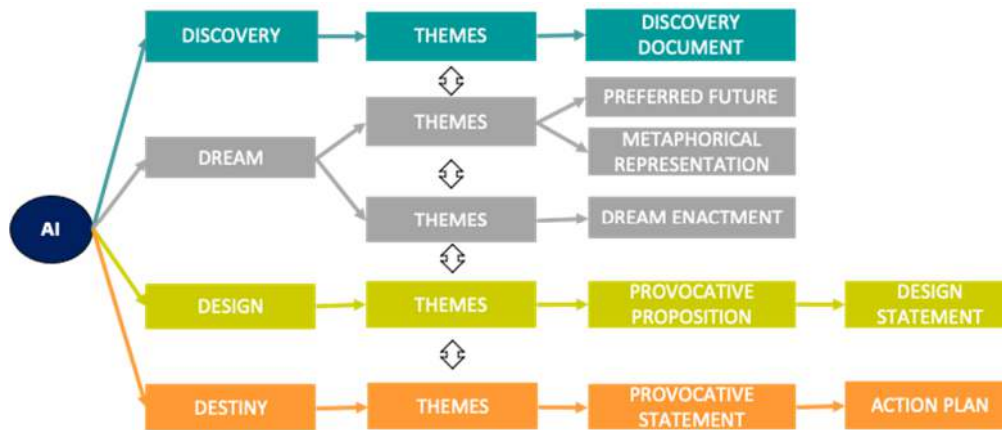

Figure 1. Data analysis framework of Swansi and Sigauke (2022).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in research involves imbuing an "attitude" into the work (Yin, 2016) to convince the audience that the findings are valuable (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) outlined criteria for establishing trustworthiness, including credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability.

Credibility. Lincoln and Guba (1985) define credibility as the believability of study results to participants. To ensure credibility, methods like member checking, triangulation, and frequent debriefing sessions were used in this study.

Dependability. As per Lincoln and Guba (1985), is about different researchers getting the same results. To ensure dependability, this study provided a detailed methodology description and examined previous research findings.

Transferability. As discussed by Anney (2014), Lincoln and Guba (1985), and Shenton (2004), this involves making study results applicable to other contexts. To enhance transferability, this study provided a detailed description of the research processes and used purposive sampling.

Confirmability. Refers to how well study data can be supported by others (Lincoln and Guba,1985). It ensures that data and interpretations reflect participant experiences, not

researcher biases (Shenton, 2004). Methods like audit trails are used to establish confirmability. This study employed an audit trail to ensure confirmability.

Ethical Considerations

In every research project, ethical considerations play a crucial role in safeguarding the rights and well-being of human subjects by adhering to relevant ethical standards. At the start of the study, participants were informed of the general purpose of the study, assured of purely voluntary participation. During the data collection, participants were allowed to choose their convenient time and place for the interview. During data analysis, pseudonyms were used to cover the identity of the participants. No identifiable elements and features of the participants were presented. During the reporting of data, the results of the study were reported honestly. No information was disclosed that would harm the participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Discovery Phase: Appreciating Which Gives Life

In the discovery phase, participants expressed more of their excitement when sharing their experience in the best practices in marketing. It implies that there is an existing and effective practices that took place. Themes were generated from the framework of McCarthy (1960), Marketing mix and these are product, price, place and promotion. Four themes were generated: upholding the institution's mission and vision, ensuring education accessibility, proximity to God and service to men and vigorous effort in promotion.

Theme 1: Upholding the institution's mission and vision

According to University of Minnesota Libraries Publishing (2015), mission statements explain why your organization exists and its main objectives. They are concise, powerful statements set in the present tense. On the other hand, vision statements focus on the goals and aspirations of the organization, aiming to inspire and uplift. They remain constant even if strategies change.

Category 1: Holistically developed students. Holistically developed students refers to focus on developing a student's mind from all sides (Datnow, 2022). In the Adventist HEI, it focuses on developing the physical, mental, social and spiritual aspects of the students. The effort to prepare the students not only for this world but for the world to come is evident through the mission and vision of the school.

Category 2: Career-prepared graduates. The Greek philosopher Heraclitus noted that the natural and constant in this world is change. According to the study of Pano (2023), a tracer study conducted on the careers of graduates of the institution, the percentage of employability is high which can be interpreted as graduates are prepared for their careers.

Theme 2: Ensuring education accessibility

According to Merriam-Webster, education is the knowledge and personal development that arise from the process of learning. Education primarily leads to acquiring knowledge and personal growth, enabling you to apply what you learn to your daily life.

Category 3: Offering cost-effective solution for students. To ensure the access of education to students, the institution should make an effort to reach the gap by offering cost-effective solution for students in regards to the payments and methods. According to Philippine Institute of Development Studies, The education sector in the Philippines faces a range of complex challenges, including poverty, armed conflict, inadequate resources and infrastructure, and disparities in digital access. Some current practices in implementing the cost-effective solution are good preparation.

Category 4: Enabling working students to access education. Having working students as employees can benefit the school in several ways. These students can provide additional manpower, helping to lighten the workload for existing staff members and contributing to the efficient operation of the school. Furthermore, employing working students can create a sense of community and inclusivity within the school, as students are directly involved in the daily functioning of the institution. This can foster a positive and collaborative atmosphere, benefiting both students and staff members alike. Additionally, working students may serve as role models for their peers, demonstrating the importance of hard work, responsibility, and time management.

Theme 3: Proximity to God and service to men

Adventist institutions promote a biblical worldview that shapes how students approach learning, decision-making, and interactions with others. This perspective helps students see the world through the lens of Christian values and principles. Adventist institutions are committed to fulfilling the mission of sharing Christ's love and truth with others. This mission focus inspires students to be ambassadors for Christ in their communities and beyond, making a positive impact on the world around them.

Category 5: Campus environment's proximity to God and nature. Students are encouraged to explore and deepen their relationship with Christ through spiritual activities, prayer, worship, and service opportunities. Adventist institutions have a strong sense of community where students, faculty, and staff support each other in their faith journey. This supportive environment fosters spiritual growth and encourages students to live out their faith in tangible ways.

Category 6: Leveraging on the institution's strategic location. Organized outreach programs such as crusades and educational workshops to meet the needs of the community are part of the strategies. These initiatives provide valuable resources and support to individuals in the surrounding area. Current practices to maximize the strategic location is the presence of community extension services department.

Theme 4: Vigorous effort in promotions

Promotion is essential as it reaches prospective students who are seeking a Christ-centered education. By showcasing unique offerings, values, and campus culture, institutions can appeal to students who are looking for an educational experience that aligns with their faith. By promoting programs, events, and achievements, institutions can raise awareness and establish a strong presence in the educational landscape.

Category 7: Adapting to market dynamics. Through regular review and update of academic programs to align with market demands, this is one of the current best practices of the institution. In continuous improvement processes to enhance the quality of education and student experience, they gather feedback from students, alumni, faculty, and employers to identify areas for improvement and implement changes that align with market dynamics.

Category 8: Partnership and linkages. Partnerships can lead to internships, research opportunities, and curriculum enhancements that better prepare students for the job market. Alumni engagement activities such as reunions, networking events, mentorship programs, and fundraising efforts help build a sense of community and support for the institution.

Theme 2: Expanded education opportunities

Education plays a significant role in the Adventist faith as it is viewed as a means to fulfill the mission of preparing individuals for lives of service to others and to God. Adventists believe in holistic education that encompasses the development of the mind, body, and spirit. Education is seen as a way to discover God's truth, develop character, and equip individuals with the knowledge and skills to make a positive impact on the world.

Category 3: Sustainable scholarship programs. Adventist HEIs may employ various strategies to provide education through scholarships, ensuring that students have access to quality education regardless of their financial circumstances. Participants characterized a well-developed scholarship programs that are sustainable and can cater to students who wants to pursue Adventist education.

Category 4: Accessible payment plans and discounts. Adventist HEIs may also utilize payment plans and discounts to make education more accessible to students and families. These options can help alleviate the financial burden of tuition costs and provide flexibility in managing expenses.

Theme 3: Well-established structure

Adventist HEIs are guided by a mission to provide holistic education that nurtures students' intellectual, spiritual, and social development. This mission-driven approach sets them apart in the market and appeals to students looking for a values-based educational experience. Many Adventist HEIs are accredited by recognized accreditation bodies, ensuring the quality and credibility of the educational programs.

Category 5: Internationalization. The Adventist Church operates a network of HEIs around the world, providing a wide reach and presence in various countries and regions. These institutions offer a range of programs and degrees, catering to diverse student populations. The results of the study showed that the participants dreamed of being present in the ASEAN and maximize the linkage of Adventist church outside the Philippines.

Category 6: Modern and competitive infrastructures. Modern infrastructures contribute to the quality of education offered at Adventist schools. Up-to-date facilities and resources enable educators to deliver engaging and effective instruction, fostering academic excellence and student success. A competitive infrastructure positions Adventist education institutions as global competitors in the education market. By investing in modern facilities and resources, Adventist schools

demonstrate their commitment to excellence and innovation, attracting students from diverse backgrounds and regions.

Theme 4: Well-developed promotions

Well-developed promotions are essential for promoting Adventist education, attracting students, engaging the community, showcasing achievements, building relationships, enhancing recruitment efforts, and shaping the brand image of Adventist educational institutions. By investing in strategic promotional initiatives, Adventist schools can effectively communicate their unique value proposition and attract individuals who align with their mission and values.

Category 7: Strong market and media presence. A strong market and media presence can help raise awareness about Adventist educational institutions among prospective students, parents, and the community. Through market and media presence, Adventist HEIs can promote their values, mission, and unique identity to a broader audience.

Category 8: School of choice. Hamond (2007) outlines distinct phases in the development of marketing within higher education. These stages progress from the belief that "marketing is unnecessary", to viewing "marketing as solely promotional", then recognizing "marketing as a tool for positioning". Finally, marketing is integrated into the strategic planning process of higher education institutions. When higher education institutions focus on having a mindset or discipline of marketing, there will be a thorough understanding of what the market needs.

Design Phase: Con-constructing the Future

Eight social architectures were identified to bridge the gap from the current practices to an ideal marketing strategy (see Figure 2). Under the element of product, two plans were identified, including promoting holistic development and integrating Adventist values. Under the element of price, two elements were identified, optimizing resource allocation and identifying strategic trends. Under the element of place, two plans were determined, global partnership and compliance and accreditation. Under the element of promotion, two elements were identified, engaging content and establishment of denominational marketing policies.

Destiny Phase: Sustaining Change

The last step of the 4D appreciative inquiry model is called the destiny phase, also known as the delivery phase. This phase focuses on making the new ideas for the future a reality by working together towards a common goal (Cooperrider et al., 2008, p. 46). It involves bringing to life the new visions and specific plans created in earlier stages. Essentially, the destiny phase is about taking action based on the insights gained from the discovery, dream, and design phases.

The destiny phase marks the conclusion of the appreciative inquiry process. It begins with acknowledging and celebrating achievements. A thorough examination is conducted to assess the themes, categories, and social structures identified in the preceding four phases of appreciative inquiry. These elements are then transformed into actionable plans through creative planning and

719

organization. The destiny phase concluded with the commitment of the administration, commitment to establish of functional marketing department, and anchor on the purpose of existence. These commitments are necessary to implement change and make an ideal marketing strategies a reality among Adventist HEIs.
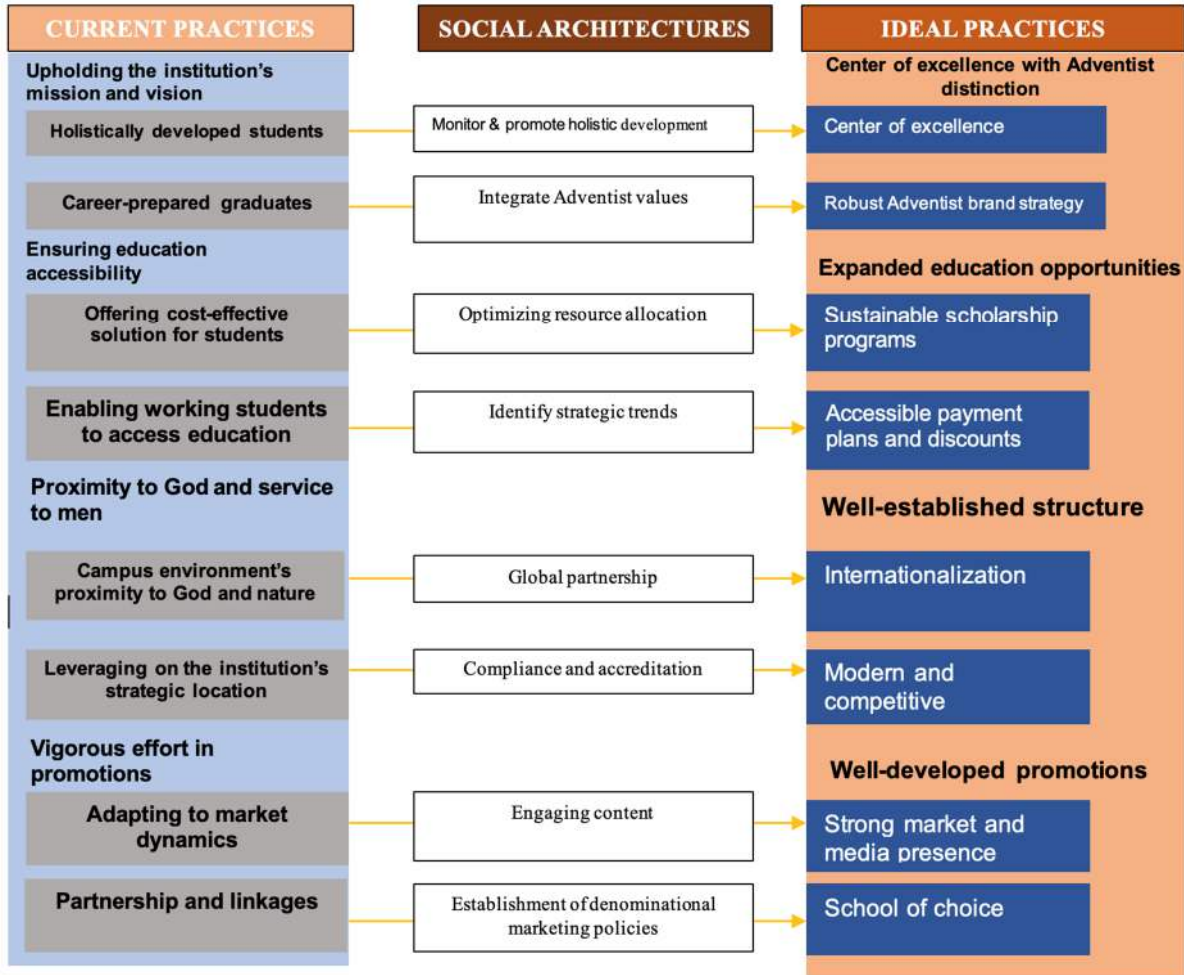

Figure 2. *Social architectures to bridge the gap.*

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Best marketing strategies of faith-based higher education institution includes upholding the institution's mission and vision that focuses on holistically developed students, and career-prepared graduates. In capturing value, best practice includes enduring education accessibility that focuses on offering cost-effective solution for students and enabling working students to access education. In delivering value, the best practice is proximity to god and service to men that focuses on campus environment's proximity to god and nature and leveraging on the

institution's strategic location. In communicating value, the best practice is vigorous effort in promotions that focuses on adapting to market dynamics and partnership and linkages.

Ideal marketing strategies include center of excellence with Adventist distinction that aims for center of excellence and robust Adventist brand strategy. Another ideal includes expanded education opportunities that focuses on sustainable scholarship programs and accessible payment plans and discounts. The participants also shared that well-established structure which includes internationalization and modern and competitive infrastructure are part of the dream. Well-developed promotions with strong market and media presence and to be the school of choice are also part of the ideal strategies.

Social architectures to leverage the best marketing strategies to what is ideal include consistency in revisiting strategic plans with promoting holistic development and integrating Adventist values. The participants also include utilizing market research that focuses on optimizing resource allocation and identifying strategic trends. Partnership and compliance with global partnership, compliance and accreditation and implement data-driven approaches with engaging content and establishment of denominational marketing policies were emphasize by the participants. It is recommended to have the commitment of the administration, commitment to establish of functional marketing department, and to anchor on the purpose of existence. These commitments are necessary to implement change and make an ideal marketing strategies a reality among Adventist HEIs.

Similar to typical research processes, appreciative inquiry goes beyond just drawing conclusions and making recommendations. It initiates a new cycle of exploration to further expand the boundaries of knowledge. For future studies, it is suggested to explore quantitative research on marketing strategies suitable for Adventist Higher Education Institutions.

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