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Colleges May Play the Name-Change Game at Their Peril, Dissertation Says

By AUSTIN WRIGHT

From 1996 to 2005, more than 100 American colleges rebranded themselves as universities, moves that may have had an unintended consequence: stunted enrollment growth.

Those rebranded institutions experienced the counterintuitive effect of slowing growth in their enrollment even as the rate of their annual tuition increases remained nearly constant, says a Marshall University doctoral dissertation that won the Alice L. Beeman Outstanding Doctoral Dissertation Award last month from the Council for Advancement and Support of Education.

In his dissertation, "Survival of the Fittest? The Rebranding of West Virginia Higher Education," James M. Owston writes that colleges often seek to rename themselves as universities to gain prestige. And they did gain prestige, if it's measured by their number of graduate programs, the 1,000-page dissertation says. But in most cases, enrollment growth slowed following the change.

"They had growth, but not the same growth as prior to the change," said Mr. Owston, a 2007 graduate of Marshall's leadership-studies program who analyzed more than 160 institutions and interviewed 22 administrators.

In an interview on Tuesday, he said rebranding is not the cure-all solution that some administrators think it is. "In most of these cases, the decision was made by one person within the institution, and that was normally the president," he said. "When it happens without shareholders' opinions, there's a revolt," he added, referring to various groups that feel they have a stake in the identity of the institution.

Such a revolt could explain the enrollment slowdown, he said. At many of the colleges, for example, alumni were upset that their alma mater's name no longer matched what was written on their diplomas, Mr. Owston said. Also, prospective students might view a sudden college-to-university rebranding as a sign of a larger identity crisis within the institution, especially for prospective students who grew up knowing the institution by its former name.

Mr. Owston's national study focuses on the state where he lives, West Virginia, which from 1996 to 2005 had the highest percentage of college-to-university rebrandings of any state. Just last month, West Liberty State College, in West Virginia, changed its name to West Liberty University, according to a university news release.

One of the institutions to undergo such a transformation is Mr. Owston's own employer. Since receiving his doctor-of-education degree from Marshall, in 2007, Mr. Owston has worked in the distance-learning program at Mountain State University, which was the College of West Virginia from 1991 to 2001 and was founded as Beckley College in 1933.

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