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Dr. Christopher Thompson
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October 23, 2008

Dear Dr. Thompson:

Thank you for speaking to me on the phone this afternoon regarding my submission that was forwarded to Dr. Cross in May. Per your instructions, I am resubmitting my dissertation electronically for consideration for CASE's Alice L. Beeman Outstanding Doctoral Dissertation Award for 2009. My dissertation, "Survival of the Fittest? The Rebranding of West Virginia Higher Education," was successfully defended on November 19, 2007. My degree was subsequently awarded by Marshall University on December 11, 2007.

According to the parameters established by CASE, "The goal of the Alice L. Beeman Research Awards is to encourage research in communication and marketing for education, including such areas as marketing, public relations, government relations, issues management, and institutional image enhancement." As I hope you will discover, my dissertation on institutional rebranding addresses most if not all of these criteria.

Of these, a core marketing principle is branding – and rebranding is often connected to the enhancement of an institution's image in the marketplace. The current higher educational competitive climate has only served to proliferate the rebranding strategy. To be successful, higher educational institutions must enhance existing public relations skills in order to seek acceptance from their primary stakeholders. The work also addresses many other areas related to communication and marketing. These will be outlined below.

Although the dissertation concentrated on rebrandings of regionally accredited schools in West Virginia, the circle of research extended far beyond the state's borders and provided data from schools nationwide. While all types of institutional rebrandings were illustrated, the primary focus was the "college-to-university" name change. From 1996 to 2005, 153 institutions nationally used this rebranding strategy; eight are located in West Virginia. In addition to having the highest percentage of institutional rebrandings during the period (56.25%), West Virginia was chosen because it had the highest percentage of

“college-to-university” rebrands as well. These eight institutions represented 25% of all of the regionally accredited institutions in the state. This number was also significant in that it ranked West Virginia fourth numerically for this type of rebranding during the same period.

With the growing popularity of this institutional strategy, many colleges are considering the adoption of the university designation. As administrators strategize to become more competitive both domestically and internationally to compete for students and dollars, there is the perception that such a change will reap positive enrollments and that the school will increase in prestige and benefit numerically and financially. While this has been a reality for some, the rebranding frequently did not produce the intended results for most institutions.

The study addressed the rationale for change, the process by which the change occurred, the influence of regulatory bodies, stakeholder reactions, effects upon enrollment, indicators of institutional prestige, and administrator hindsight. Finally, the work included a case study concerning the competition experienced by six institutions using similar brands. This comprehensive study provides numerous illustrations of the successes and pitfalls of institutional rebranding strategies. Abundant examples, first hand accounts, and statistical analyses provide the modern higher educational administrator comprehensive stimuli and suggestions regarding brand transformation.

Since the dissertation employed an atypical dissertation format, each of its eight content chapters was written as a separate entity focusing on a particular aspect of rebranding. Therefore, individual chapters can be extracted and submitted as journal articles. It is my intention to submit several of these chapters for publication in the near future. Due to information gathered concerning one of the study schools, I have already authored an institutional history in conjunction for this university’s 75th anniversary. Currently, this work, titled *Keepers of the Flame: A Legacy of Leadership at Mountain State University*, is complete and is now in production. The volume drew partially from my existing dissertation research and includes information concerning the institution’s history never before published.

I am including my chair’s original nomination that was sent in the spring of the year, a short summary of the dissertation, and a separate file containing the entire dissertation. If chosen for the Beeman award, it is my intention to attend the CASE Summit for Advancement Leaders in July 2009. I am humbled by my dissertation chair’s confidence in my work and am honored by her nomination for this award. Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Sincerely,

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James M. Owston, EdD



Graduate College
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TO: Dr. Freddie Cross
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FROM: Barbara L. Nicholson, Ph.D.
Professor, Leadership Studies
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Marshall University

RE: Dissertation Award Nomination

DATE: May 1, 2008

Dear Dr. Cross,

It is my pleasure to nominate Dr. James M. Owston's work for consideration for CASE's Alice L. Beeman Outstanding Doctoral Dissertation award to be presented in 2009. Jim has become a valued colleague, and I'm delighted to have this opportunity to address his research and his potential to continue to contribute to the community of scholars. I've had the pleasure of working closely with him as dissertation chairperson for the past two years, so I'm quite familiar with the quality of his work.

Jim brought remarkable energy and enthusiasm to his research, despite the long hours of solitary travel, the tedious process of transcribing lengthy interviews, and the painstaking care with which he sorted through archival data to find the institutional gems that brightened his writing and made his dissertation such a pleasure to read. The latter was crucial, as his dissertation was easily the lengthiest I've directed. It was also, however, the most thoroughly researched and well-written, and the first I've nominated for an award in my 18 years of chairing doctoral committees.

There are two primary dimensions to Jim's work that I believe make it worthy of thoughtful consideration: its timeliness and its format. First, the phenomenon of institutional rebranding has but increased since he began his study. In a fiscal environment in which institutions of higher education continue to be asked to do more

with less, the temptation for colleges to rebrand themselves as universities in an effort assumed to enhance enrollment or attract more donors is difficult to resist. Jim's work documents the potential pitfalls of such assumptions, and makes clear the questions that must be answered prior to any attempt to engage in such a major change.

Second, Jim's dissertation demonstrates the benefits of taking an unconventional approach to formatting the document. As he collected data and began to write, it became quite clear that the traditional five-chapter format was not suitable for his study. There were so many institutions, so much institutional history, so many constituencies whose reactions were relevant, so many justifications, so many models – so many data to report – that adhering to the standard format would have meant chapters in excess of hundreds of pages each. The choice to focus chapters on the various aspects of the rebranding process rendered a document in which each chapter is affiliated with the whole, yet is capable of standing on its own as a resource to readers.

I have particularly admired Jim's interest in the research process as a means of generating information on which meaningful change can be predicated. His comprehension of research as a catalyst for reform as opposed to an academic exercise sets him apart from all but a few of his peers, and his commitment to learning how to produce scholarship that can have an impact on colleges and universities speaks well for his career as an administrator in higher education.

I recommend his work to you without reservation, and would be pleased to answer any further questions you may have. I can be reached at the addresses below, and I sincerely appreciate your consideration.

Sincerely,

(signature removed)

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Survival of the Fittest? The Rebranding of
West Virginia Higher Education
(A Summary)

Marshall University
College of Education and Human Services

Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the
Marshall University Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirement for the degree of

Doctor of Education
in
Educational Leadership

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ABSTRACT

From 1996 to 2005, West Virginia produced the greatest number (56.25%) of institutional rebrandings in the country. In addition, the state experienced the largest proportion (25%) of the “college-to-university” rebranding strategy than any other state. This study embarked on discovering possible reasons for this phenomenon and the results of such changes. Using a mixed method approach, a variety of quantitative and qualitative methods was utilized to determine the rationale, strategies, and implications of these name changes.

Eleven West Virginia institutions in total were analyzed. As West Virginia is a nested population within Appalachia, administrators from 51 rebranded universities in the region were also surveyed. Additionally, existing data from 103 institutions across the United States were longitudinally compared before and after a “college-to-university” rebranding. The study addressed the following areas relating to institutional rebrandings: rationale, implementation, regulatory constraints, stakeholder reactions, effects upon enrollment, resulting prestige, administrative advice, and brand protection.

While administrators reported that the goal for rebranding as a “university” was to accurately reflect the institution’s current mission, there was a tacit assumption that these changes would also produce greater prestige and increased enrollment. Certain indicators of prestige and a slowed growth in enrollment were noted following the rebranding effort.

SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST? THE REBRANDING OF WEST VIRGINIA HIGHER EDUCATION

Introduction

From 1996 to 2005, West Virginia had the largest percentage (56.25%) of institutional rebrandings and the largest percentage (25%) of “college-to-university” name changes in the nation (see Appendix A). This study set out to discover if there were factors unique to West Virginia (e.g., demographic, social, economic, etc.) that could explain the proliferation of “college-to-university” rebranding in the state. In addition, the rationale, reactions to, and the results of the change were studied.

A mixed-method approach using overlapping techniques strengthened the entire research project. The quantitative procedures used extant data as well as a survey to collect and analyze information, while the qualitative methods employed naturalistic observation, historical/archive research, and interviews. This variety of methods provided data triangulation.

Theory and Rationale

A postmodern theoretical perspective was used for this study and concentrated largely on administrative decisions. As Reason and Bradbury suggested, the postmodern perspective “emphasizes the intimate relationship between knowledge and power, how knowledge-making, supported by various cultural and political forms, creates a reality which favours [sic] those who hold power” (2001, p. 6). The majority of the decisions to rebrand the institutions in this study began as the effort of one individual – usually the president.

Research Procedures

Previous studies had analyzed rebranding in regard to enrollment based on institutional name changes (Koku, 1997; Spencer, 2005); however, neither study analyzed the specific “college-to-university” change. Although Morphew’s (2000) study of the “college-to-university” change analyzed institutions in regard to institutional size, graduate focus, and selectivity, he admitted that “an in-depth qualitative study of several of these institutions, their motivations, and the outcomes associated with their change would go a long way toward documenting and understanding this trend in higher education and determining the organizational impact of this kind of transformation, their students, and their faculty” (p. 22). Four distinct populations were studied:

- Eleven institutions within West Virginia – 10 that experienced the “college-to-university” change from 1979 to 2005 and one is currently in the process of changing status. Qualitative data included historical research, institutional documentation, accreditation records, governmental documents, legal briefs, and interviews. Existing quantitative data relating to enrollment and graduation rates were also used;

- Fifty-one institutions in 10 Appalachian states that experienced the “college-to-university” change from 1996 to 2005. A modified version of Spencer’s (2005) instrument was distributed and a sample of 34 was returned. The data consisted of quantitative and qualitative material culled from the survey returns, historical documentation, and interviews. The researcher used correlations and descriptive and inferential statistics;
- One-hundred-three institutions in the United States that experienced the “college-to-university” change from 1996 to 2001. The 103 institutions represented the total population of regionally accredited institutions experiencing the “college-to-university” change during the six-year period. Existing quantitative data of enrollment, tuition, Carnegie classifications, numbers and levels of graduate programs, and undergraduate selectivity were analyzed. Incremental changes in enrollment and tuition for the five successive years prior to the name change were compared to similar incremental changes during the five years following the change. The remaining indicators of prestige were compared for the year of the change and the fifth year after the change. Paired samples T-tests, correlations, and Chi square statistical methods were employed, and;
- Six institutions utilizing a similar institutional brand (the name Allegheny). This case study examined how Allegheny College reacted to five other schools that changed their names to include the “Allegheny” designation. Allegheny College successfully limited two institutions’ use of the “Allegheny” brand for marketing purposes. Additionally, Allegheny College exerted pressure upon two additional schools to alter existing names to avoid confusion. A fifth institution was unaffected. Data collection consisted of historical research, governmental records, legal briefs, existing marketing quantitative data, and interviews.

Where interviews were conducted, these were two-fold: complete and partial (one to three questions). The longer interviews, ranging from 30 to 90 minutes in length, were conducted with 22 individuals representing institutions, governing boards, consortia, and the state legislature. The shorter interview questions were directed to a number of other individuals who had specific information not known by the comprehensive interview subjects. An additional 48 individuals provided information germane to this study. The total number of individuals contributing to this study (including 32 non-duplicated survey participants) totaled 102. All data were collected from December 2006 to October 2007.

Because the standard five chapter dissertation had the potential of limited readership and exhibited a writing style that researcher would never employ again, the study conforms to the suggestion of Duke and Beck (1999) who recommended an alternative style that would provide an “opportunity [to develop] skills that will actually be beneficial to students in the long term” and proposed that “each ‘chapter’ of the

dissertation would have its own abstract, introduction, literature review, research question(s), methodology, results, and conclusions – it would be a self-contained research article manuscript ready to be submitted for publication” (pp. 183-184). In addition to introductory and concluding chapters, this dissertation’s eight chapters corresponded to the following research questions:

- What factors were responsible for the specific institution’s decision to rebrand as a university?
- What was the administration’s justification for believing that the institution met qualifications to be called a university?
- What was the institution’s strategy for the rebranding process?
- What procedures did administration use to implement the institutional change?
- What influence did regulatory bodies have upon the change?
- What were the reactions of stakeholders to the change?
- How did senior administrators perceive the success of the institutional change?
- Did the change produce any indicators of increased prestige?
- What suggestions did administrators provide upon revisiting the change?
- What methods can institutions use to retain ownership of its brand?

Findings and Interpretations

Consistent with Morphey (2000), the majority of colleges that rebranded as universities did so to reflect each institution’s current status and following the change, the school exhibited an increased focus on graduate education. Additionally, the process of adopting the university designation was typically accompanied by organizational changes and a thorough review of possible name alternatives, with the vast majority of schools simply replacing “college” with “university” (53.06%). The second largest group (34.01%) kept the primary institutional identifier but added the name “university” along with other changes to the name (rearranged word order, wording added, wording subtracted, etc.). A minority of schools (12.93%) completely rebranded with a new identity. A variety of strategies to implement the changes, corresponding to a number of approaches identified by Kaikati and Kaikati (2003), were utilized. In West Virginia, regulatory bodies exerted some control over the process; however, the extent of control/intrusion was far less than was experienced by institutions in other states.

The reactions of the following stakeholder groups were analyzed: students, board members, administration, the community, faculty, alumni, other institutions, and (in one case) former employees. While each institution’s stakeholders reacted differently, alumni tended to be less supportive of such changes. Where there was a combined effort of several stakeholder groups (i.e., students, faculty, and alumni) protesting a change, the

rebranding was viewed as less than successful. While this occurred in other states, it did not occur in West Virginia.

Certain senior administrators perceived the name change had a positive effect upon enrollment, and upon comparing incremental enrollment figures five years prior to the name change to five years after, significance was noted; however, the results were negative and the rate of enrollment growth at these institutions actually slowed. This contrasts with Koku's (1997) conclusion that strategic institutional name changes (of all types) produced no statistically significant effects upon enrollment (see Appendix B). Independent variables that negatively affected enrollment figures occurred in Georgia and West Virginia. In Georgia, the switch from a quarter hour system to a semester system two years following the name change contributed to a loss of enrollment. In West Virginia, the independence of former community college components produced a loss of students (and revenue) that had been previously claimed by the former respective parent university.

The change to university status was also perceived by administrators as increasing institutional prestige. While four indicators were tested, only two produced statistically significant results five years following the name change: an improvement in Carnegie Classification and an increase in graduate programs (see Appendix C). No significance was noted in either tuition rates or institutional selectivity after the name change.

Advice given by administrators following the "college-to-university" change included "have a good reason to change" and "have a defensible name that relates to the institutional mission." West Virginia administrators indicated that prior to a change of status, the institution needed to involve key stakeholder groups and perform the necessary research concerning the feasibility of such a change. Finally, when a brand is challenged by an interloping institution, administrators need to protect their school's brand at all costs.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Taken altogether, some results from this study supported the findings of other researchers, while others did not. The primary reason for the rebranding was "to reflect the institutions' current status," and the "college-to-university" change often included organizational alterations and an increased focus on graduate education (see Appendix D). In certain jurisdictions, regulatory bodies exerted more control than in others. Stakeholder reactions (primarily those of alumni) had the potential to create problems for the process.

The postmodern theoretical approach, which challenges preconceived notions and allows for new or alternative explanations of phenomena (Lyotard, 1984), was utilized for this study. While administrators reported that the goal for rebranding as a "university" was to accurately reflect the institution's current mission, there was a tacit assumption that these changes would also produce increases in enrollment resulting in financial gains. This did not occur; therefore, this study contributes to the field of educational administration in that it indicates that institutional rebranding efforts often do not yield the desired results. Administrators will need to weigh the cost versus the benefits of "college-to-university" rebranding efforts. While these changes may not be

successful in competing for students and dollars, administrators often reported greater institutional prestige accompanying the change. The “college-to-university” change, while successful for some institutions, was no guarantee of increased enrollment or institutional prestige, as was assumed by most administrators prior to the rebranding.

The study raised several heuristic implications that could serve to improve or extend understanding of this phenomenon for administrators in higher education. An addition of the perspectives of stakeholders, for example, would provide insight into how specific groups viewed the changes. Since this study did not analyze marketing and promotional materials in relation to the name change, the influence of these materials on perceptions of the success of the “college-to-university” transition would be warranted. Finally, an analysis of the leadership approaches of and/or activities undertaken by the presidents who led the rebranding charges at their institutions could shed some light on the extent to which those individuals’ styles and personalities led to the success or failure of their endeavors. These suggestions of broadening the scope of analysis would serve to vastly improve this already comprehensive study.

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APPENDIX A: COMPARATIVE REBRANDING BY STATES

Top 10 Institutional Rebranded States 1996-2005 Ranked by Percentage

Rank	State	Percentage Rebranded	2000 Population
1	West Virginia	56.25%	1,808,344
2	Kentucky	49.15%	4,041,769
3	Georgia	42.86%	8,186,453
4	Minnesota	39.29%	4,919,479
5	New Hampshire	32.00%	1,235,786
6	Connecticut	31.71%	3,405,565
7	Montana	28.57%	902,195
8	Missouri	28.21%	5,595,211
9	Oregon	25.58%	3,421,399
10	Maryland	25.45%	5,296,486

Top 10 University Rebranded States 1996-2005 Ranked by Percentage

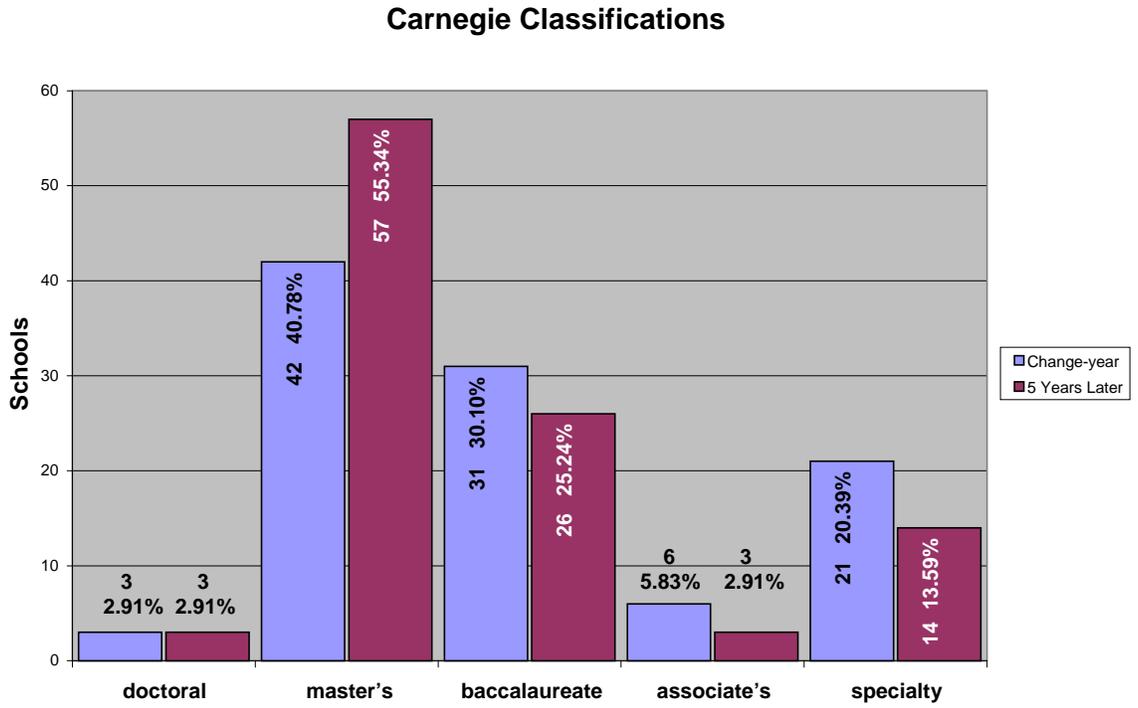
Rank	State	Percentage of University Rebranded Schools	2000 Population
1	West Virginia	25.00%	1,808,344
2	Georgia	20.78%	8,186,453
3	Idaho	20.00%	1,293,953
4	Missouri	16.67%	5,595,211
5	Oklahoma	12.82%	3,450,654
6	New Jersey	10.64%	8,414,350
7	Kentucky	10.17%	4,041,769
8	Oregon	9.30%	3,421,399
9	New Hampshire	8.00%	1,235,786
10	Ohio	7.34%	11,353,140

APPENDIX B: PRE-AND POST-CHANGE MEAN INCREMENTAL ENROLLMENT COMPARED BY SCHOOL SIZE.

Pre & Post Name Change Mean Incremental Enrollments

	Pre-Change	Post-Change	Difference	Percentage
Total	0.0693	0.0412	-0.0281	-40.51%
Small	0.076	0.0564	-0.0196	-25.79%
Medium	0.0716	0.0205	-0.0511	-71.37%
Larger	0.0428	0.0414	-0.0014	-3.27%

APPENDIX C: CARNEGIE CLASSIFICATIONS CHANGE-YEAR AND FIVE YEARS LATER



APPENDIX D: TOP REASONS WHY COLLEGES CHANGE TO UNIVERSITIES

Top Reasons for Change

