When Larry Hincker, Virginia Tech's associate vice president for university relations, arrived on campus 22 years ago, he was surprised to be asked what he wanted his business card to look like. Until he realized that different colleges and programs had cards featuring a wide variety of disparate designs. Even the name of the institution was inconsistent—some used Virginia Tech and others used Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University. "I said to the president, 'We're never going to get a reputation if we don't know who we are!'"

Educational institutions understand the importance of having a positive image among their target audiences, but the process of creating, enhancing, and managing that image remains challenging to many.

"Historically, higher education has been skeptical about marketing," says Rob Moore, president and CEO of the marketing communications firm Lipman Hearne. "Twelve to 14 years ago, we would make a presentation about marketing, and professors would say, 'We don't market, we educate.' There wasn't an understanding of the fundamental relationship between the experience you deliver and your ability to generate revenue from it."

Confusion over what branding is only adds to the challenge. Consultants define brand as promising an experience and delivering on that promise. In practice, however, consultants note that many institutional branding efforts seem to begin and end with creating and maintaining a graphic identity, a component that is merely the tip of the branding iceberg.

"A major issue in branding and brand architecture is the level of brand understanding and expertise," says Bob Brock, president and co-founder of Educational Marketing Group. "While most people in higher education acknowledge on an intellectual level that branding is about the experience, reputation, and messaging rather than graphic identity, actions tell a different story."

In other words, people tend to work with what they know and like to work with what they can control.

"Since most communicators have never assumed responsibility for what the institution stands for—the brand promise and the actual experience—they fall back on what they know and have traditionally dealt with: consistency of the logo and signature," Brock says. "This is historical, and it's encouraged by institutions and leadership who don't yet understand that brand goes way deeper, impacting how institutions deliver their mission.