



California State University Channel Islands

Report: Qualitative Interviews with Influencers

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Objectives

- I. Gather the opinions, experiences, and perceptions of influential stakeholders of California State University Channel Islands (CSUCI)
- II. Assess the qualitative data to determine themes among influencer perceptions of CSUCI
- III. Identify areas in which misperceptions of CSUCI might be remedied and current strengths leveraged to inform operational and communication strategies to strengthen CSUCI's brand reputation

Methodology

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Methodology

We worked with the CSUCI team to identify a targeted list of influential stakeholders to invite to participate in one-on-one interviews with an ADV qualitative researcher.

These influencers included:

- Donors
- Workforce partners
- Educators in the community
- Foundation and/or board members
- Engaged alumni
- Staff and Faculty

Participating influencers scheduled their interview time directly with the ADV researcher.

Participants were asked to share their honest thoughts and impressions and assured their responses would be aggregated for confidentiality.

Methodology

Interviews were conducted over the phone and typically lasted 20-30 minutes.

Interviews were conducted between April 21st-May 5th, 2022.

The interviewer took verbatim notes of each interview.

Responses were later coded by theme.

We began this research hoping for 10-15 interviews and finished with 23. Not only was this level of participation helpful in the research process, but it also signals a high level of commitment to CSUCI from this group and a desire to see the University advance in the years ahead.

Why CSUCI was Founded

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Why CSUCI was Founded

Given its relative newness on the California higher educational scene, most of the influencers could remember when CSUCI was founded—some were involved in helping select the location.

This provided us with the opportunity to ask them to reflect on why CSUCI was founded and set the context for understanding their perceptions of how CSUCI has evolved relative that mission.

For reference, the CSUCI Mission Statement:

Placing students at the center of the educational experience, California State University Channel Islands provides undergraduate and graduate education that facilitates learning within and across disciplines through integrative approaches, emphasizes experiential and service learning, and graduate students with multicultural and international perspectives.

Why CSUCI was Founded

Among the 23 influencer participants, the dominant response to the question of why CSUCI was founded was:

“CSUCI was founded to be a 4-year college in Ventura County.”

Participants noted that there hadn't been a four-year educational option in the area—the closest being southward: CSU Northridge or California Lutheran (private), or northward: UC Santa Barbara.

Why CSUCI was Founded

Less-often mentioned responses to the question of founding were:

“To educate local minority students”

“To educate the future employees of local businesses”

“To improve the community”

Implied in many of the answers was the notion that CSUCI filled a service gap not just because it *could* be established in that area, but also because the local community *needed* it to be there. Students in the area were capable of university-level academic achievement, but unlikely or unable to travel to other, established universities to get their degree.

Quotes about Why CSUCI was Founded

“There was a high interest in creating a university in Ventura County. Otherwise, it was Santa Barbara or Northridge; those were the main places other than community colleges in our area. There was a high need and want to serve the community in Ventura County and provide a local university that people could attend and to serve the under-represented students; English learners. A lot of the family’s I knew and grew up with, the parents worked in the fields and they [parents] want you to stay close home to home and anywhere else and you’re ‘in danger’ so there was a high need to have a local university.”

“I believe that there had been a game-plan at the university level to plant one in Ventura/Santa Barbara area. It was scheduled to go into Ventura. With the closure of the mental hospital by the Reagan administration, the land was vacant for many years, but because they campus and the grounds were in a respectable state, and the recognition that a college would be useful to the population of Ventura County. It was the second choice of a list of locations that were to be served that had been prepared years before. The community of Ventura turned down the location of the university in the city. They reacted negatively to the impact of traffic and students; thought it would be disruptive. This site is pretty benign—in the middle of agriculture with no traffic or negative effects upon the residential areas of Camarillo.”

Quotes about Why CSUCI was Founded

“To be able to meet the need of Ventura County. We’re in the middle of UCSB in Santa Barbara—but it’s more expensive, the population is different—and Long Beach and Northridge, but that’s a stretch for this community. So, it was to build the bridge between those two areas and serve that first-generation community we have. And to bring up Ventura County as a whole—as the place to live and to be and bring in commerce, to make it a hub.”

Primary Public Perceptions of CSUCI

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Primary Perceptions of CSUCI

The selected list of influencer stakeholders have an informed perspective of CSUCI. They are also in positions to speak with people who may not know about CSUCI or who hold perceptions and misconceptions which—regardless of source or veracity—influence their opinions of the University. We asked participating influencers what other people think of first when they think of CSUCI.

The following were the trends in their responses listed from most to least-commonly mentioned:

- The old mental hospital
- Not well-known outside of Ventura County
- The local CSU
- Channel Islands e.g., “Do you have to take a boat?”
- It depends on age or location of the audience (see next page for nuance of age and location)

Primary Perceptions of CSUCI

Listed from most- to least-commonly mentioned

- The old mental hospital
- Not well-known outside of Ventura County
- The local CSU
- Channel Islands e.g., “Do you have to take a boat?”
- “It depends” on age or location of the audience

Older people in county = old mental hospital and/or the local CSU

Outside of Ventura = Either no knowledge at all, or ask: “Is it on an island?”



Primary Perceptions of CSUCI

What people think of first when they think of CSUCI (cont.)

- First-generation college students
- Small
- Affordable
- “CSucky”
- A Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI)
- Ghosts (from the old mental hospital)
- Limited program choices
- Beautiful
- Close to the coast
- Spanish architecture

Quotes Regarding First Thoughts of CSUCI

“In terms of the people I know, they don’t think anything, they don’t know what it is. The other one [belief] is that its on the Channel Islands which is quite unbelievable since they’re unoccupied. So, unless you know about the school, you have no idea in Santa Barbara. A lot of kids from the area go there, but not enough to make a difference.”

“I think unfortunately there’s not a lead narrative. There’s nothing that jumps out first...The original president—Dr. Rush—was the face of the franchise, always out in the community and at that time, you’d think of him first with CSUCI. Since he retired, I don’t have a strong sense of who they are and what they do. Q: Is that the same with the local high school students and faculty. A: I think so. It’s not something where there’s a lot of negative around it, either there’s no real hook.”

Anyone older than 40 say the old mental institution. That’s what a lot of people say still but people who have been there think it’s a beautiful campus. For me, it’s this beautiful campus nestled into the hillside of the Santa Monica mountains and has the beautiful Spanish architecture. They’re improving run-down buildings, they’re improving. A lot of people think of ghosts; but I would sneak in and never got ghosts, just dust.

Quotes Regarding First Thoughts of CSUCI


“It depends on where you are. I was born and raised in Ventura so being able to talk about CI was something I could do. When I moved to grad school, I received questions like: ‘Is it really on an island? I’ve never heard of it before.’ So, I quit mentioning it and said I went to a Cal State school. In California and in the southern half of California and as the 23rd Cal State campus, it’s not unheard of. At the time, there were a lot of questions about Channel Islands having been transferred as the old mental hospital and so there was a lot more connection to that. It was literally old buildings boarded up. I’d sneak into them and check into the buildings to see what was in there. I was fascinated. Fast forward millions of dollars and there are more to the campus that people are engaging, and people are transitioning away from the legacy of mental hospital and satellite campuses of Northridge and Fullerton. It’s not a nationally ranked school or NCAA competition school so people are aware of specialties but by no means do people know all about the expansion, it’s seen as rural, quiet and not everyone has had a chance to be introduced and see the progress over time and of the 23 other Cal State schools.”

Primary Misconceptions of CSUCI

Another way to ascertain how the public perceives CSUCI is to ask influencers which misconceptions they face when in conversation about the University.

The themes of these common misconceptions were these from most to least mentioned:

- “Not as good”/ Not rigorous
- Less about misconceptions than they just don’t know it at all
- Limited programs
- Nothing going on on-campus
- Unstable presidential leadership
- Expensive
- Underestimate how supportive it is to students
- Party school



These top 4 misconceptions could reasonably be considered growing pains for a new institution.

Quotes Regarding Misconceptions of CSUCI

“That it doesn’t offer the same rigor as some of the established universities. Because it’s the baby, it’s looked down as a negative that it doesn’t have as many events or programs or events.”

“I don’t think they know what it’s really about. I don’t think they have a clear picture of the strengths and why they would want to recommend people that they know go to school there.”

“That it is very static, little degree offerings and not a lot of buzz or movement. The thought is that we’re just a university with nothing profound happening that’s not on the community radar.”

“I think we’re still shaking off an image. You have the folks that still view the campus as the state hospital or ‘CSucky’ or don’t know what to think. I love the idea of branding because it’s the opportunity to help them know what to think. The biggest misperception is that there isn’t a common perception.”

Quotes Regarding Misconceptions of CSUCI

“Not to be sarcastic, but you can’t have a ‘misconception’ if you don’t have a ‘conception.’ If you say to someone in Santa Barbara, ‘Where’s the closest Cal state school?’ they’ll say, ‘San Luis Obispo.’ But CI is half the distance and some of their programs are in Santa Barbara: nursing and psychology are in Santa Barbara.”

“I think that it’s not accessible. That it has limited programming; that’s definitely a misconception. Students could perhaps make a comparison with universities that have a longer in history and in comparison CSUCI is a baby and there could be a misconception that they’re not as comprehensive as others, but I’ve seen that they’re very strategic and mindful to bring in academic programming to meet the needs of students in our region. I think another misconception could be the change in Presidential leadership. In the early years, they had had lot of stability with the first president and they’re in a transitional period to the president being the interim to the permanent president. Some [people] were concerned about the misconception that the leadership has been unstable, but it’s not. Especially with presidents in California moving to other universities and I think it’s a new opportunity to chart a new course.”

Keywords that Influencers Associate with CSUCI

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What Top 5 Words do You Associate with CSUCI?

The influencer participants all have a more informed perspective than that of the public with whom they might talk about CSUCI. When we asked to provide a list of words they currently associate with CSUCI, the resulting list was much more optimistic and inspiring than the trends to what the public thinks of “first.”

The words participating influencers used more than once included these listed in most to least commonly mentioned:

- Beautiful
- Growing
- Energetic
- Affordable
- Intimate
- Supportive
- Accessible
- Inspiring
- Good leadership
- Community
- Spanish architecture
- Family

The only negative associations were “ivory tower” and “ignorant of the community,” mentioned once each

What Top 5 Words do you Associate with CSUCI?

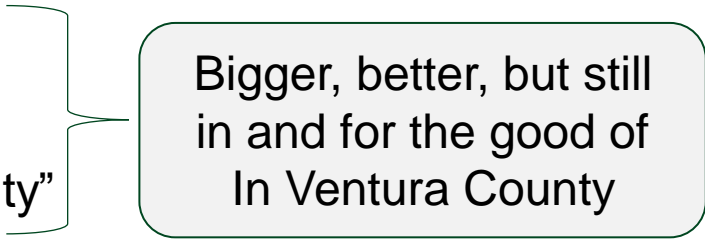
The full list of influencer words associated with CSUCI was still very diffused with very few words given more than a handful of mentions. This suggests that CSUCI can help loyal influencers better steer the narrative by providing them the short list of keywords to which the University wants to lay claim as well as stories and outcomes to bring those words to life.



What Top 5 Words do you Hope to Associate with the CSUCI's of the Future?

We also asked influencers to provide us with words or phrases they'd like to be able to associate with CSUCI in the future. The following are their words/phrases listed from most to least often:

- More programs/More graduate programs
- High caliber/Selective
- Embedded in the community / "Our university"
- Athletics
- Environmental stewards
- Residential
- Opportunities
- Innovative
- Profound



Bigger, better, but still in and for the good of In Ventura County

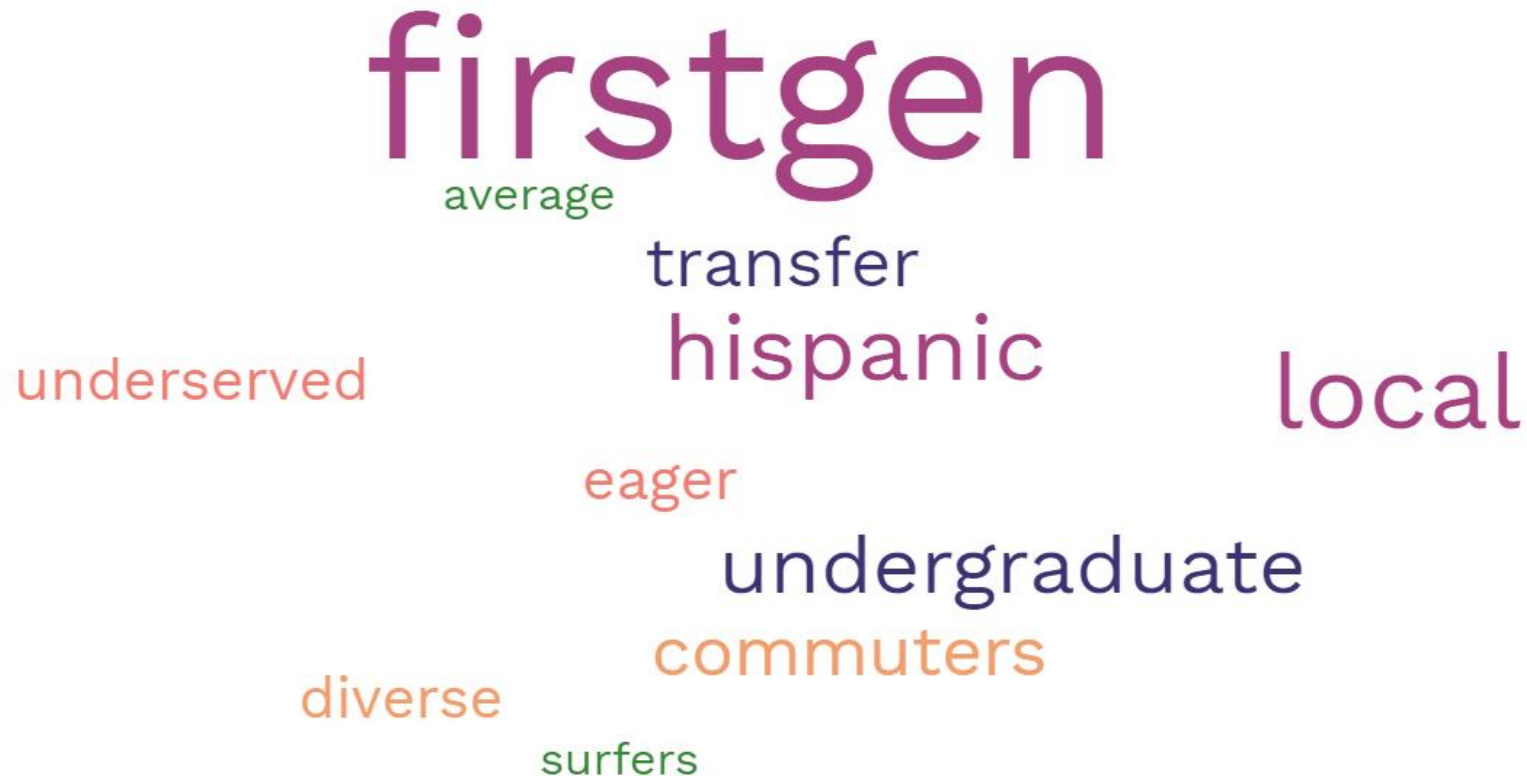
CSUCI's Best-Served Students

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Best Served Students

We asked influencer participants to describe the kind of student CSUCI “serves best” and their responses followed several clear themes:



Quotes about CSUCI's Best-Served Students

“They are developing graduate programs, but their focus has been undergrads and first-gen students, many from Ventura County. They partner very much with the three community colleges and promote the University as a viable option for students through community colleges.”

“I actually think they're really good with first gen. The majority of our [local area's] graduates are from high poverty areas where parents are working in the agricultural fields. They're first gen to graduate from high school and CI does great job supporting students who come from that background when they're admitted and helping them persist to the degree.”

Quotes about CSUCI's Best-Served Students

“One of the things I like the most is that it serves the underserved really well – minorities, people in the community for whom college is a far-off dream or unattainable. It allows them to live the American dream in a real way, the children of farm workers. I’ve seen graduation pictures of kids are out in the field with their parents. It’s safe in many ways.”

I think our biggest strength is smaller class sizes and the ability to give students a more narrowly tailored personalized experience that fits. We’re between 50% and 60% first-gen college students. They don’t have role models in higher ed. A lot of them have negative role models like the aunt who says; “So you think you’re better than us now? Why are you wasting their [family’s] money when you could be in the fields?” We can’t be a Cal State UCLA, nor should we be. We serve a different role and the smaller class sizes are particularly appealing.”

How to Better Support Best-Served Students

After asking participating influencers the question of *whom* CSUCI serves best, we followed with the question of how to *better* support those students. The two most common responses were:

- 1) Continue to support first-generation students with the peer mentoring program;
- 2) Build stronger connections with local K-12 districts.

- Specific suggestions about outreach to local districts:
- 1) Include the families of students in the outreach;
 - 2) Start messaging to families before high school (e.g., middle school) as agricultural families might encourage their children to get jobs prior to graduating;
 - 3) Build relationships with counselors who might otherwise recommend community college rather than a 4-year degree.

Quotes about how to Better Support Best-Served Students

“I think the University is doing a great job from everything I know; doing peer mentoring. I think they are the right things to do.”

“They are very geared to first-gen and Hispanic kids. And, also, anyone who does not have the support of a family that understands education. So, the thing about them that is unique like the mentor program who help kids who have no idea bout college be successful. Their biggest achievement is the graduation rate.”

“Build a stronger partnership between the district and CI. When Dr. Rush retired, we had partnerships that vanished and then the provost left for Cal State Chico. In the meantime, they got a new president and that one [the President] had four different provosts and that person [the Provost] is the right hand. We just met with Dr. Yao and the new provost a month ago. They invited the superintendents to a meeting to talk about things like this and I thought that was a great step.”

Quotes about how to Better Support Best-Served Students

“I don’t know how they interact with that pipeline locally now. They were just starting; they would do outreach to high schools, and when I was in community college, they were doing transfer programs. Engaging in the community more would help to meet the students where they’re at.”

“The grad rate for minority and first-gen groups is (typically) very low and they have incredible support for those kids. Q: What could they do to better support that audience? A: Nothing, they give scholarships. The mentor program gives money to the mentors and mentees. They have great counselors and, what makes the school academically unique is unlike UCSB who attracts researchers, CI has teachers who are motivated by teaching and collaboration.”

“Make those connections with companies within the county to increase the visibility of the University and the connections but also to make it stronger to hire alums or offer internships.”

How to Better Support Best-Served Students

Less frequently-mentioned suggestions of how to support best-served students included:

- Strengthen public transportation to campus from the community
- Vary between events that bring the University into the community as well as events that invite the community to campus
- Offer more career services and internships
- Track and publicize graduate jobs and salaries
- Offer an inventory of college readiness measures that show students the areas of gaps where they will require more preparation
- Offer road-mapping that shows first-gen students how to build their degree over four years

Quotes about how to Better Support Best-Served Students

“I think maybe making information more available to this audience maybe even the family of the audience and starting as earlier as junior high. I know that particularly in the farm working environment, that due to the culture and the need, parents ask their children to start working very young; because it’s the need. Often that ask starts in junior high and so involving the families as early as junior high to know the options, the scholarships, and that it’s attainable. Q: Should outreach be translated as well? A: Yes, in Spanish, but perhaps also in Mixteco and Zapoteco.”

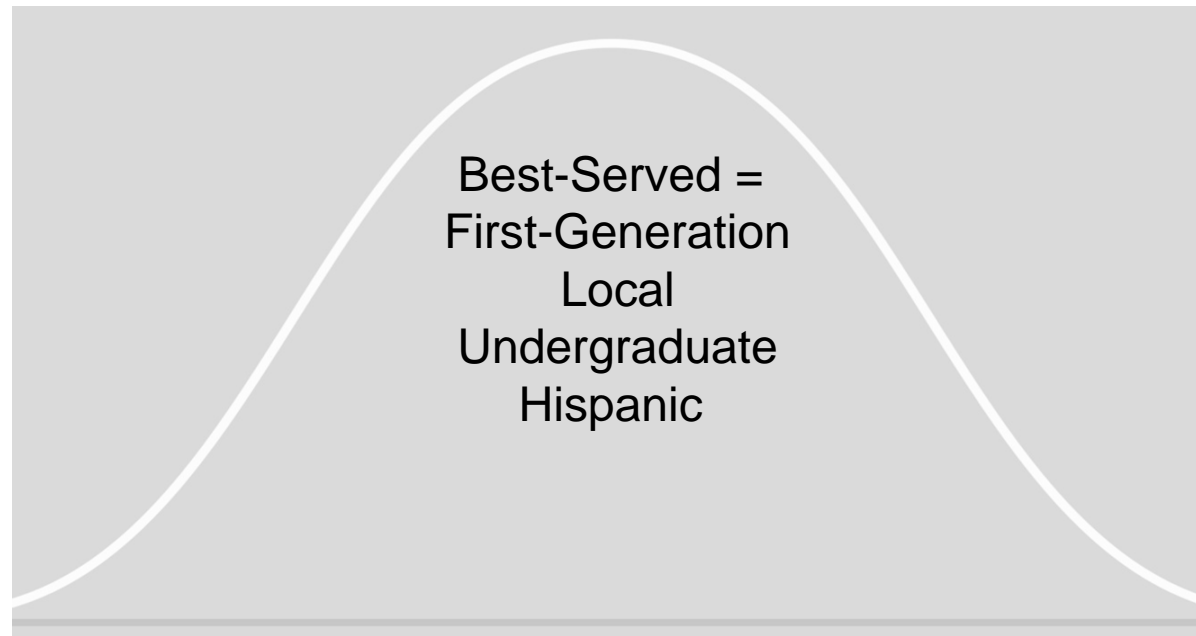
“Make those connections with companies within the county to increase the visibility of the University and the connections but also to make it stronger to hire alums or offer internships.”

“Bring back those events that bring the community back to campus...There were family night events that were hosted in some of the halls. Bringing first-gen college students to campus so they can see themselves there is vital.”

Concern for Students who don't Fit “Best Served”

Despite the clear perception that CSUCI's “best served” student is the first-generation, undergraduate, Hispanic student from Ventura County, there were a few participants who worry that local higher-need students are being left behind. On the other side of the spectrum, there was concern that the biggest misconception about CSUCI is that it's “there to serve the underprivileged families in the region.”

“The University serves the average to above-average student. My students are at-risk...There's a lack of understanding about the community—it's not Beverly Hills; it's farm workers in little rural towns...They need to revisit the vision that established them 20 years ago.”



Out-of-region families who aren't first-gen, or “underprivileged”

Quotes about Students who Might Self-Select Out

Higher-need
Local students

“Just last week, we were at a meeting and presenting that a large high school with a large ESL population. We were sharing with the [CSUCI] Dean of Education and I was presenting the frustration that the District was going through that teachers aren’t trained with ESL; they’re trained to teach, but not when 20 out of 30 students are English learners. The teachers are saying, ‘My job is to teach Algebra not English,’ and the University said: ‘You tell us what you want, and we’ll collaborate.’ I got frustrated because we need solutions. Spanish speakers learning English—in our county, it’s a significant population. To make matters worse, their parents have an average education of second grade, so kids don’t have support at home. Add to it that the kids don’t know the language and it’s extremely challenging. We were saying the University should consider developing a program as part of their teaching credential programs on how to handle ESL learners.”

Non-local
Students
attracted
By quality

“If Cal State and its reputation and quality of faculty were better disseminated, it would be a more attractive location for the general population. Basically, what you’ve got is Cal State which is close at hand, Pepperdine in Malibu which attracts a higher-income level family, and then Cal Lutheran [Thousand Oaks] and then on the north end, UC Santa Barbara and the community college systems.”

Targeted Outreach Ideas

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Specific Outreach Ideas

Participating influencers offered several of their own ideas about how CSUCI can better connect with its market. These included:*

- Engage the alumni base of +20,000 happy graduates.
- Promote the high graduation rates of the best-served student profile (which is statistically much higher at CSUCI than other institutions) as well as the ranking on the Social Mobility Index.
- Reach out into the community rather than expecting them to (always or even usually) come to campus.
- Build brand messaging communications to local high school counselors.
- Use the Super Sunday model to build brand awareness in BIPOC local churches
- Provide campus facilities to community groups to host their events
- Strengthen relationships with local companies

*The University may already be doing these things. However, as they were suggested by allies of the University, they may not be fully understood or visible enough.

Summary and Implications

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Summary & Implications

CHOOSE AND OWN THE MARKET

CSUCI has done an outstanding job of serving its local market of undergraduate, first-generation, predominantly Hispanic students. The peer mentorship program and the ranking on the Social Mobility Index are testimony to the University's innovative solutions to helping local families achieve the American Dream.

As the University considers what's next, strategy needs to be closely aligned to mission and market. Our experience is that the University will be tempted to dilute its market clarity and appeal to everyone...and no one. In order to avoid this process of vanillafication, primary questions will be: Who do we want to be? And for whom? And what do they need?

Boldly choose to be specific.

Summary & Implications

CSUCI IS ITS COMMUNITY

Influencer participants made it clear that CSUCI is ideally located—not only because of its pretty location and beautiful Spanish architecture, but because many of its best-served students will not comfortably leave the area to fulfill their higher education capabilities. Families are rooted in Ventura and closely knit. The benefit to this—and the challenge for CSUCI—is to become the community’s family university.

- Look to Ventura County as CSUCI’s first and most important audience
- Ask alumni—most of whom are from the community—to help tell their story and the University’s story to their families, schools, places of work, and worship.
- Leverage the University’s research resources to address issues relevant to Ventura County
- Look for innovative impact opportunities—what can local retirees offer students? What can students offer aging community members? What can the University learn from resourceful immigrants who risked everything for their families? Or from the Chumash who stewarded the land?
- Bring the community to campus (e.g., host community and school events)

Summary & Implications

STEER THE NARRATIVE

CSUCI is beloved by those who know it—and very poorly understood or entirely overlooked by those who do not. Now, with 20 years and a solid alumni base behind you, the University is ideally positioned to take control of its brand reputation.

The qualitative research suggests influencers have a long list of nice things to say about the University.

The task ahead, then, is to marry the brand attributes that make CSUCI special to those who engage with you with what your target audiences are looking for. These must be substantiated with programs, stories, and statistics that convey CSUCI's strengths in critical areas and equipping your advocates with the information they need to be your ambassadors in the community.

A final note on communication to keep in mind: whichever words or concepts the University chooses, ensure they translate well in Spanish.

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