

Classifying Universities: Institutional Brands from the Market's Perspective

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Define a **clear brand promise** for your university, or the **marketplace** will **define it for you.**

Research shows that Canadian applicants already sort their university choices into five basic categories. Will you like the position they've given your school? Can you base an appealing brand promise on their entrenched perceptions?

Brand as Reassurance

Registrars and recruiters know that, for most university applicants, the moment of decision is fraught with tension and anxiety. Their post-secondary degree is a personal badge they hope to wear proudly for life; it will expand their horizons and shape their careers. Applicants are contemplating a frightening leap into independent living, while wrestling with the burden of parental expectations and peer pressure.

Higher education is the most complex, expensive intangible most people will ever purchase, and the “purchase decision” is therefore powerfully influenced by brand reputation.

Imagine that you are 18 years old, earning minimum wage, and considering going into significant debt to purchase a \$50,000 car. Not just any car, mind you:

you will have to keep this vehicle for the rest of your life, and employers and colleagues will judge you for years to come by the make or model you choose.

To make matters worse, you've never driven a car before, and quite probably neither have your parents. There are no real “test drives” available, and you have no clue what's under the hood or how it really works. The product specifications and options are dizzying, and there are so many claims to world-class quality that you take them all with a grain of salt. To the novice, they all look the same.

For many university applicants, this is what the decision-making process feels like. Ultimately, their choice of university, like most consumer decisions, will be guided primarily by emotional drivers and trust in the institution of origin. Style, status, and the reassurance of a well-known brand will outweigh minor considerations of price or program details. They develop a sense of which campus “feels right” to them, and which fits their own, often fragile, self-image. A single face-to-face exchange may swing the balance. The moment of decision is a leap of faith, and the brand name will affirm their decision, to themselves, their friends and family.

A Singular Promise

Traditional positioning theory, like that first articulated more than thirty years ago by Al Ries and Jack Trout,¹ insists that successful brands are positioned around a single key attribute or core brand promise – preferably one that is credible, valuable, and distinctly different. “The essence of positioning is sacrifice,” they explain, surrendering other options to choose a single position. The challenge to university recruitment marketers is that the academic mindset and the liberal arts tradition of a “multiversity” are diametrically opposed to the simplification of a single unified brand.

“Most positioning programs are nothing more or less than a search for the obvious,” explain Ries and Trout. “Unfortunately, obvious concepts are also the most difficult to recognize and to sell. The human mind tends to admire the complicated and dismiss the obvious as being too simplistic.” Academic minds take this reverence for sophistication to a whole new level.

With a few notable exceptions, institutions of higher learning are very reluctant to stand for something concrete,

focused, or specific in the marketplace. Academic politics, and the desire to satisfy all stakeholders, mean that every university in the country wants simply to be known for being “student-centered,” offering “academic excellence” and “world-class research.” These are qualities with universal appeal for academics and administrators, each of whom would like to work for the “best” university in the world, but they do nothing to help prospective students decide on an institution.

By trying to stand for everything, most universities in fact manage to stand for *nothing*. Our applicant focus groups and surveys repeatedly encounter the same complaints:

“The viewbooks all look the same, just with different logos on them.”

“All of them are just saying how good they are, but nothing else.”

“How am I supposed to choose between them?”

When you fail to differentiate your institution meaningfully for applicants, you miss the opportunity to develop a meaningful brand promise. Even worse, if you cannot articulate and communicate a clear position for your university in the higher education landscape, the market – your applicants, students, alumni, and the general public – will create a position for you. And chances are good that it won't be the position you would like it to be.

¹ The theory of positioning, first articulated in a series of articles by Al Ries and Jack Trout in the 1970s, has become standard marketing theory. Quotations from Ries and Trout in this white paper are drawn from *Positioning: The Battle for Your Mind* (McGraw-Hill, 2001).

The Reality that Counts

To be credible, an institutional position must fit within the “brand footprint” already perceived by your audiences – *internal* audiences, like faculty, administration, students and alumni, but also *external* audiences, including applicants, their parents, school counselors, and yes, even journalists. Ries and Trout insist that “to be successful today, you must touch base with reality. And the only reality that counts is what’s already in the prospect’s mind.”

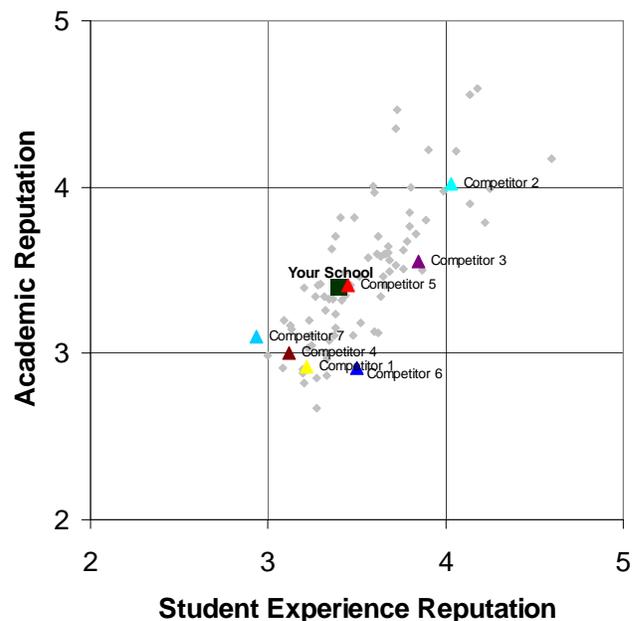
It is possible to shape and shift the position your university holds in the minds of the public, but first you must clearly understand the position you already hold. To that end, many colleges and universities across the country are turning to market research techniques to understand their current reputation.

The largest higher education consumer study in North America is Academica Group’s UCAS Applicant Study (formerly called the UAS - University Applicant Survey™ and CAS - College Applicant Survey™). The UCAS surveys almost 100,000 Canadian post-secondary applicants every year, providing in-depth insights into brand perceptions, the post-secondary decision process, student recruitment marketing and institutional reputation. With almost a decade of historical trend data, competitor and

comparator data, and the ability to cross-tabulate on numerous demographic, educational, and psychographic characteristics, the UCAS™ offers a wealth of untapped data to any university marketer.

Among other things, the UCAS measures consistently, year over year, applicant perceptions of the “reputation for academic quality” and “reputation for student life experience” of dozens of institutions. Mapped on two axes, this results in the “Brand Mapping Grid” pictured below.

Fig 1. Brand Mapping Grid of Canadian Universities²



² Naturally, the UCAS™ report provided to subscribing institutions provides university names on this and other graphs, but Academica Group remains committed to keeping the results confidential. We do not share reputation rankings with the media or the public at large. The UCAS™ rankings are exclusively intended to provide market intelligence to our client institutions.

36 Decision Factors

Most universities cannot clearly and succinctly articulate their own distinctiveness, or the key reasons why potential students should attend their institution. And no wonder — our research has demonstrated that applicants weigh about 40 factors, to some extent or another. Universities are complex and multi-faceted places, as faculty will quite rightly remind us. None of these factors can be completely ignored in recruitment efforts — but one or two can be prioritized in key messages, to stake out a clear brand position for the institution.

For years, the UAS™ has asked Canadian university applicants to rate the impact of the key factors on the selection of their first-choice university. Consistently, applicants report that some factors — such as academic reputation of the institution, and reputation of the program or faculty of study — are the strongest attractions of their first-choice school, while other factors — such as winning sports teams or fraternities — are distinctly unimportant.

Any university, whether the largest research university in the country or the smallest liberal arts college, might see survey results something like the impact curve in Fig. 2. And examining those results, the university might reasonably conclude that their biggest attraction for undergraduate applicants was academic reputation. They would therefore be inclined to emphasize quality, prestige, and reputation in their recruitment materials. This conclusion would be reasonable, but completely false.

While university applicants consider the full range of factors in selecting their first-choice university, they are not making their choice in a vacuum. Except where applicants in a one-university town are determined to commute, university applicants are invariably weighing one university *against its competitors*.

As Ries and Trout put it, “Prospects don’t *buy*, they *choose*... The merit, or lack of merit, of your brand is not nearly as important as your position among the possible choices.” Applicants are not swayed by a university’s biggest strength, but by its biggest perceived competitive advantage over other schools.



When we compare the impact curve of any given university to its key competitors, the perceived competitive advantages and disadvantages of the institution become readily apparent. Reputation may receive a strong positive rating, but still be far behind the rating for reputation at key competitor institutions. Other factors may be given lower ratings, but still represent very significant advantages over competing institutions.

The perceived advantages of the institution depicted in Fig. 3 are those points at which the red impact curve spikes *beyond* the blue benchmark, while the perceived disadvantages are those valleys that dip below the benchmark.

Fig 2. National Impact Curve Benchmark - Mean Scores for Key Decision Factors (2005 UAS™)

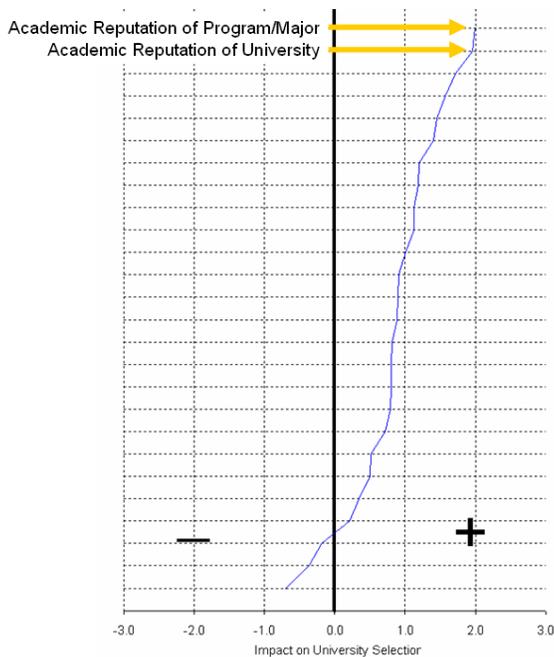
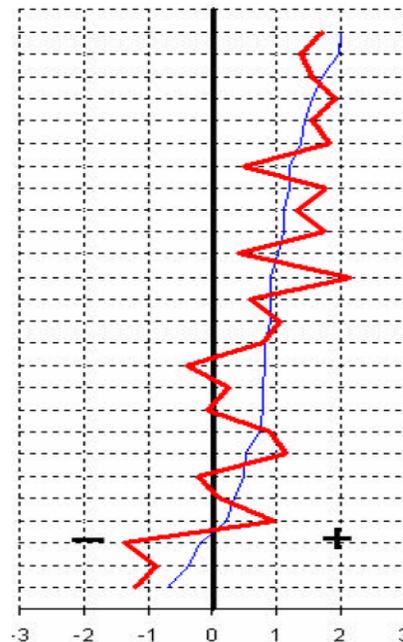


Fig 3. Impact Curve for a Typical Small Canadian University, compared to National Benchmark (2005 UAS™)



5 Styles of University

When Academica Group compared impact curves for dozens of universities across Canada, it became apparent that each university tends to possess significant competitive advantages in only a few key areas, which are often interrelated.

Applicants perceive that universities fall into one of five distinct categories: “Elite” schools, “Outcome” schools, “Campus” schools, “Nurturing” schools, and “Commodity” schools.

A few fortunate institutions possess major spikes in one area and minor spikes in another. Differences of opinion between applicants of various demographic groups, geographic regions, or program clusters also add subtleties and complexities to the results.

1. Elite

Some Canadian universities possess impact curves that spike significantly above their key competitors, and the overall benchmark, on two key factors:

- Academic reputation of the institution
- High admission averages

These “elite schools” attract applicants because of their academic rigour, prestige, and the perceived difficulty of gaining acceptance.

When asked, applicants explain that elite schools stand out for them “simply because it’s a dream school,” or because “the name is cool.” Elite institutions can attract applicants seeking intellectual challenge, but also those seeking credentials that will impress their friends, family, and future employers.

2. Outcome

Many Canadian university applicants are attracted to another set of institutions primarily because of what we have come to label “outcome” factors:

- High quality jobs for graduates
- Graduate and professional school placements for graduates
- Co-op programs or internships
- Relevant industry in the area

When applicants describe the attraction of these outcome-focused schools, they speak of “almost 100% guaranteed jobs” or reference a strong reputation for a specific program area. Older applicants, and commuter applicants, are particularly attracted to these outcome-focused universities.

3. Campus

Other impact curves, including major research institutions and small university colleges, demonstrate strong spikes on a range of “campus” factors:

- Attractive campus
- Good quality residences
- Guaranteed residence spaces

- Social and extracurricular activities on campus
- *Not* close to home

When applicants describe the attractions of a campus school, they mention “school spirit” and its “great atmosphere,” the attractive campus and the sense that “I can have a lot of fun there besides my studies.” Virtual tours of residences are particularly important for campus schools.

4. Nurturing

Applicants also perceive a group of Canadian universities as “nurturing” schools, which spike on several factors:

- Small class sizes
- *Not* large student population
- Safety, on and off campus

While some of these institutions also have fairly strong academic reputations, or track records of good outcomes for graduates, applicants are quite clear about the major attraction of these schools.

When asked, they explain that “the people there remembered me from my school presentation. That was a big part of my decision.” Some describe nurturing schools as “friendly and homey,” or “a place to foster individuality.”

5. Commodity

No university really wants to see itself as a commodity, but Canadian university applicants clearly perceive a class of institutions that attract them purely because of price:

- Bursaries / Scholarships
- Tuition Costs
- Cost of Living
- Proximity to Home
- *Not* Academic Reputation

These universities attract applicants from a fairly narrow catchment area, and applicants who consider a “commodity” school will generally say “it’s mostly a back-up, but if I get stuck with it I’m sure I would love it there.” Effective brand development is particularly vital for these universities.



A Conceptual Framework

In our branding practice, Academica Group consultants have developed a data-driven, multi-layered conceptual framework for understanding institutional positioning.

A complete institutional position is formed by identifying and presenting three levels of differentiation: in our terminology, a broad institutional *Category* is then defined by institutional *Style*, and uniquely positioned with *Focus*. The position is then set in the context of *Scope*.

1. Category

Canadian post-secondary institutions are commonly classified³ into six Categories:

1. Research University
2. Graduate University
3. Undergraduate University
4. Degree-Granting College
5. Multi-purpose College
6. Career College

Prospective students are quite clear about the category of institution to which they are applying. Applicants to each Category of institution are demographically and psychographically different. Although roughly one-quarter will cross-apply, this is generally between adjacent categories. Institutional evolution between Categories, particularly across the line between “college” and “university,” inevitably shifts the institution’s applicant pool, although adjacency may retain some portion of the market.

³ The definitions used by Statistics Canada for these Categories can be found on their website at http://www27.statcan.ca/IP_Internet/Common/Definitions/English/section1B.asp

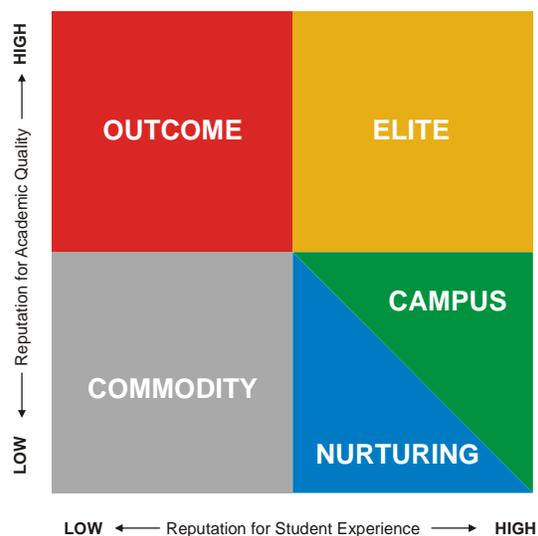
2. Style

As outlined above, applicants perceive most Canadian institutions as satisfactory on all 42 decision factors, but when making final choices from their consideration set, applicants distinguish between institutions in five key areas: academic quality, outcomes, campus experience, nurturing environment, and financial considerations.

To simplify the complexity, applicants consign each institution to a single Style, which can be roughly aligned with four quadrants of institutional reputation for academic quality and student experience.

Internal stakeholders are likely to see their own institution as comparatively strong in many of these Styles, but measurement of applicant decision factors and top-of-mind brand associations confirms that the marketplace mentally positions Canadian universities in a single clear position. Complexities and subtleties that are important and readily apparent to internal stakeholders are not always evident to casual observers in the marketplace.

Fig 4. A conceptual map of possible institutional positioning styles.



3. Focus

This is the narrowing of the institutional positioning yet further, within a Style, to a singular, unique focus. (Because they achieve narrower focus, multiple universities can possess unique positions within the same general Style, such as UofT, McGill and Queens, all of which are Elite universities.)

The outcome of a brand positioning exercise is to identify the focal point, the precise spot in the higher education landscape, on which to plant the institution's flag. Ideally, that focal point will also serve as a star to guide the institutional vision and strategic plan.

Institutional resources, energy and talent must necessarily continue to be directed to ensure that a university remains competitive on all 42 points of comparison, but additional capital investments, resources, strategic thinking and marketing emphasis need to be channeled to ensure that the positioning focus truly outshines all other institutions within the scope of its marketplace. *(See the next section for a discussion of some examples of brand focus among Canadian universities.)*

4. Scope

Canadian universities can also be classified by the geographic scope of their student recruitment draw, into one of 4 groups:

1. International
2. National
3. Regional
4. Local / Commuter

For our purposes, Scope denotes the competitive landscape in which a university must establish a unique and attractive position. If students nationally are to consider your institution, *it must stand out nationally*. By comparison, a commuter university may be successful in its market without ever clearly defining its position or brand, and a regional university may need only to define a broad Style in order to be distinctively positioned.

There is a risk in not establishing a complete position because of a perception of an institution's Scope. Greater globalization is reducing the barriers between regions, widening the playing field with more competition coming from across the country and around the world (e.g. distance education). Claiming a fully-defined and unique position will better insulate an institution from encroachment into its region.

Examples of Brand Focus

The general Styles outlined above are fundamental to understanding how the marketplace perceives universities, but are not the end of the story. Within each Style, or even on the cusp of two adjacent Styles, it is possible to define a distinctive Focus for your institution's brand.

Successful positioning, as Ries and Trout memorably explain, requires that a brand "own a word" in the consumer's mind. Their oft-quoted examples include Volvo ("safety"), 3M ("innovation"), BMW ("driving experience"), and Tide ("clean"). The word or concept needs to be easily understood, memorable, and above all compelling to the marketplace — it has to be something *valued* by your prospects.

It is also vital to be the first brand to establish that claim. Once a brand has staked its territory, all challengers are simply "also-rans" who wind up on a lower rung of the same ladder. That's one reason why claims for "academic excellence" are most credible from the oldest and best-known universities, which occupied that position first. University applicants have already decided on a top tier of "elite" institutions, and their perceptions have remained largely unchanged over the past decade. Claims for academic excellence from all other institutions will fall on deaf ears.

While every university would like to own the "elite" position, and virtually none wants to be perceived as a "commodity," the five styles outlined above are certainly *not* the only possible brand positions. The five styles simply reflect *default* positions that applicants have created for themselves.

Before embarking on a branding program, it is vital to fully understand where applicants have positioned your institution and your key competitors — but you can then proceed to reinforce, shift, or refocus those preconceptions through effective brand strategy and consistent, concerted effort.

The following examples illustrate the power of creating a position which refines a general style into a singular position:



University of Western Ontario *Research University Category-Campus Style- "Student Experience" Focus*

Building on brand perception as a "party school," investing millions in varsity athletics when other Ontario universities are cutting back, building new residences and investing \$250 million over 10 years in campus realignment to enhance appearance and functionality of the campus for students. Excellent example of positioning strategy guiding institutional planning and resources. Some competition for the position from smaller universities, but UWO may be able to outspend them in the marketplace, and defend this position for itself.



University of Waterloo

*Research University Category-Outcome Style-
“Learning from Experience” Focus*

Building on a strong reputation for co-op program (offered in every faculty and almost every program), computers and technology transfer, connections to industry and the world, future-oriented and innovative. Excellent example of a strong position, although one that is not explicitly articulated through its marketing initiatives.



University of Toronto

*Research University Category-Elite Style-
“Great Minds for a Great Future” Focus*

Emphasizes UofT's stature as Canada's largest university, equates size with quality through the dual meaning of the word “great,” speaks to individual career outcomes and national/global future created through research and innovation. Marketing materials use “great” in various contexts. Solid example of a single, strategically-chosen word that positions UofT as the largest elite university.



Queen's University

*Research University Category-Elite Style-
“Tradition” Focus*

Although not the oldest university in Canada, Queen's has a strong reputation in the marketplace for school spirit, a campus with beautiful architecture, an international facility in an English castle, and a name that conveys heritage and royal endorsement. Although Queen's doesn't make “tradition” its tagline, the word is used liberally in explicit messaging, and neogothic architecture, bagpipe music, kilts and tartans reinforce the position in photography and recruitment videos. As a small but elite university, Queen's is readily distinguishable from UofT in the marketplace. Its challenge is that an overly traditional position needs to be managed carefully to continue attracting forward-looking engineering and science students.

Branding Success

Successful brand positioning for a university must be far more than a marketing slogan. It must be a concept supported by fact and embraced by alumni, students, senior administration and faculty. Budgets and strategic plans must focus and reinforce the positioning — universities have to “put their money where their brand is.”

And of course, a successful brand position must be one that your applicants find credible, distinctive, attractive, and compelling. Solid reputation research is an essential part of the branding process, to develop an accurate and nuanced understanding of your institution’s perceived strengths and weaknesses, and competitive position in the higher education landscape.

It has also been our experience that it is vital to engage stakeholders across the campus community and beyond, to ensure their perspectives are understood and respected, that they feel engaged and follow along the branding process.

About the Author:

Ken Steele was an award-winning university researcher, teacher, and ad agency executive before co-founding Academica Group to provide integrated consumer research, strategic planning, and marketing execution to Canada's education sector.

Ken has consulted with dozens of college and university clients on recruitment marketing and brand strategy. In particular, Ken has led the development of our conceptual, data-driven framework for mapping institutional positioning and reputation. Recent projects that have benefited from Ken's strategic thinking include our branding work for Lethbridge College and Mount Royal College, marketing audits for McGill University, Cambrian College, Fanshawe College and Sault College, alumni research for Bishop's University, the Ontario Applied Degree marketing plan ("Degrees in Demand"), the University of Western Ontario undergraduate recruitment campaign, and Athabasca University brand positioning report.

Ken created and continues to edit [Academica's Top Ten](#), a free daily news summary that now serves more than 1,700 email subscribers and thousands of RSS readers.

To discuss this white paper or other Academica Group research studies, please feel free to contact Ken Steele directly at ken@academicagroup.com or toll-free at 1-866-922-8636 ext. 205.

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North America's leading source of quantitative market research intelligence to higher education institutions. Our research division has achieved Gold Seal accreditation from the Marketing Research & Intelligence Association of Canada.

In addition to market research, brand strategy and recruitment marketing strategy for hundreds of colleges and universities, Academica Group has conducted national research on perceived return on investment and the effectiveness of student aid for the Canada Millennium Scholarship Foundation, Educational Policy Institute, and other government agencies.

Academica Group has pioneered the application of **Full Cycle Marketing™** to higher education – integrating market research, concept testing, and web analytics in a continuous cycle.

Our technology division has recently released **SkoolPool™**, the first Facebook application designed to facilitate college and university decision-making online.



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