Best Practices in Institutional Positioning

In this report, Hanover Research provides an overview of best practices in institutional positioning within higher education. The report covers topics related to establishing a brand identity and evaluating brand success. Case studies of re-branding efforts at top tier Canadian and U.S. institutions are also provided.
Introduction

This report provides an overview of best practices in institutional positioning at colleges and universities. The report covers a variety of topics related to the creation and evaluation of branding campaigns in higher education. Our analysis is broken down into three sections:

- **Establishing a Brand Identity** – The first section of the report covers common practices among colleges and universities in their efforts to create or overhaul institutional brand identity.

- **Evaluating Brand Success** – The second section goes on to summarize strategies for evaluating the success of branding campaigns at colleges and universities.

- **Examples of Success in Higher Education Branding** – The final section of this report provides case studies of four Canadian and U.S. institutions in their efforts to establish a brand identity. The following institutions are profiled: Simon Fraser University, the University of Guelph, University of Pennsylvania, and Cornell University.

Key Findings and Recommendations

After reviewing available literature on branding at colleges and universities, we identified several key findings and recommendations for creating and evaluating brand identity.

*Establishing a Brand Identity*

- In the face of increasing competition to attract prospective students, many institutions are paying increased attention to the value branding has to offer. Adoption of branding strategies in higher education has followed the general upward trend seen in the non-profit sector.

- Creating a brand identity is a long-term, disciplined activity. It involves research on market demands and perceptions, an analysis of what the institution offers and what distinguishes it from the competition, and implementation of changes that will allow the institution to better fulfill its market niche.

- Responsibility for branding strategies often resides with the public relations department or the office of the president, though many believe the process
would benefit from greater involvement by alumni, staff, students, faculty, the business community, and civic leaders.

- University administrators suggest that the impact of branding campaigns is most readily seen in student recruitment activities.

- Branding strategy should not be the product of top-down decision-making, but rather an inclusive process that uses the opinions of various stakeholder groups.

Evaluating Brand Success

- While branding is a topic of increasing interest in the higher education sector, little research has been conducted on defining and assessing success in university branding.

- Because formalized branding is a relatively new strategy in higher education, the literature on evaluating brand performance is sparse. It appears, however, that the top-down and metrics-based assessment strategies often applied in the university setting do not easily translate to branding.

- In commerce, branding success has often been associated with market share, which perhaps best translates to university rankings in higher education, though the validity of the connection between ranking and success is doubted by many institutions.

- Successful branding initiatives have a clear vision, internal buy-in, and strong leadership support. Reputable universities note strong press coverage and synergy with a city or town brand as additional contributors to success.

- Universities must regularly assess the brand and how it is being communicated, ensuring that they have arrived at an effective message and delivery that resonates with prospective students and the community at large.

- Feedback from key stakeholders, such as students and alumni, plays a major role in brand assessment. Strategies for collecting feedback include surveys, focus groups, and one-on-one interviews.

- Periodic perception surveys can help an institution evaluate the successes and challenges of a branding campaign. Such surveys answer the key question: Do perceptions of the university’s character align with the attributes the university intends to communicate through its brand?
Establishing a Brand Identity

A brand serves to both tell the story behind an organization and to distinguish its products or services from others on the market. A well-developed brand identity “does much of the ‘work’ for potential customers by simplifying consumer decisions, reducing the risk associated with a purchase, providing emotional reinforcement, and offering a sense of community.”

Within the context of higher education, a brand can be described as “a name, an image, a compelling description of an organization that captures the essence of the value that your college provides.”

In the face of increasing competition to attract prospective students and external funding, many institutions are paying increasing attention to the value branding has to offer. Hayes Roth, VP of worldwide marketing at Landor Associates, notes that branding in higher education has followed the general upward trend seen in the non-profit sector.

In 2004, Point Park University, a Pittsburgh-based institution, launched a $1 million branding campaign. One year later, the University of Houston embarked on a five-year, $5 million “image campaign.” Numerous other institutions have followed similar paths.

While branding campaigns often come with a high price tag, the benefits outweigh the risks for many institutions, particularly in light of past research connecting college choice with image and reputation. One study, for instance, identified “image or reputation” as one of the four major factors considered by prospective college students in their matriculation decisions. Another study investigating college selection determined that “reputation” and “academics” were the two most important factors in the college decision process.

While external branding is most commonly employed—that is, building a brand identity for prospective consumers—promoting a brand internally is likewise valuable to an organization. In order to effectively achieve both, marketing staff must ensure that the brand messages communicated to employees closely resemble those delivered externally. The failure on the part of an institution to closely align these messages “can result in a demoralized and cynical staff that loses faith in the

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2 Ibid., 57.
5 Ibid., 57.
6 Ibid., 55.
Creating a Brand Identity

While the term branding is often associated merely with a logo, scholar Paul Temple asserts that this is only “the tip of the iceberg” when it comes to higher education branding campaigns. Creating a brand identity involves research on market demands and perceptions, an analysis of what the institution offers and what distinguishes it from the competition, and implementation of changes that will allow the institution to better fulfill its market niche. According to Temple, the brand “emerges as a function of how well the institution performs in meeting the needs of its clients: it is the result of effective marketing and consequential changes in activities, rather than its basis.”

The branding process asks universities to “try to understand who they are and to frame their image in a way that will favourably influence internal and external perceptions.” The process can be rigorous, as a 2007 study published by researchers at Laurentian University in Sudbury, Canada explains:

Authors of a branding strategy go through a number of steps in pursuit of one that is effective. In order to move forward successfully, they must understand clearly the exact attributes that the target audience seeks from the institution, how the audience perceives the institution, and whether the characteristics projected have credibility and sufficient appeal to the target audience. The mission and vision of the institution should be thoroughly reviewed in order to devise the best branding strategies to complement them. The ability to identify and fill performance and perception gaps is crucial, and will be tested.

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7 Ibid., 56.
8 Ibid., 56-57.
10 Ibid., 17.
12 Ibid., 172.
Indeed, branding is a “long-term, disciplined activity,” and brand managers should communicate the time-delayed nature of the process to stakeholders.13

In order to garner further information on the branding strategies and structures in place at higher education institutions, the authors of the Laurentian University study sent a three-page online survey to a group of 89 executives, professors, and researchers employed by universities in North America, Europe, and Australia and considered to be “judgment experts.”14 A total of 28 university representatives responded to the survey, for a 31 percent response rate. Of the 28 participants, 24 reported that their institutions had clearly defined branding strategies. Responsibility for “creating, maintaining and adjusting” branding initiatives most often fell to the public relations department, followed by the office of the president.15

The survey further asked participants to identify, from a list of 12 stakeholder groups, the top contributors to the development of the institution’s branding strategy. At most universities, “higher management” took the lead on formulating a branding strategy, selected as the principal contributor by 54 percent of the survey participants. The “board of governors” was selected as a very distant second (19 percent), followed by the “public relations department.”16

The survey also compared actual involvement levels with desired involvement levels. Discrepancies were seen in the two measures for several groups, including alumni, support and administrative staff, enrolled students, the business community, teaching staff, the board of governors, and civic leaders. The institutional representatives largely felt that the branding process would have benefited from greater input and participation from these constituent groups.17

Finally, the survey gathered input on the degree to which branding had benefitted the universities in several core areas. The results placed student recruitment as the most highly impacted activity; in fact, 61 percent of the survey respondents suggested that branding had a “profound effect” on the university’s ability to attract prospective students. Behind student recruitment, with a score of 1.74, followed “fundraising (1.89), faculty recruitment (2.00), industry

http://personal.ashland.edu/omcknight/docs/ParentalAssessment.pdf
15 Ibid., 177.
16 Ibid., 177.
17 Ibid., 178-179.
partnering (2.27), and research money (2.52).”18 The general agreement among survey participants that branding had affected student recruitment suggests that successful branding should be reflected in the number of students who signify interest in the university. However, while easy to collect, metrics such as application and matriculation rates are inevitably influenced by multiple factors and changes seen in these figures cannot be reliably attributed solely to a branding campaign.

The survey emphasizes that a branding strategy should not be the product of top-down decision-making, but rather an inclusive process that effectively uses the opinions of various stakeholder groups. The authors elaborate:

Total commitment to all stakeholders is needed. This goes far beyond annual reports, five-year strategic plans, logos, speeches, sophisticated websites, and high standing in annual rankings. Stakeholders must be involved to such an extent that they are encouraged to express their own expectations and to gauge the quality level of services through effective feedback channels.19

The following case study depicts the brand development process at one American university—the University of Texas at Austin—at which administrators have conducted extensive research and encouraged stakeholder input throughout the process.

**Case Study: University of Texas at Austin**

*The Challenge*

While the University of Texas at Austin already possessed name recognition due to its popular athletics teams, it had not yet asserted itself as a leading public research university when it embarked on a branding initiative in 2003. That year marked the beginning of an “integrated communication initiative” that would “provide an opportunity for all facets of the organization to communicate in a strategically coordinated, professional and consistent manner.”20 The need for a clearly defined brand arose in the face of increasing competition, as the University vied with other institutions for “top faculty, top students, donor dollars and public support.”21

The Office of Public Affairs website describes the need for a distinct University of Texas at Austin brand as follows:

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18 Ibid., 179.
19 Ibid., 183.
To be successful, it needs a consistent, powerful brand that clearly communicates the university’s distinctive qualities and strengths. By creating a common understanding of the brand among staff, faculty, students and the people of Texas and the nation, we reinforce the great value the university brings to the world.22

The Process

The branding process at the University of Texas at Austin was carried out in four phases, each of which is described in detail below.

- **Phase One: Project Teams:** The University established a cross-campus team led by the Center for Brand Research and comprised of representatives from various constituent bodies, including the Office of Public Affairs, Development and College of Communication, faculty members, and current students. This core team met once per week to discuss the direction the project had taken and plan next steps. Additional teams were formed to undertake various parts of the project, including “a research team, a creative team, a Web development team and brand ‘advocates,’ enthusiastic supporters who were responsible for developing the material and informing the university community about the brand.”23

- **Phase Two: Discovery and Research:** The team reviewed the conclusions reached in previous discussions on the University’s image, past presidential speeches and initiative reports, and the results of two previous surveys—an online alumni survey and a phone survey of the public. The team also scanned a broad range of research reports, including state and national surveys, comparative studies, and focus groups conducted with faculty, staff, and students. Dr. Larry R. Faulkner guided the team, and recommended primary focal points for the brand, such as academic quality, leadership in technology, community partnerships, economic impact, innovative research, and recruitment of superior scholars.24

- **Phase Three: Creative Development:** In the third phase, the creative team reflected on the University’s campus culture and strengths in order to develop a precise brand and to refine the messages and visual style that would be used in communications. In the fall of 2004, the team arrived at the tagline, “What starts here changes the world.”25 The phrase captures the importance and

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22 Ibid.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
influence of the research and work being done on the University of Texas at Austin campus.

- **Phase Four: Communication:** In the final phase, the University began to communicate the new brand to the campus community and the general public. In regard to the former, the Office of Public Affairs elected for a “soft launch” which would allow community members—faculty, staff and students—to discover the brand, rather than it being imposed on campus. The Office of Public Affairs launched a website to describe the brand, as well as the need behind the brand image and the process used to arrive at it. In regard to the general public, the University first conveyed the new brand in 30-second NCAA television spots based on the “What starts here…” theme.²⁶

**Best Practices**

The University of Texas at Austin's branding initiative is notable for the comprehensive research undertaken and the broad spectrum of stakeholders consulted in the process. While the core team guided the process, it collected opinions from members of the campus community and the public at large in order to better understand how the University was being perceived. Four primary strategies were used:

- **Statewide Perception Survey:** In 2002, a faculty member in the McCombs School of Business conducted a survey of 1,000 randomly selected Texas adults. With the University’s name withheld, the survey aimed to gather objective insight into residents’ perceptions of top universities, the characteristics that define reputable universities, their associations with the University of Texas at Austin, and their opinions of its strengths and weaknesses.²⁷

- **National Benchmark Survey:** The University further conducted a national survey of 450 individuals through the Advertising Department’s Online Consumer Panel. The survey compared consumers’ perceptions of the University of Texas at Austin, three of its competitors, and three non-higher education brands serving as a baseline.²⁸

- **Focus Groups and Interviews:** The University held focus groups for faculty, donors, and students. These sessions hosted several “brand extension exercises,” such as “magnetic poetry, adjective lists, competitor comparisons,

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²⁶ Ibid.
²⁸ Ibid.
personal experiences, and student collages.”  

The University also conducted one-on-one interviews with campus community members to determine personal experiences, expectations, and recommendations for the direction branding should take.

- **Competitive Analysis:** Finally, in order to develop a better sense of its national reputation, the University also reviewed its standings in the *U.S. News & World Report* rankings in various categories.

A final noteworthy aspect of the branding campaign at the University of Texas at Austin is the website developed by the Office of Public Affairs, which provides a detailed look at the facts behind the brand image. With sections dedicated to the new brand’s purpose and history and a toolkit designed to help University faculty and staff use thematic language and visual elements to support the brand, the website effectively promotes brand ownership and buy-in across the community.

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29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
Evaluating Brand Success

While brand theory for product-oriented companies has evolved and successful techniques have been established, brand theory for service-based organizations is a more uncertain territory, with the area of higher education being even less developed. Some argue that a university brand is not significantly different from a brand in the corporate world and therefore rebuke the notion of specialized research in this regard, though others suggest that higher education brands are “inherently more complex” and that “conventional brand management techniques are inadequate in this market.”

Certainly, while branding is a topic of increasing interest within the higher education community, little research has been conducted on defining and assessing success in university branding.

Defining Success

It can be difficult to “isolate brand success from overall business success.” Though necessarily linked, the two must be distinguished in assessment efforts. While overall institutional performance might reflect well on an institution’s branding strategy, more traditional metrics used to define university success usually link to numerous operational factors and would not accurately trace to brand development as the sole influencer. In commerce, success has often been associated with market share, which perhaps best translates to university rankings in the realm of higher education, though the validity behind a connection between success and ranking is doubted by many institutions.

So how does one determine whether a brand is successful? Scholar Chris Chapleo of Portsmouth University Business School has approached this question in his research, which explores the common characteristics evident in successful UK higher education brands. As he notes, one scholar suggests a concrete definition for a successful brand, that is, “a name, symbol, design, or some combination, which identifies the ‘product’ of a particular organisation as having a sustainable competitive advantage.”

Ibid., 7.
advantage.”36 Under this definition, a successful brand relies on three components: “an effective product, a distinctive identity, and added values.”37 Another suggests that a successful brand is one that, “when someone mentions the name of a university, [will] immediately evoke associations, emotions, images and faces.”38 Synthesizing the definitions offered by other scholars, Chapleo arrived at the following descriptor for successful university brands: “clear and consistent (in demonstrating a distinct competitive advantage) and congruous with needs of various customer/stakeholder groups.”39

In 2007, over a period of eight months, Chapleo conducted twenty-two semi-structured interviews with the Heads of Marketing/External Relations and Heads of Careers at eleven UK higher education institutions generally considered to have strong brands.40 A “uniform strategy” did not emerge; however, Chapleo’s research did identify a number of factors associated with successful university brands, each of which is described in further detail below.41 While the study did not identify specific metrics to determine variable levels of branding success, these characteristics could lay the groundwork for an evaluation of whether an institution’s branding initiative is well positioned for success.

- **Clear Vision:** Several interviewees mentioned a “clear vision” or a “strong strategic agenda” as being critical to branding success. An institution should establish clear and prioritized goals and establish policies that will allow for consistent communication of a single brand across institutional divisions.42

- **Internal Support/Buy-in:** Internal support is closely linked with the culture an institution builds. In order for a brand to thrive, it must be accepted and used by the university’s faculty and staff.43

- **Leadership Support:** Nearly all of the chief executives at the interviewed institutions were thought to be “very supportive” of the concept of branding and its potential to build the university’s reputation. One interviewee

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40 Ibid., 15.
41 Ibid., 22.
42 Ibid., 20.
43 Ibid., 21.
commented that, in higher education, “brand is vulnerable to personal whim of the chief executive to a greater extent than many commercial brands.”

- **Press Coverage/Public Relations:** Being captured in the media appears to be one of the communication strategies of choice for universities with strong brands. For several of the “older” institutions studied, public relations comprised the bulk of marketing activity.

- **Location – Synergy with City/Town Brand:** Several of the institutions interviewed leveraged desirable locations as part of their brand image. The interviews suggested strong potential for synergy between successful university brands and the larger town or city image.

Additional commonalities emerged that Chapleio deemed to have “possible associations” with successful brands, including recent growth in central marketing staffs, the designation of “account handler” roles within faculties, use of marketing communications, “experiential” aspects of the brand, and past research conducted on the brand, whether in the form of “perceptual audits” or “stakeholder analyses.”

**Evaluating Performance**

While Chapleio’s research provides insight into the characteristics of successful branding initiatives, it is equally important to discuss the process by which higher education institutions evaluate brand performance. Once established, a brand must be “continuously monitored and honed.” Universities must regularly scrutinize the brand and how it is being communicated, ensuring that they have arrived at an effective message and delivery that resonates with prospective students and the community at large. Indeed, “vigilance is required, and branding strategies have to be modified to match the competitive environment.”

One of the primary considerations at the outset of a brand assessment is the question of who will be best positioned to undertake an objective and comprehensive assessment of the institution’s brand identity. In a *Harvard Business Review* article published in 2000, one author suggests that “most brand managers are knowledgeable

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44 Ibid., 21.
46 Ibid., 19-20.
47 Ibid., 16-17, 23.
49 Ibid., 175.
Because formalized branding is a relatively new strategy in higher education, the literature on evaluating brand performance is sparse. It appears, however, that the top-down and metrics-based assessment strategies often applied in the university setting do not easily translate to branding. Researchers at Laurentian University emphasize the role key stakeholders, such as students and alumni, can play in evaluating a university brand. Oftentimes, community members “see institutional elements in a way that branders might not have otherwise considered.”

As mentioned in our introduction to brand identity, it is critical that institutions employ both external and internal branding strategies. Evaluations of a brand’s effectiveness, therefore, should arguably take into account the perceptions of individuals inside and outside the university community to ensure the brand resonates with both. As Colin Jevons notes in his article, “Universities: A Prime Example of Branding Going Wrong,” there is often “a lack of clarity with the internal view of the brand, since staff may well associate more with an entity smaller than the university itself,” such as a college, school, or division. He points to Cambridge as an example, where the “identity, offerings and culture of the individual colleges” are often more distinctive than the institution as a whole.

A 2009 study designed by a team of researchers from Northern Illinois University, Illinois and the University of Wisconsin-Madison could serve as an adaptable model...
Periodic perception surveys can help an institution evaluate the successes and challenges of a branding campaign. Such surveys answer the key question: Do perceptions of the university’s character align with the attributes the university intends to communicate through its brand? Perception surveys extended outside the university can help brand managers understand how an institution is perceived—that is, do perceptions of the university’s character align with the attributes the university intends to communicate in its branding campaign? Such a survey can help gauge whether the brand is being effectively communicated, and any misperceptions uncovered during research of this type can help the university refine its messages and overall communications plan. At the University of Ottawa, which uses the tagline “Canada’s University” and strives to communicate four brand characteristics (Ideas, Diversity, Community, and National Outlook), administrators conducted a reputation survey prior to development of the University’s brand promise in 2002. The University of Ottawa has since conducted a second reputation survey, administered as a follow-up survey in 2005, which has helped administrators “evaluate the success and challenges” of branding campaign and determine opportunities for “increased visibility.”

The following case study illustrates how one American college—Saint Mary’s College of California—has revisited and evaluated its branding strategy, drawing on feedback from internal and external constituents to refine the visual and thematic brand.

**Case Study: Saint Mary’s College of California**

**Assessment Objectives**

In July 2008, Saint Mary’s College of California concluded its brand assessment, performed with the assistance of two outside agencies—Peterson Skolnick & Dodge and Pentagram Design. The assessment process aimed to examine the overall effectiveness of the College’s existing brand identity and to identify areas for improvement. The College recognized the need to enhance its visual and thematic identity to better align with its mission and values. The assessment sought to understand the College’s current brand perception and to identify opportunities for improvement.

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**Footnotes:**

improvement. The specific project objectives included identification of the “distinctions and qualities” communicated by the brand, the “misperceptions and challenges” the College brand encounters, the potential future path for the brand’s evolution, and the options for a “new visual expression” of the brand.57

Assessment Methodology

As mentioned earlier in this report, it is difficult for university administrators to undertake a reliable assessment of brand success, given their immersion in the university environment and the biases they inevitably hold. Saint Mary’s College of California, in its assessment of brand success, therefore relied on a number of outside contributors and sources, including not only the two organizations guiding the investigation and subsequent design—Peterson Skolnick & Dodge and Pentagram Design—but also various college constituents: faculty and staff, alumni, current and potential donors, and “academic opinion leaders.”58 The assessment team used telephone interviews and focus groups to gather feedback from these individuals on the College’s brand identity. The team supplemented these conversations with a review of the College’s strategic marketing plan; logos, wordmarks, and other marketing and communications materials; and the brand identities achieved by four peer institutions and four aspirational institutions.59

Assessment Results

The telephone interviews and focus groups conducted with various constituents both on- and off-campus revealed a number of “distinctions” associated with the Saint Mary’s College of California brand, such as a warm community, a values-based and personalized education, a transformative experience, and an egalitarian learning environment.60 However, while the responses confirmed several strengths of the Saint Mary’s brand, they also uncovered several uncertainties and misperceptions. The assessment process pinpointed areas where the institutional brand fails to communicate the value behind the education offered at Saint Mary’s. For instance, common misperceptions were that the College served an all Catholic or all women student body and that it lacked diversity, was expensive, lacked academic rigor, and was too traditional or out of step with modern times. Perceived challenges, then, included a failure to clarify the College’s Catholic identity, a lack of focus, high cost of attendance, and an idyllic but isolated setting, among others.61

58 Ibid., 5.
59 Ibid., 5.
60 Ibid., 7.
61 Ibid., 9.
The visual review conducted by the team further pinpointed problems with the College logo. Feedback on the logo received mixed results in regard to the use of the chapel design, and some suggested that the use of the term “of California” in the title limited the College’s “perceived geographic scope.” Other issues that surfaced included inconsistent use of the College’s “identity elements” and the lack of a clear nomenclature and typographic system, color palette guidelines, and rules for secondary use, for instance on individual department sites.62

Beyond community feedback on brand perception, the assessment team at Saint Mary’s College of California also used a peer analysis to identify opportunities for brand revision. This qualitative review of the brands conveyed by peer and aspirational institutions led to development of the following matrix:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emphasis On</th>
<th>Surfaced In</th>
<th>Our Observation</th>
<th>Opportunity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academics</td>
<td>• 2007 ASQ&lt;br&gt;• Constituent Interviews/Groups&lt;br&gt;• Academic Opinion Leader Interviews</td>
<td>• UC Davis and Santa Clara emphasize academic excellence more than the rest</td>
<td>• Improve academic reputation by more prominently emphasizing academic rigor, and leveraging strength in quality of faculty; couple with value-based education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contemporary</td>
<td>• Constituent Interviews/Groups&lt;br&gt;• Academic Opinion Leader Interviews</td>
<td>• Santa Clara, SSU, and UC Davis, because of their positioning around Silicon Valley, technology, and cutting edge research respectively, communicate contemporary characteristics</td>
<td>• Without letting go of traditions, emphasize the contemporary characteristic of globally engaged, leveraging the international network of Christian Brothers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual Attention</td>
<td>• 2007 ASQ&lt;br&gt;• Constituent Interviews/Groups</td>
<td>• Santa Clara, USF, SSU and Saint Mary’s have a claim to individual attention due to the nature of small schools</td>
<td>• Reinforce this current strength and own it above others by leveraging Lasallian/Saint Mary’s focus on student-centric education and its impact on the individual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service/Social Justice</td>
<td>• Constituent Interviews/Groups&lt;br&gt;• Academic Opinion Leader Interviews</td>
<td>• US and Santa Clara emphasize service as part of the Jesuit traditions and Saint Mary’s emphasizes it based on Lasallian traditions</td>
<td>• Reinforce current strength and claim “ownership” of it by emphasizing Lasallian aspects at Saint Mary’s – intellectual, hands-on, voluntary, social justice orientation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Saint Mary’s College of California63

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62 Ibid., 11, 25.
63 Ibid., 20.
The peer analysis outcomes illustrate how the brand assessment has led to concrete strategic goals for Saint Mary’s. Combined, all components of the brand assessment—community input, academic opinion leader interviews, visual review, and peer analysis—resulted in a final list of assets and liabilities, which served as the foundation for final recommendations on how the College should move forward with its branding initiative. The assessment team created a “brand pathway,” which describes how the College’s current messages could be transformed in the future to better convey Saint Mary’s “highest self.” For instance, the current message of “shapes and changes lives” should evolve to communicate the message: “By transforming lives, changes the world.” Similarly, the current message of “values community” should transition to: “Translates community values into global engagement.” These pathways were determined for nine key messages inherent to the St. Mary’s brand.

Summary

The assessment process undertaken at St. Mary’s resulted in clarification and improvement of the College’s brand elements (its basic value proposition), brand personality (the character prospective students perceive), brand voice (the tone of communications), and brand platform (the overall message that communicates what Saint Mary’s is all about). The assessment led to concrete and strategic “next steps” to be taken by the College as time progresses.

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64 Ibid., 39.
65 Ibid., 46.
66 Ibid., 48-51.
Examples of Success in Higher Education Branding

In this section we present four examples of branding at top tier institutions – Simon Fraser University, the University of Guelph, University of Pennsylvania, and Cornell University. While all four institutions are highly ranked, that does not necessarily mean they have successful brands. However, strong rankings in Maclean’s or the U.S. News & World Report suggest that they have been able to build and maintain a solid academic reputation.

Canadian Universities

Simon Fraser University

Simon Fraser University (SFU), ranked by Maclean’s as the top comprehensive university in Canada in 2009, uses the tagline “Thinking of the World.” The brand, developed through research and wide consultation with university stakeholders, is based largely on the idea of breadth—that is, the University’s “ability to provide an education that is both broad and deep, enabling graduates to be open-minded and adaptable, and resilient lifelong learners.”67 The idea of breadth, which SFU believes is one characteristic that helps distinguish it from other Canadian institutions, rests on three “pillars” of the University’s brand identity: “it is highly interdisciplinary, highly experiential, and, more than ever, highly international in scope.”68 Linked to the idea of breadth, SFU incorporates the notion of a higher purpose in its brand. Research conducted by the University shows that SFU graduates feel they are better positioned to positively change the world.

The SFU website states that the “Thinking of the World” brand has met with broad internal and external acceptance. The University strives to communicate the brand in all of its communications, from stationary and business cards to signs, websites, and presentations.69 In order to ensure consistency across the institution, SFU has compiled a Graphics Standards manual and clear Social Media Guidelines to be followed by all SFU divisions. The University has also launched a “Common Look and Feel” initiative to improve the consistency of its web presence.70

The University of Guelph

In 2007 the University of Guelph, ranked 4th among comprehensive Canadian universities by Maclean’s in 2009, introduced a new comprehensive branding campaign surrounding a new logo and tagline. The tagline “Changing Lives, Improving Life,” was fully integrated into the new “cornerstone” logo. The new logo and tagline came

68 Ibid.
69 Ibid.
out of a multi-year initiative to “re-evaluate the University’s brand and develop marketing strategies to build greater brand recognition.”71 The rebranding initiative was completed by the Departments of Registrational Services, Communications and Public Affairs, Alumni Affairs and Development, and Open Learning and the Office of Research. The Director of Communications led the effort. The University also worked with a marketing group, Cundari SFP, to gather information from focus groups and stakeholders.72

The tagline “Changing Lives, Improving Life” was chosen to reflect the University’s dedication to “protecting and cultivating the essentials of life – water, land, the environment, health, community, commerce, culture, and learning.”73 The tagline serves as a summary of the University’s mission statement and strategic objectives. Focus groups and stakeholders played an important role in choosing the new tagline. The Director of Communications stated that most felt that the tagline “should be bold and distinctive, easy to understand, true to the University’s mission, and relevant to our global society.”74

Once the new logo and tagline were launched, a new set of graphic standards for all web and print materials were made available online. The Graphic Standards Guide provides information about the appropriate use of the University’s name, logo, and image and ensures that the University’s image and reputation is recognizable, consistent, and of high visual quality. There are color, typeset, size, quality, and layout standards for use of the logo, tagline, and other identifiers.75

American Universities

University of Pennsylvania

The University of Pennsylvania, an Ivy League institution ranked 5th in the U.S. News & World Report’s 2011 ranking of U.S. universities, uses the University’s logo as “the primary graphic element of University branding program.”76 The logo includes the “Penn” mark, the University’s shield, and the longhand “University of Pennsylvania.” The University stresses the importance of strict adherence to the Penn logo in order to “reinforce public awareness of the University.”77

72 Ibid.
73 Ibid.
74 Ibid.
77 Ibid.
The University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School of Business has its own comprehensive branding. While Wharton’s logo clearly links back to the larger University, the school developed its own brand values and tools specific to Wharton’s strengths and commitments. Wharton’s brand is based on three values—commitment to innovation, broad expertise in global outreach, and deep engagement with business and policymakers. These values directly reflect the areas of excellence within the school’s curriculum and programming.78

Faculty and staff at Wharton are encouraged “to get to know [the values], to build upon them, and to use them to tell the Wharton story.”79 Wharton provides a set of tools for effectively conveying the brand values. The tools, which are easily accessible online, provide specific examples for supporting and strengthening the Wharton brand. Brand tools include:

- Downloadable PowerPoint templates that utilize the Wharton brand and logo, including an overview slide about the school. Additional information on best practices in building presentations is also provided.80
- Text for the Wharton boilerplate (“About Wharton”) to be included in all communications. The boilerplate is designed to “add depth” and “help extend the Wharton brand.”81
- One-page fact sheet about the Wharton School of Business to be included in mailings or handed out at meetings.82
- Contacts within the Communication Office. Wharton faculty and staff are encouraged the use of communications staff members to “create language for [their] program that positions it within the broader school message.”83

While the Wharton School of Business has a clearly thought out and presented branding plan, the University of Pennsylvania as a whole appears to rely more heavily on the power of the Penn logo and reputation.

Cornell University

Cornell University, an Ivy League institution ranked 15th in the U.S. News & World Report’s 2011 national university rankings, unveiled a new logo in 2004. The

University’s previous logo consisted of a red square with the word “Cornell” in white text inside. The old logo was disliked by many within the University and as a result departments and offices often created and used their own logos.\(^{84}\)

The new logo consists of a simplified version of the traditional Cornell crest and the words “Cornell University.” The impetus for moving back to the more traditional crest logo largely came from students and alumni who desired an image that was more similar to other Ivy League institutions. Many feared that Cornell was “viewed as a country cousin to Harvard, Yale, and Princeton.”\(^{85}\) The Image Committee, comprised of faculty, students, and staff, “lobbied administrators” to revert back to a simplified version of an older Cornell logo and abandon the relatively new red box logo.\(^{86}\)

The new logo, which was created by Cornell’s Office of Communication and Marketing Services, draws on elements of the 1910 and 1930 crest logos. The office also created a Visual Identity Style Guide to ensure that all print and web materials is consistent. The new logo was designed to “reconnect [Cornell’s] visual identity program with the University’s historic emblem.”\(^{87}\) The decision to revert back to a traditional logo was upheld by discussions with campus constituents who expressed a “consensus centered on some form of the traditional university emblem.”\(^{88}\) The new logo was designed to “reflect the University’s rich history and academic identity, while providing a modern, clear, and meaningful identifier for use in today’s diverse media.”\(^{89}\)

Some have attributed the new logo to increases in applications and general interest in the University. While many Ivy League institutions experienced growth in applications in the mid-2000s, Cornell’s growth was particularly strong. Between 2004 and 2006 applications increased by 35 percent, allowing for increase admissions selectivity.\(^{90}\) Publications and press about Cornell also increased; between 2004 and 2007 the number of non-sports press appearances increased from 11,000 to 42,399 articles. Visits to the Cornell website also increased from 993,000 in 2003 to 1,770,234 in 2007, for a 78 percent increase. These increases are attributed to both the creation of the university-wide Press Office and the streamlining of Cornell’s visual identity.\(^{91}\)


\(^{86}\) Ibid.


\(^{88}\) Ibid.

\(^{89}\) Ibid.


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