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# CHAPTER FIVE

## INSTITUTIONAL REPUTATION AND POSITIONING

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The two authors of this chapter examine the twin challenges of, firstly, defining an effective and distinctive institutional position in the current higher education landscape, and secondly, ensuring congruence between promotional claims and the experiences of stakeholders, particularly students. Part I of this chapter, written by a seasoned marketer and higher education branding consultant, Ken Steele, examines the growing importance of effective institutional positioning for Canadian colleges and universities, and describes the challenge of distilling the complexity and multiplicity of a campus to a clear, concise institutional brand. Part II of this chapter, written from the perspective of an experienced campus leader and noted strategic enrolment management consultant, Dr. Jim Black, describes the creation of a differentiating brand promise, approaches to ignite the passions of internal stakeholders, and the ingredients necessary to deliver on an institution's promise consistently.

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### **PART I:**

## **DEFINING AN EFFECTIVE INSTITUTIONAL BRAND**

**BY KEN STEELE**

### **THE MARKETING IMPERATIVE**

In the face of demographic, economic and competitive forces (see Chapter Two), most Canadian colleges and universities have long since accepted marketing as a necessary evil, to attract enrolment outside traditional catchment areas or in a highly competitive urban environment, to secure alumni loyalty and donor support, to enhance town-gown relations or to attract prospective faculty members. The senior leadership at most institutions I have visited openly desire national or even international awareness and reputation, almost always for the same fundamental qualities: academic excellence, a comprehensive range of quality programs, outstanding research, and/or a student-centred campus culture. Hundreds of Ca-

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nadian colleges and universities (and thousands of international institutions) are simultaneously trying to communicate very similar messages, in a very similar tone of voice.

Although most institutions of higher education now acknowledge the importance of so-called “marketing” to advance their missions, very few actually practice true marketing at all. The discipline of marketing entails the management of the so-called “Four Ps”: Product (design and offering of courses, programs, majors, degrees), Price (tuition, scholarships, bursaries, work terms), Place (classrooms, residences, recreational facilities, instructional delivery, class timetabling), and lastly—and arguably least critical to enrolment success—Promotion (Web and print communications, media relations, advertising). (Some marketing theorists have added a “Fifth P”—People—which is explored in the second part of this chapter.) Typically, these responsibilities are scattered across campus and beyond: academic leadership is responsible for “product” decisions and innovations, either centrally or at the department level; offices of student awards, financial aid, and the provincial ministry of advanced education determine “price”; campus planners, the registrar’s office, and individual faculty members determine “place”; and “promotion” is often carried out by dozens of decentralized and largely uncoordinated offices. In many ways, it is unfair and unproductive to hold campus recruitment marketers solely accountable for enrolment results, when they have little or no control over three of the most important “Ps” of marketing.

When an institution is founded on marketing principles, like Royal Roads University in British Columbia or Athabasca University in Alberta, decisions about all “Four Ps” are coordinated strategically, based on consumer research, and institutional structures and policies evolve to serve the marketing strategy of the institution. Royal Roads was established from the outset to provide degree completion and professional graduate-level credentials to mid-career professionals working in select sectors of the economy, and therefore the institution developed degrees and a unique blended learning model, to meet the needs of that target market. Athabasca offers distance learning courses to students with greater convenience of time and place than conventional universities, and many of their students are in fact full-time undergraduates at other institutions that have inadequate variety or capacity in their course offerings. Both institutions make strategic investments, program decisions, faculty hires, and marketing decisions based on a clear focus on their defined target market.

These two universities are the exceptions that prove the rule: many academics at traditional institutions still harbour misgivings about universities that cater consciously to their markets. Yet while marketing and branding may seem out of place on many campuses, few

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would disagree that institutional reputation is a valuable asset to any college or university. Faculty members take pride in their institution's reputation, and prospective faculty members can be attracted by a strong national or international profile. For years, applicant studies have shown consistently that prospective students consider the academic reputation of an institution or program to be the most compelling factor in their decision process (UCAS). Campus marketers, seeking to establish national profile and sustain a positive reputation for their institutions, are increasingly turning to the proven disciplines of corporate branding to achieve their goals.

## **THE BRANDING IMPERATIVE**

Higher education institutions must compete for attention from prospective students, donors, faculty members, and various influencers in an increasingly crowded marketplace, with infinitesimally small budgets compared to national and multinational commercial advertisers. (One notable exception is the for-profit University of Phoenix, with an international marketing budget in excess of \$500 million.) To maximize marketing effectiveness, most institutions have come to understand the necessity of a consistent "look and feel" in both online and offline promotions: a consistent visual identity, tagline, colour scheme, page layout or site navigation, and perhaps even consistent photographic style or tone of voice. The challenge on a decentralized campus is building support for a consistent visual brand among diverse faculties, schools, institutes, and service units, and frequently such internal wrangling consumes all the energy of marketing communications professionals, who become known pejoratively as the "logo cops." On many campuses, mere consistency in marketing is mistaken for "branding": a set of guidelines for copywriters, graphic designers, and Web developers to follow. As a result of this misconception, faculty, staff, and many students on these campuses regard the institution's "brand" as slick but superficial marketing techniques that are irrelevant to their working lives.

Properly understood, however, an institutional brand should be much more than mere promotional window dressing (Aaker, 1991): a college or university brand is a concise, compelling expression of campus identity, a distillation of institutional mission, vision, and values that focuses passion and enthusiasm among stakeholders, attracts external audiences, and drives strategic decision-making at every level of the organization. An institutional brand, in this fuller sense, is an organizing principle that attracts and guides faculty, students, and supporters; that positions the institution among its competitors; and that reflects the unique

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and distinctive value the school brings to its constituents. To be effective, such a positioning strategy must be championed by the president and led by senior administration, and should be integrally connected to the institution's academic plan, strategic plan, business plan, enrolment plan, and marketing (promotion) plan. Ideally, the positioning strategy is carefully developed with solid market research, thorough stakeholder consultation, and careful competitive analysis, and can, in fact, survive as a long-term, multi-decade strategy.

The University of Western Ontario exemplifies a strategic approach to institutional positioning. In its student recruitment marketing, Western promises "Canada's best undergraduate student experience" (although the university's full mission statement elaborates, "the best student experience among Canada's leading research-intensive universities"). Western's "student experience" position in the higher education market is made credible by a long tradition of school spirit and extracurriculars, varsity athletics, and off-campus nightlife. The "experience" position appeals to prospective students, who imagine a lively social life and party atmosphere, and also to their parents, who imagine their child reading a textbook on the campus green or participating in a campus club. It suits the institution's enrolment strategy, which appears to focus on attracting full-time residential students from the Greater Toronto Area, located an optimal two hours away up the nation's busiest freeway. (And though faculty might have worried about attracting less studious students with an "experience" brand, the heightened competition for admission to Western has actually increased entrance averages.) But Western's brand is more than a marketing statement that reflects reality and attracts great students: it is embedded in the mission of the institution, and guides decisions on policy, procedure, and budget. The campus master plan allocated significant funds to construct appealing modern residence halls, and to relocate administrative offices from the centre of campus to the outskirts—creating a literally student-centred campus. Over time, Western's succinct declaration of its mission and focus—its brand—will attract donors who share the vision, and faculty and staff committed to fulfilling the mission on the front lines. This is how an institutional brand can help advance institutional strategy, and if Western stays the course for a decade, they will likely be synonymous with the "experience" position in Canada.

## **THE IMPACT OF INSTITUTIONAL POSITIONING**

Positioning is a brand discipline defined thirty years ago in the seminal book, *Positioning*, by legendary marketers Al Ries and Jack Trout (Ries & Trout, 1981). They argue that con-

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sumers in our prosperous society do not simply buy quality products, they choose between competing products based on the distinctive features or values those products offer. Since consumers are deluged with thousands of marketing messages every day, their mental map for any given brandscape is simplistic, and ultimately positioning amounts to a battle “to own a word in the prospect’s mind.” Automotive brands may be the clearest examples of positioning: Volvo = safety, BMW = excitement, Mercedes = prestige, Kia = practical value. Each automotive brand owns a distinctive position, and when it ceases to be unique, or loses the clarity of its brand focus, it loses market share. The same sort of positioning occurs in much lower price categories too: Coca-Cola sells its heritage, while Pepsi sells to a new youthful generation (even though the brand dates back to 1898).

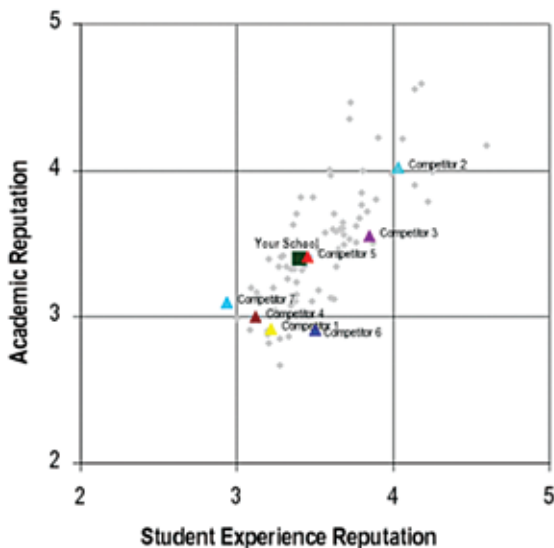
Postsecondary recruiters know all too well that prospective students are weighing their alternatives carefully: most university applicants visit six or more Web sites, visit two or three campuses, and even apply to three or more institutions that make their shortlist (UCAS). For applicants, how a college or university differs from other institutions is far more critical than all the many things those institutions have in common. Canadian consumers assume that all public institutions will offer quality, accredited programs, a safe campus environment, reasonable tuition prices, and generally satisfied students. Yet students feel immense pressure to make the right choice, since they are making a major investment in an abstract intangible that will define them and their career opportunities for years to come. In dozens of focus groups, I have heard young people repeatedly express frustration at how similar all institutional viewbooks look and sound: “How am I supposed to choose when they all look the same? It’s like they just slap a different logo on!” If a geographically remote college or university hopes to attract students across hundreds of miles, past dozens of competing institutions, it needs to offer something truly compelling, credible, and distinctive.

## **EMPTY CLAIMS TO EXCELLENCE**

Almost without exception, faculty and administration on every campus believe their institution is fundamentally about academic excellence, and perhaps also world-class research. Academic culture is extraordinarily focused on excellence: once campus stakeholders grasp that institutional positioning is about “owning a word,” the first word they all want is “excellence” of some kind. Unfortunately, claims of quality almost always ring hollow in any product category (Ries & Trout, 1981), and certainly they cannot be distinctive when hundreds of competitors echo identical claims. “Quality is important, but brands are not built by

quality alone” (Ries, 2002). Ries and Trout maintain that only one brand can occupy a given position in the minds of consumers, and that usually the first brand entering a market holds that position permanently—unless a competitor outspends them significantly on marketing: “the easy way to get into a person’s mind is to be first” (Ries & Trout, 1981). Every product or service category can be understood as a “little ladder in your head” on which consumers rank competing options—a concept quite familiar to higher education, thanks to the Maclean’s University Rankings and the Globe & Mail University Report Card.

Academica Group’s applicant research seems to bear out the theory that the first institutions to enter a prospective student’s mind wind up owning the top position for quality. Over more than fourteen years conducting the UCAS Applicant Study, university applicants have perceived institutional reputation with remarkable consistency year over year. They are able to rate institutions on “reputation for academic quality” and “reputation for student life experience,” and the two tend to correlate, although the exceptions are naturally interesting (UCAS). Generally, institutions are rated more highly if they are older, larger, or in closer geographic proximity to the respondent: in effect, the first institutions to enter students’ minds, often in elementary school, own the highest positions on these two axes of reputation. While applicants overall perceive perhaps half a dozen universities in Canada to inhabit a top tier for academic quality, the vast majority of institutions are clustered in an undifferentiated mass—essentially occupying a relatively neutral position in the marketplace (see Figure 1). This is what broad claims of academic excellence will earn an institution: an undifferentiated reputation as “average.”



**Figure 1:** Reputations of Canadian universities for academic quality and student life experience, as perceived by university applicants (UCAS, 2005).

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Instead of competing directly over identical market positions, Ries and Trout emphasize that strategic positioning often involves discovering a specific niche or a novel position—or, sometimes, involves repositioning a more established competitor (Ries & Trout, 1981). It is hardly surprising that prospective students, parents, guidance counselors, and even peer academics would be highly skeptical of claims from a regional college to academic excellence on par with Harvard. It might be possible, however, for that same regional college to establish an international reputation for excellence in a particular discipline (such as Grande Prairie Regional College has in Harley-Davidson motorcycle repair), or for a unique pedagogical approach (such as Colorado College or Quest University have with their modular block system for one-at-a-time courses). Instead of a bland, undifferentiated, and ultimately less than credible claim for academic excellence in the abstract, a more focused claim is more credible, more distinctive, and can become the basis for a successful national profile and reputation.

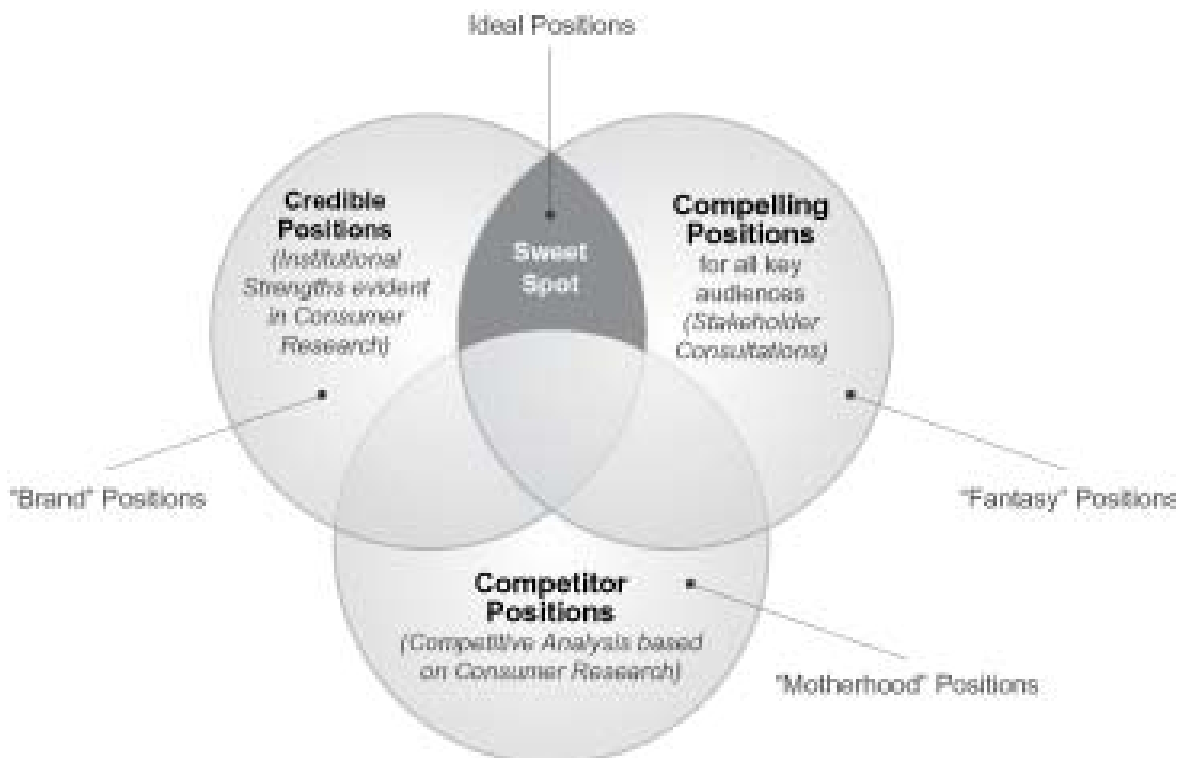
Institutions that leverage a focused position will find that, over time, a “halo effect” will in fact raise the credibility and reputation of the entire institution. Albeit without conscious strategy, this is how McGill University’s reputation for pioneering neuroscience in the early twentieth century developed into an all-encompassing reputation for academic quality that persists to this day, despite decades of underfunding. This is how the University of Waterloo’s reputation for mathematics and computer science—amplified by connections to RIM, Open Text and Microsoft—has translated into a remarkably strong institutional reputation for a relatively young university. The University of Saskatchewan’s overall reputation benefits from massive federal research investments in its synchrotron. MIT’s Web site has become the most trafficked university site in the world, thanks to its OpenCourseWare initiative. McMaster University has occasionally used the tagline, “Canada’s premier health university,” but can leverage that strength to promote humanities and business programs. Building an institution’s reputation for something in particular, making strategic investments to grow and enhance that “something,” and communicating that “something” succinctly, memorably, and consistently for years, will gradually differentiate an institution from its competitors, and raise perceptions of quality among a broad range of audiences.

## **THE THREE C’S OF SUCCESSFUL BRANDING**

An institutional position could conceivably be constructed around almost anything, from an academic discipline, a research institute, a prominent professor, or a prominent graduate,

to a corporate partnership, a pedagogical approach, a style of architecture, an athletics team, a provincial stereotype, or an implementation of technology. To be successful, however, an institutional position needs to be built at the intersection of what I like to call the “three C’s” of branding: the institution’s brand position must be simultaneously Credible, Compelling, and Competitively Distinct. In many ways, these align with the three intersecting circles of corporate strategy: company capabilities, customer needs, and competitor offerings (Collis & Rukstad, 2008). The “sweet spot” for institutional strategy is found in the overlap between student needs and institutional strengths, where it is distinct from competing institutions’ positions (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2:** Successful institutional brands arise from the intersection of the “Three C’s” of branding (Ken Steele).





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## **CREDIBLE POSITIONS**

An institutional brand position must first of all be credible to all stakeholders: in the context of what they know or have heard, prospective students must regard the claim as believable, faculty and staff as achievable, and education professionals as reasonable. In other words, the brand position must reflect reality—and perceived reality—both to be believed and to ensure there is no major disconnect when students arrive on campus. Rightly or wrongly, if prospective students perceive an institution as having lax academic standards, any brand messages celebrating academic excellence will be met with incredulity and derision. If faculty believe an institution is committed to research, but students expect it to be student-centred, one or both parties will be severely disappointed, and strategic planning will be contentious. If students know little about an institution aside from its geographic location, the brand position needs to fit credibly with what they already believe about the location, whether urban nightlife, cosmopolitan culture, outdoor recreation, or sleepy college town. If a brand positioning strategy fails to incorporate attributes that are perceived as credible by stakeholders, I call it a “fantasy” position (or less kindly, a “delusional” position), and it is doomed to failure.

Solid market research is the best way to objectively establish and measure existing brand perceptions, and help to define the credible “brand footprint” for an institution in the near future (see Chapter Three). For example, if consumer research clearly shows that an institution is a well-known “party school,” a credible brand position might encompass school spirit or a “work hard, play hard” message, but it would be a stretch to position the institution’s brand on academic rigour or quiet study. An institutional brand can certainly be aspirational in nature, but it must be sufficiently elastic to appear credible to stakeholders in the present reality. If the campus reality needs time to catch up with the vision, a branding campaign must either be delayed, or phased in so that credibility is always maintained.

## **COMPETITIVELY DISTINCTIVE POSITIONS**

An institutional brand position will not be effective if it is not distinct from the perceived positions of key competitor institutions. (The only way to supplant an established competitor in a given market position is by significantly outspending them in marketing communications, consistently and memorably.) Whether writing a mission statement or brainstorming for an institutional branding project, campus stakeholders have a stubborn tendency to focus on traditional academic principles that are common to virtually every college or

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university: the most vital aspects of higher education tend to be such “motherhood” statements, which fail to differentiate an institution.

For example, over the past decade environmental concerns have swept across every campus in North America, so the University of Northern British Columbia’s tagline, “Canada’s Green University,” may not be particularly strong as a differentiator. The University of British Columbia has a credible claim to this title, thanks to its highly successful EcoTrek sustainability programs, and other institutions certainly focus on environmental programs and LEED gold or platinum campus buildings. However, at this point only UNBC is attempting to stake out the “Green” position in Canadian higher education, so despite a modest marketing budget, they might be successful in the long term at owning the word “Green.”

When multiple institutions are simultaneously pouring their limited marketing budgets into identical brand positions, however, most of those marketing dollars are wasted. In 2007, as globalization and international student recruitment became a priority for almost all Canadian institutions, their positioning strategies (as exemplified in their positioning statements or taglines) converged on a collision course. UBC proudly proclaimed it was “Canada’s Global University.” Nearby Simon Fraser University was “Thinking of the World.” On the other coast, Saint Mary’s University was attracting students with the slogan, “One University. One World. Yours.” and Nova Scotia Agricultural College invited prospective students to “Embrace Your World.” Trent University assured applicants that “The World Belongs to those Who Understand it.” Sadly these were by no means all of the institutions jockeying for the “global” position in the higher education marketplace. Internationalization is a virtue, an attractive revenue model, and reflects student interest in a new global economy, but it is not tenable as a distinctive position in the higher education landscape.

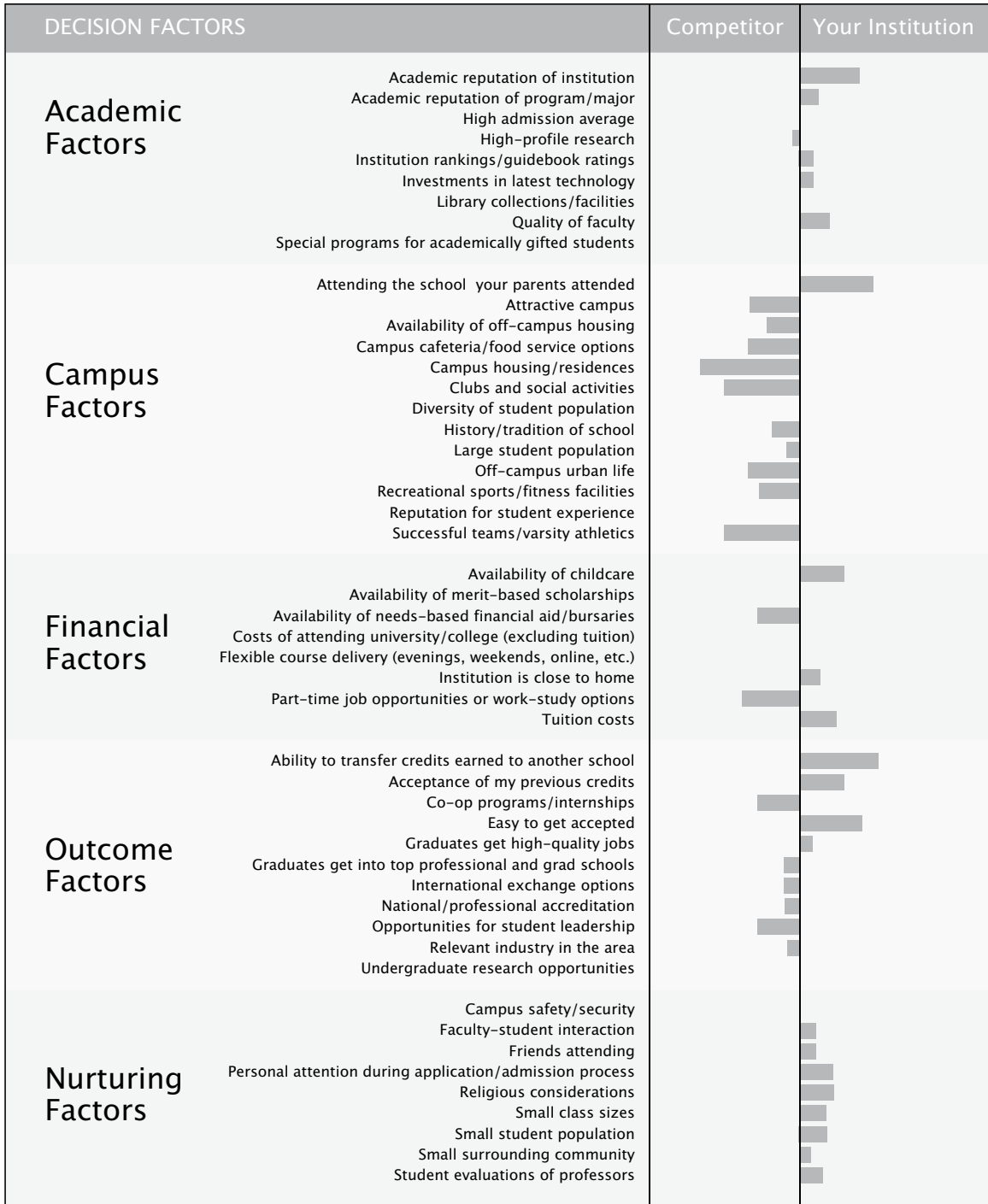
At the time of writing, a series of institutions are competing head-to-head to own the position as Canada’s university. Carleton University in Ottawa was first into the fray some years ago, with their tagline “Canada’s Capital University.” They were followed very shortly by the University of Ottawa, who declared itself “Canada’s University.” In 2010, the universities in Nova Scotia launched a collective campaign to position the maritime province as “Canada’s University Capital.” The competing claims to such similar territory, in such similar language, undermine the effectiveness of all three brand campaigns, and leave prospective students even more confused and frustrated.

Quantitative research can help build campus consensus and focus branding efforts on the credible, distinctive, and compelling qualities of an institution. The UCAS survey asks

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300,000 applicants to universities and colleges to gauge the impact, positive or negative, of fifty different features on their choice of institution (UCAS). Academica Group often poses the same question to current students, faculty, and alumni to measure the perceptions of a range of stakeholder groups. (In effect, the push-pull gaps measure simultaneously how compelling a factor is, how credibly it is associated with a given institution, and how distinctive it is from competitor positions.) When the scores given to competing institutions are compared in a “push-pull” graph (see Figure 3), it often becomes clear that the schools are differentiated most strongly on only a handful of decision factors: in this example, the strongest distinctions are that School A offers a small student population, small surrounding community, and small class sizes, while School B is perceived to offer greater student diversity, relevant industry in the area, and relative ease of acceptance. If other stakeholders and other competitor comparisons yielded corroborating evidence, School A could reasonably proceed with a positioning strategy emphasizing nurturing qualities in some way. It would be unwise, on the other hand, to attempt to distinguish School A on the basis of financial costs or institutional reputation.

**Figure 3:** Compelling, credible, and distinctive qualities of institutions, as perceived by prospective students, measured in a “push-pull” graph (UCAS).



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## COMPELLING POSITIONS

Finally, perhaps it seems obvious that a successful brand position for a college or university must also be compelling—but it may not be so obvious that it should be compelling not only for the primary target market (usually prospective undergraduate students), but also for graduate students, faculty and staff, prospective faculty, alumni and donors. If the strategic positioning process has been sufficiently inclusive and consultative, all stakeholders will be engaged in the process of uncovering the core of the institution’s mission and vision. Market research can measure the appeal and impact of the most compelling brand promises, and help identify the language that can clearly communicate the concepts to various audiences. Student recruitment marketing will express the brand in language, visuals, and terms that are most compelling and memorable for the primary target market, but the underlying brand position must be compelling to other campus stakeholders as well.

Many colleges and universities undertake expensive branding or positioning exercises, yet ultimately fail to arrive at a sufficiently compelling brand promise: they instead arrive at what I call a “bland position.” Bland positions often result from a lack of leadership or authority in the strategic positioning process: if the institution’s president does not champion the brand strategy, if the task force or committee is trying to satisfy too many masters, if the process has a lack of clarity about the primary target market or a lack of research evidence to focus its efforts, the result will be a brand “camel” (to adapt the old adage that a camel is a horse designed by committee). Effective institutional strategy is all about making tough choices; bland strategy results from a failure of will to make choices at all. Instead of focusing the mission of the institution, and its marketing messages, on a single word or concept, colleges or universities with a bland position are typically trying to “own” six or eight different concepts simultaneously.

## FINDING THE GRAND OVERSIMPLIFICATION

Ries and Trout warn that “most positioning programs are nothing more or less than a search for the obvious,” and state memorably that “the essence of positioning is sacrifice” (Ries & Trout, 1981). In other words, “the most important aspect of a brand is its single-mindedness” (Ries, 2002). The biggest challenge to university marketers is that scholarly training and the liberal arts tradition of a “multiversity” are diametrically opposed to the simplification of a single unified brand. With good reason, faculty members are committed to academic freedom and intelligent debate: a coherent, consistent message from the entire institution runs

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counter to the academic mindset. On community college campuses, it can be equally difficult to achieve consensus on a singular brand focus because the faculty are fundamentally committed to breadth of programming and providing access to education for all students, not a specific target market. Academic program reviews on every campus in the country find it easy to launch additional programs to expand the breadth of offerings at the institution, but face public outcry from faculty and students, and often legal opposition from faculty associations, when they attempt to narrow program offerings in any way.

It seems to be the natural inclination of postsecondary institutions to seek breadth, not focus, and this makes the strategic positioning process particularly sensitive and often politically explosive. The objective of a strategic branding process is definitely not to fabricate an unrealistic or untrue fiction, but it does absolutely require the distillation of the essence of the institution to a singular concept—a grand oversimplification—in order to cut through the media clutter and communicate meaningfully with audiences. Effective institutional marketing must identify what is credible, compelling, and truly distinctive about an institution, and express that kernel of truth creatively in language that resonates with the target audience—usually high school seniors.

Even in the simplest consumer categories, “the human mind tends to admire the complicated and dismiss the obvious as being too simplistic” (Ries & Trout, 1981). Academic minds take this reverence for sophistication and complexity 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. They must overcome particularly strong internal pressure if they are to arrive at a brand position that is comprehensible to teenagers, let alone one that is expressed in terms teenagers will find attention-getting and appealing.

But if an institution fails to express its brand position credibly, distinctively, and compellingly—if it attempts to stand for too many things simultaneously—the institution ultimately stands for nothing in particular at all in the minds of the public and the marketplace. And if a college or university abdicates responsibility to define and communicate its essence, the marketplace will fill that information vacuum by inventing a position for the institution, through rankings, word of mouth, gossip, perceptions, and misperceptions.

## **THE “WISDOM” OF THE MASSES**

When thousands of twelfth-graders decide what your institution of higher learning is really all about, the simplification will almost certainly displease more campus stakeholders than

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a carefully managed branding strategy. The UCAS survey asks postsecondary applicants to provide a top-of-mind word or phrase that they associate with particular Canadian institutions; analysis of the results for hundreds of institutions reveals the sort of brand positions the marketplace invents on its own. (Quotations that follow are taken verbatim from open-ended responses by university applicants to the 2006 UCAS applicant survey.)

The most frequent response, naturally, is some variation on the word “nothing” (UCAS)—either students have never heard of the institution, or cannot provide any association whatsoever; this is brand position purgatory. The risk of attempting to be all things to all people, is that in fact an institution becomes nothing to anyone. To achieve an effective brand position, an institution must first seek awareness (or at least name recognition), then cultivate interest through a clear position, and only thereafter can it attempt to communicate a more complex and comprehensive understanding of all that the institution has to offer.

The next most frequent brand associations applicants offer are fairly obvious associations with geographic locations. The implication, obviously, is that an institutional brand can be tightly connected to its provincial or municipal namesake, and all the positive and negative connotations that may entail. Many applicants are miles off target when they ascribe a location to a college or university, adding insult to injury when this is the top-of-mind association they have with the institution.

When an association with academic quality comes to mind for applicants, it is typically polarized into extremely positive or relatively negative terms. Institutions are perceived as either “extremely good,” “challenging,” “excellent,” and “tough,” or they are perceived as “average,” “not bad,” “so-so,” or “not good.” Applicants are often explicit that their top-of-mind association with the institution is solely about reputation and prestige: “famous,” “recognized,” “well-reputed,” “top-ranked,” or “the Harvard of Canada.” The opposite of such reputation is, naturally, obscurity. Applicants also ascribe academic quality to institutions in terms of the difficulty of admission: schools are either “competitive,” “intimidating,” with “high admission cut-offs” and “high achievers,” or they are “mediocre” and “accept anybody”—or even accept “rejects from elsewhere.” These institutional positions based on perceived quality shift very little over years or even decades.

Applicants also associate institutions with their size, usually in a pejorative sense. Small schools are “quaint,” “UofT junior,” or a “high school.” Large institutions are “crowded,” “overpopulated,” and “suffocating,” where students will get lost in a “maze” and be treated as “just a number.” Applicants’ top-of-mind associations for some institutions are focused

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on the student social environment. Schools with strong campus spirit bring to mind “Homecoming,” “Frosh Week,” “fraternities,” “fun,” “parties,” “porn,” “girls,” and “drinking.” Welcoming campuses are “close-knit,” “people-oriented,” “friendly,” or even “student-centred.” And commuter campuses are often perceived as places with “no social life,” where students go “to study and that’s it.”

Many applicants associate particular postsecondary institutions with a specific subject or faculty, often a professional school like business, medicine, engineering, law, or veterinary medicine. Many respondents are conscious of the brands of named professional schools like Osgoode Hall Law School, the Schulich School of Medicine and Dentistry, the DeGroot School of Business, or the Ivey School of Business. Some faculty-specific associations are obviously pejorative, such as “Moo U” (for agriculture) or “Skule” (for engineering). Although specific programs come to mind for the marketplace when they think of particular postsecondary institutions, these programs are seldom dominant brand associations. Positioning an institution on the basis of unique, respected, quality programming—sometimes called “pillar programs” or “centres of excellence”—can be both difficult and dangerous. Difficult because politically, faculty and staff tend to resent the “tall poppies” and prefer equitable exposure for the work being done across the institution. Dangerous because unique programs can quickly be imitated by competing institutions, or fall out of funding or market demand. Positioning should be solid ground you can claim and defend for years to come, not an ever-changing race to be first to market with new programs. It can be highly effective to develop strategic recruitment programs and public relations initiatives at the program level, but an institution’s brand position usually needs to surpass individual program areas.

Although the UCAS data demonstrates some minimal recall of marketing slogans and taglines, generally these are cited by very few respondents when providing top-of-mind associations with a college or university. (The applicants do, however, ascribe a variety of interesting brand attributes to institutions, from “innovation” and “discovery,” “huge history” and “castles,” to “nerds,” “Brains,” and “Brainiacs” or “successful grads.”) Taglines and positioning statements, however clever they may be, do not have a significant lasting impact on campus stakeholders or target markets, but positioning strategies that are integral to institutional mission and vision, that guide strategic planning and resource allocation, and that are communicated clearly and compellingly to all audiences, have the power to shape institutional reputation and create a shared sense of direction. Taglines are important as tools to crystallize the brand position in a few words, particularly for internal audiences, but



prospective students are likely to retain only a general impression drawn from the tagline, photography, and perhaps news headlines.

## A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR POSITIONING

Over the past two decades, we have developed a new conceptual framework for positioning colleges and universities in the higher education landscape, based on quantitative research data, hundreds of focus groups, and working with dozens of institutions on rebranding and positioning strategies. The remainder of this section will outline our approach to institutional positioning.

We believe that 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 distinctiveness of the position required is established by the Scope, which defines the institution’s competitive set. Once the positioning focus is identified, creative executions of the brand find the language and imagery to convey that position to key target markets.

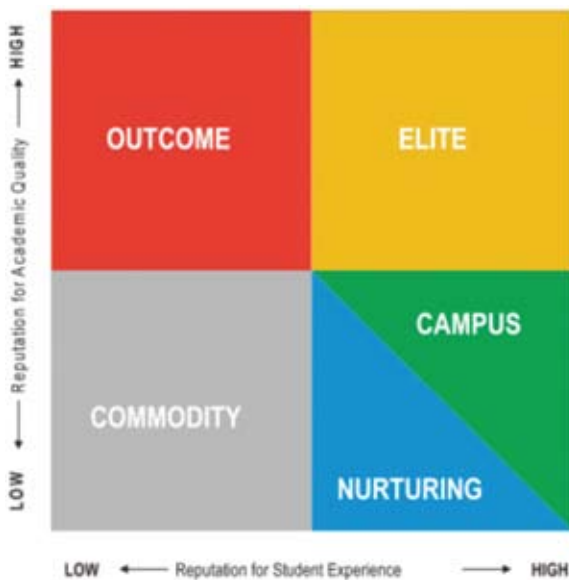
### CATEGORY:

Statistics Canada classifies Canadian postsecondary institutions into four broad categories with nineteen sub-types (Orton, 2009):

<b>University and Degree-Granting</b>	Primarily Undergraduate Comprehensive Medical Doctoral Special Purpose
<b>College and Institute</b>	Degree-Granting College and Institute Multi-Purpose Special Purpose
<b>Career College</b>	Degree-Granting Career College Multi-Purpose Special Purpose
<b>Apprenticeship/Adult Education</b>	Art Language Medical/Health Professional Other Immigration Centres Literacy, Upgrading, ESL Native Friendship Centres School Board Adult Ed

Generally, prospective students are relatively clear about the category of institution to which they are applying, and provincial governments are explicit about the mandate of each institution. 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, such as when a college is granted university status, inevitably shifts the institution’s applicant pool, although adjacency may retain some portion of the market.

**STYLE:** As noted previously, applicants consider about fifty key decision factors, to some extent or another, when comparing their postsecondary options. Applicants perceive most Canadian institutions as satisfactory on all fifty 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 (Steele, 2008). To simplify the complexity of a life-changing decision, applicants generally ascribe each institution to a single Style, which can be roughly aligned with four quadrants of institutional reputation for academic quality and student experience.



*Figure 4: A conceptual map of possible institutional positioning “Styles” (Ken Steele).*

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 most institutions more simplisti-

cally. Complexities and subtleties that are important and readily apparent to internal stakeholders are not always evident to casual observers in the marketplace. Moreover, the danger of attempting to position an institution in multiple quadrants simultaneously is that the position instead is watered down to a central, neutral position, not perceived as particularly strong on any aspect. Over time, a bland position can gravitate downward into a commodity position, attracting only local or regional students.

**FOCUS:** Focus is the narrowing of the institutional positioning yet further, within a Style, to a singular, unique focus. There are potentially thousands of distinctive Focus positions for an institution, and multiple universities can possess unique positions within the same general Style. For example, the University of Toronto, McGill University, and Queens University, are all Elite universities, but can be ascribed distinctive foci: Toronto is known for its sheer magnitude, McGill for its international prestige, and Queen’s for its historical traditions. The outcome of a strategic 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 an institution remains competitive on all fifty 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.



*Figure 5: A conceptual map of some possible institutional positioning “Foci” (Ken Steele)*

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**SCOPE:** Postsecondary institutions can also be classified by the geographic scope of their marketplace, their historical or aspirational catchment for student recruitment: institutions typically have local, regional, national, or international scope. Where brand strategy is concerned, Scope denotes the competitive landscape in which an institution must establish a unique and attractive position. If students nationally are to consider an institution, it must stand out nationally. By comparison, a commuter university may be successful in its local 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 in its region.

There is, however, a risk in setting one's sights too low. Greater globalization is reducing the barriers between regions, widening the playing field with more competition coming from across the country and around the world. The growth of the University of Phoenix and other for-profit multinational distance education providers may continue in Canada, and many institutions will be attempting to establish national brands. The risk of defining an institutional position relative only to local competitors is that the position may not be credible or distinctive in a broader competitive field. Claiming a fully defined and unique position (on a national or international scope) will better insulate an institution from encroachment into its region, and prepare it to extend its brand to a wider marketplace in future.

## **CREATIVE EXPRESSION OF THE BRAND**

The process of developing an institutional positioning strategy, taking into consideration Category, Type, Focus, and Scale described above, typically takes six months to a full year to complete thoroughly. Institutions must amass solid consumer research, if it is not preexisting; conduct a thorough competitive analysis; and undertake wide-ranging and repeated consultation with campus stakeholders to gather their input and perceptions and inform them of the process as it unfolds. By the end of the process, the university or college has reached a shared understanding of its unique mission, and its credible, compelling, and competitively distinctive position in the higher education landscape. Yet, in many ways the branding process is only halfway complete. Once an institution understands its unique Focus, it still needs to find the words, images, and tone to express that Focus—to communicate it to key target markets, and to engage and motivate campus stakeholders to become true ambassadors of the brand.

Although some larger universities have well-staffed graphics or creative communications

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departments, in general the design teams on most campuses are already working flat out to keep up with regular online and print communications needs for the institution. In many cases, internal staff do not have the creative experience to convert an institutional positioning strategy into a truly effective visual brand. Most institutions will turn to external brand expertise to develop a memorable, creative, attention-getting, and sustainable creative framework for messaging, visuals, and content—usually with a teenage market in mind.

For a successful brand positioning exercise, it is critical to have widespread input and engagement in the process leading up to the development of the institutional positioning strategy. Senior administration from the president on down need to champion the positioning exercise, and input needs to be sought from faculty and staff, students, alumni, and the governing board. But it is often equally important that senior campus leadership adopt a “hands-off” attitude when it comes to the tactical level of brand execution. Talented, experienced creative agencies can develop a powerful expression of the institutional brand for particular target audiences, and research firms can test those concepts through focus groups and online panels.

Senior administrators and faculty are almost never the primary target market for institutional branding campaigns. The central purpose of university recruitment marketing is to attract the attention of prospective students with very little true comprehension of higher education. Marketing aims to resonate with its target audience, addressing their current concerns and priorities with a simple, focused, and often emotional appeal. Brand campaigns do not and cannot challenge the intellect, open minds, or expand horizons—that is the transformative role played by faculty, once applicants become students at your institution.

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## **PART II:**

# **DELIVERING ON THE BRAND PROMISE**

**BY JIM BLACK**

Often institutional positioning efforts are confined to marketing strategies. While there is value in this approach, a marketing focus alone simply does not leverage the opportunity to align the campus culture, practices, policies, and behaviours with the promises inherent in the brand. Alternatively, a combined focus on marketing strategies and promise delivery can redefine an institution and thus, secure its reputational position.

## **DEFINING BRAND PROMISE**

A brand promise is essentially the point of difference the brand commits an institution to delivering consistently to its constituents (Krueger, 2007, March). Through focus groups with thousands of students in Canada and the U.S., our consultants have found that these informants have very specific perceptions of institutional promises. Some articulate these promises as expectations while others view them as guarantees. Regardless of how they articulate the promise, students universally see themselves as educational consumers with certain rights and privileges. When promises are kept, student commitment and loyalty to an institution grows. Conversely, when perceived covenants are broken, student dissatisfaction, attrition, and negative word-of-mouth become natural consequences.

This author concurs with the findings of Westervelt (2007) that most brand promises in higher education are abbreviated versions of institutional mission statements. This approach represents a flawed mental model of what a brand promise should be. Mission statements are purpose statements that convey why an institution exists. Mission statements usually fail to differentiate schools from their competitors and seldom reflect a promise of what institutions will deliver to students and other constituents.

With that said, a school's mission statement, vision, and core values should be the foundation for the brand promise (Ehret, 2008, July). The challenge in creating a brand promise is to design a concise statement that reflects these foundational elements while differentiating the institution among its competitors and identifying a promise that employees and others can become passionate about, and constituents can experience with every encounter they have with the institution. To illustrate, one Canadian college we have worked with has

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defined their promise in one word, “Inspire.” For this institution, the promise is intended to focus the campus community on inspiring students in every encounter they have with students—inspirational teaching, service, communications, facilities, etc.

## **A BRAND PROMISE THAT DIFFERENTIATES**

To differentiate effectively, the brand promise must be bold yet credible. The higher education marketing landscape is replete with brand messages using words like excellence, quality, and learning. Few, however, claim something profoundly different or life changing. In developing a brand promise, consider an element of the institution’s personality that goes beyond what students and others expect. Ideally, the promise should create a “WOW” effect. Think about a relationship or an experience you want to create for all students.

The brand promise should “catapult” your institution over its competitors. What is the next “big thing” in the university or college sector? It could be an innovative approach to curriculum or pedagogy, a unique integration of the living and learning experience, a study abroad experience for every student, or simply packaging what you already do in a way that makes it distinctive. It is what marketing guru Seth Godin refers to as the “purple cow”—it’s different from all the other cows and thus is memorable (2002). The magic in creating a “purple cow” is providing your constituents with something they don’t know they yet need—just when they are ready for it (Kerner & Pressman, 2007). Whatever distinctive position you claim, you must be prepared to deliver on its promise 100% of the time.

## **A BRAND PROMISE THAT INSPIRES PASSION**

Brand promise statements are powerless unless everyone on campus passionately embraces and lives them. Certainly, college and university employees do not come to work each day with the intention of undermining the institution’s brand. More likely, they are not necessarily even cognizant of the brand or its importance to the school’s vitality. Generally speaking, employees are not “wired” to deliver experiences that align with the brand promise. They naturally respond to teaching, advising, and service encounters in ways that are largely driven by their personalities and styles (Lebard, Rendleman, & Dolan, 2006).

To help faculty and staff transition from a state of minimal brand awareness into brand enthusiasts, institutional brand champions must facilitate the metamorphosis. The following is an adapted excerpt from a white paper I recently published titled, “The Branding of Higher Education” (2007). The five steps outlined here provide a road map for actualizing a brand promise.

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**1. Define the brand promise.** The definition must be based on the institution’s personality—congruent with what the institution espouses to be and more importantly, consistent with institutional behaviour. Most colleges and universities have clearly articulated core values, which should be fundamental elements of the brand promise definition. These values and thus, the brand promise must be relevant both to internal and external constituents. Relevancy does not equate to standardized adoption, but instead it translates to individualized interpretations and behaviour associated with the promise. Hence, the promise must be malleable enough to be accepted and practiced by different subcultures within an institution as well as individuals with their own unique beliefs and values. In the academy, this is the only practical way to strike a balance between the objective of universal adoption and maintaining a modicum of autonomy. Collectively, the college or university community must define desired expectations and behaviours associated with the promise.

**2. Live the brand promise.** Consider the role of all faculty, staff, and administrators as “institutional trust agents.” Whether encounters with students occur in the classroom, in an administrative office, through a campus event, online, in person, or on the phone, each experience either fosters or diminishes institutional trust. Think for a moment about your own personal and professional relationships. Is there a single valued relationship in your life that is not built on a foundation of mutual trust? Our students, their families, the school’s alumni, and others we serve are fundamentally the same. They will desire a relationship with the institution only if they trust you.

**3. Operationalize the brand promise.** The promise must be personified through your services, business transactions, human interactions, information delivery, and learning experiences. It must be embedded in the culture and become a part of your institutional DNA. It must be viewed as a covenant between the institution and those you serve—never to be broken. Finally, it requires an unfaltering focus on identifying and eradicating promise gaps using some combination of people, processes, pedagogy, and technology.

**4. Deliver the brand promise consistently.** To achieve consistency, institutions must 1) clearly define the desired constituent experience and 2) ensure the employee experience is aligned with the desired constituent experience. For instance, if a staff member feels mistreated by the institution, it will be virtually impossible for that individual to effectively represent the brand promise to the students they serve. So, to improve consistency of promise delivery to your constituents, you must first create an environment for employees that is conducive to



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feeling passionate about the organization and its promise. The campus environment must be one that values the contributions of individuals and proactively enhances human capacity.

**5. Convey the brand promise.** Too often, higher education organizations permit their constituents to form impressions of the institution in an information vacuum—usually based on anecdotes, media coverage, and the negative experiences of the few. Effectively conveying the promise requires an ongoing internal and external campaign. It requires careful management of constituent expectations, the promotion of promise delivery successes, as well as intentional efforts to build institutional loyalty over time.

In forming a brand promise, you must engage the campus community in the process. Gain an understanding of what your people already are passionate about, or could be if a promise reflected their values and the values of the institution. While it is unrealistic to expect to find unanimous consensus, look for themes that can be woven together to create a single brand promise that the community will actively support (Lull & Thiebolt, 2004). In order to identify a brand promise that will be fervently believed and practiced, you will need to sacrifice other alternatives.

## **A BRAND PROMISE THAT DELIVERS**

Carlson (1987) coined the phrase, “moments of truth” in his book by the same name. The application of this phrase to higher education simply means that colleges and universities have thousands of “moments of truth” with those they serve every day—both in and outside the classroom. Each of these “moments of truth” is a measure of how well an institution is delivering on the promise of its brand. With each encounter, trust in the brand is either enhanced or eroded. Failure to carefully manage these “moments of truth” renders a brand and its inherent promise worthless—often with severely negative consequences to the image of the institution.

Though they never used the jargon marketers espouse, academics were the first to shift the focus from the institution (or faculty) to the students. In November of 1995, the cover article in *Change* initiated discourse in the academy over a paradigm shift from instructor-centred teaching to student-centred learning (Barr & Tagg, 1995, November). Admittedly, it has taken years for this seismic shift to infect academic culture, but the metamorphosis that has transpired is revolutionary. The “sage on the stage” has gradually been supplanted by faculty who engage their students in active learning; coach and facilitate rather than lec-

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ture; customize the learners' experience based on their needs and learning styles; and leverage technology to enable learning. By fostering a learning environment where students are encouraged to collaborate, create knowledge, synthesize and apply information, strategize, and even find entertainment in the learning experience, faculty have created the conditions for managing "moments of truth" (Tapscott, 2009).

In the service sector of higher education, the movement gained momentum with a collaborative effort among a handful of "best practice" institutions, IBM, and the Society for College and University Planning. This group produced the first book dedicated solely to student services (Beede & Burnett, 1999). However, it was the second book published by these organizations that directly addressed the notion of delivering on the promise of the brand. In that book, *Innovations in Student Services: Planning Models Blending High Touch/High Tech*, a rising star at Disney, Cynthia Wheatley, wrote vividly about the importance of delivering service reflecting an organization's brand (Wheatley, 2002). She focused on the areas of engineering the service experience; having reliable delivery systems; utilizing a service lens that considered three dimensions of service delivery: people, processes, and place; mapping the service; aligning the employee's experience with the student's experience; as well as reaffirming the value of active participation of the student in his or her own learning experience.

Although the learner-centred model of delivering education and services has been embraced by most institutions—in theory by virtually all and in practice by a growing number—it is just now being adopted as part of the brand strategy by colleges and universities. Until recently, branding on most campuses has been viewed as purely a promotional endeavor and thus, has been relegated to a marketing department or a division of institutional advancement or enrolment management to implement. Arguably, brand positioning, promotion, and the other facets of brand development are essential to any institution that competes for students and external funding. However, successful brands deliver on the claims they promote.

The delivery component of a brand strategy is significantly more difficult to engage in than the promotional dimension. As illustrated in the following graph, Lebard, Rendleman, and Dolan outlined a two-year, four-stage process to creating brand enthusiasts throughout an organization (2006). The process begins with promoting brand awareness among employees, followed by teaching brand knowledge, then developing brand believers, and lastly delivering consistently on the brand promise. It is important to note that the frame

of reference for these authors is business, not higher education. In my experience, this is a protracted evolutionary process in the academy, which unlike business is not a command and control environment.



Source: Lebard, Rendleman, and Dolan, 2006.

Any culture that values collegiality and a degree of autonomy may find such an organizational transformation to take five years or longer. So, for institutional leaders, such an endeavor requires patience, focus, and the will to stay the course. According to Heaton and Guzzo, aligning a human capital strategy like the one proposed by Lebard, Rendleman, and Dolan with brand strategy has one overarching organizational benefit that makes the effort worthy of such a prolonged investment of time and resources—constituent needs end up driving the entire enterprise (2007).

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Beyond the time and resources required to create a brand-oriented, learner-centred culture, common barriers to delivering on the promise are substantial and include:

- Inadequate staffing
- A lack of investment in organizational learning
- Inadequate technology to support the delivery of services and education
- Inefficient business processes
- Inaccurate or inaccessible information
- A lack of employee incentives as well as accountability for adherence to brand promise principles and values
- Poor communications, particularly across functional and organizational boundaries
- Organizational structures that inhibit the support of a holistic approach to brand delivery

Daunting as it may be, the Herculean effort to deliver what is promised is a requisite to a successful brand strategy. Without it, institutional branding will be an exercise in futility.

## **CONCLUSION**

In an increasingly competitive student recruitment environment, institutional positioning and strategic marketing are becoming vital techniques to advance the mission of Canadian colleges and universities. Effective institutional brand positions must arise organically from the intersection of the “Three C’s” of branding: positioning claims must be Credible in the marketplace and reflect the reality of campus experience for all stakeholders, they must be Compelling not only to prospective students but also to faculty and staff, and they must be Competitively Distinctive or the institution will fade into a neutral, commodity position in the marketplace. The campus community will need to accept a “grand oversimplification” to create a concise message that can be delivered clearly to an indifferent public, and creative executions that appeal more to teenage prospective students than to middle-aged faculty members.

Effective marketing strategy entails an alignment of all the “Five P’s” of marketing: differentiating a Canadian college or university among its competitors is as much a product, place, and people exercise as a promotional one. (As tuitions rise and greater disparities

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appear, even price will become an important aspect of the postsecondary marketing mix.) Even the best promotional efforts will not overcome lackluster or low-demand programs, unreasonably large class sizes and outdated lecture techniques, or cumbersome and inefficient student services.

Higher education is above all else a people business: campus communities are comprised of intelligent, questioning, and independent faculty and staff, and the education process is very much a collaborative one between faculty and students. An institutional brand that fails to inspire its leadership, faculty, staff, and students has little chance of receiving broad-scale adoption—and campus constituents need to “live the brand” for it to become real at all. A branding effort that is not personified internally is “full of sound and fury; signifying nothing” (Shakespeare, 1605–06): there will be obvious incongruence between the expectations created with external constituents through related marketing activities and their experiences with the institution. Campus master plans, academic plans, budgets, and strategic decisions all need to be aligned with the institutional brand position and contribute to the fulfillment of the brand promise. All stakeholders must experience, and exemplify, the brand promise consistently with each interaction, or the immense potential of a strong institutional brand is squandered and becomes merely a marketing slogan.

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