

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

**EXCERPT: CHAPTER EIGHT: REVISITING THE
“COLLEGE-TO-UNIVERSITY” CHANGE**

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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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Huntington, West Virginia, 2007

Keywords: Higher education, rebranding, brand identity, college-to-university

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CHAPTER EIGHT: REVISITING THE “COLLEGE-TO-UNIVERSITY” CHANGE

Hindsight is always twenty-twenty. – Billy Wilder (n.d).
May you have the hindsight to know where you've been, the foresight to know where you're going, and the insight to know when you've gone too far. – Anonymous Irish blessing.

When time came to effect the controversial change of Morris Harvey College's identity to The University of Charleston, the school celebrated the event at the beginning of the 1979-1980 fiscal year with an event termed “Growing Day.” At 3:00 PM on Sunday, July 1, 1979, participants desiring to donate a tree or shrub could purchase one of hundreds of varieties to be planted on the UC campus to commemorate future growth (“Trees, Shrubs Planting,” 1979).

At the front of the campus, a large “UC” was constructed from Japanese juniper, boxwood, and other shrubbery. Shrubs of all varieties were planted and lined the riverbank. The event also marked the return of Kanawha City's dogwood trees. Up through the 1960s, flowering dogwoods lined the campus side of the Kanawha River but were removed in an effort to shore up the bank and minimize erosion. Planted behind Riggleman Hall, the 30 pink Chinese dogwood trees soon became a visible symbol of the changes occurring at The University of Charleston (“Landscaping Cram Session,” 1979).

Four-and-one-half years later Tom Voss, who landscaped the university's new identity, was on his way out. One faculty member characterized the beginning of the end: “There was a vote of ‘no confidence’ taken prior to his departure. I would say that encapsulates the relationship between the president and the faculty. He didn't much care for faculty, and I think sometimes he saw faculty as a distraction and not terribly important.”

The faculty's lack of faith in Voss mirrored the feelings that had been festering among the board of trustees who asked for Voss' resignation. At first, Voss vehemently denied allegations he was leaving ("Voss plans to keep UC presidency," 1984). When his departure was finally announced, he insisted that he was not being fired but was quitting for a better job. Although his lack of candor about his future fueled rumors that the UC Board asked him to resign, the public suspected what actually occurred (Cavender, 1984a & 1984b; Sontag, 1984; Vandergrift, 1984). Even the editors of the *Charleston Gazette*, who supported the Voss presidency and hesitated to see him leave, admitted that his relationship with executive staff and the board of trustees went south. An editorial characterized the inevitable as "his principal difficulty being that he has overstayed his welcome" ("Tom Voss," 1984, p. 4).

For months, the flamboyant Voss served only as a figurehead with the board actually running the institution. One UC administrator explained the situation:

Voss' strategies were not advantageous and the board dismissed him, but they didn't want to admit it so they tried to cover it up. One of the board members sat downstairs and ran the university while the president sat upstairs for four or five months. This was because the board knew they had a problem, but they wanted to save face. So there are not many people who look back and say these were halcyon days.

The decision to change the name to The University of Charleston was accompanied by a series of unfortunate initiatives that made the transition even more difficult. Alumni were alienated due to the loss of institutional identity, a large number of faculty were dismissed, and tenure was abolished. These events all contributed to faculty

paranoia. The institutional structure was overextended and the school continued to operate with large deficits and a shrinking fulltime student base. Nearly 30 years after the name change, UC's administration has finally moved the institution to the level it had originally desired. While current administration would not have approached the name change in the same manner, there were some positive results. One administrator evaluated The University of Charleston brand and the process utilized in changing the name:

Yes, it's [the UC name] helpful. It's helpful because people in the community who support us see us as the educational institution for community, for the [Kanawha] Valley – and for Southern West Virginia in some ways, but certainly for the Valley. It was helpful, but it was very painful. I think the idea was good, but the process was horrendous. If there had been a better process to do it, it would have been more of a victory. Social change cannot be compared to a baseball game of who won and who lost. How do you balance the positive and negative outcomes? There are many more positive outcomes than negative outcomes, but we could have reduced the negative outcomes and expanded the positive if there had been a better process to make the change. The process was horrendous.

In examining the rebranding efforts of universities in West Virginia and the Appalachian region, this chapter emphasizes the reflections of those who have experienced a rebranding. Some administrators characterized the processes that allowed their institutions to be successful, others reflected upon what they would have done

differently had they the opportunity to repeat the effort. This advice is characterized by the broad categories of preparation, continuation, and integration.

Preparation

One way to prepare for a change is to seek broad-based support from constituents. If anything can characterize the problems at several Georgia institutions, it was the lack of stakeholder involvement in the process. Most of the complaints revolved around stakeholders' not having a voice. Chancellor Stephen Portch decided upon the initiative and selected the new institutional names. Thus, leaving alumni, faculty, staff, and students feeling that their opinions were ignored. At some institutions, the college name and its inherent intimacy were desired by a number of constituents. Their concerns were not addressed, as one Georgia administrator revealed that there were no positive benefits from the change:

I cannot think of one positive thing that came out of the name change. Our mission didn't change. Our approach to things didn't change. If it had been another name, perhaps something positive could have come out of it. The way it is now, I personally do not view it positively and most people look at the name and go, "When can we get rid of this?" Again, this is my personal point of view, some people will say it pulled us away from being identified as a small college; but, that's what we are . . . We probably would have been better off leaving the name as it was. I'm not the *only* voice in that argument.

A systemic change similar to what Georgia experienced, however, is unlikely. As outlined in Chapter 2, only a handful of states do not have the majority of their “state colleges” already identified as “universities.” This, however, does not negate the importance of involving stakeholders when the decision is made at the institutional level. One West Virginia administrator reiterated this:

I would say involve your constituents – get your alumni involved. Don’t make it look like it’s just you pushing it. I tried my best to let everyone know that this was my idea. They knew that. I said right off that this was something that I felt that we needed to do, but I didn’t want it to look like me on a big white horse coming in and doing it all. I wanted it to look like me having a good idea and now all these other people are now making it happen.

The decision to rebrand must be a natural extension of the institution’s mission. One Tennessee administrator advised, “Make sure the name is authentic – that it describes what the institution is: a college, a professional school, or a university, more than one ‘college’ held together by a common mission.” A Pennsylvania administrator added, “Have a good reason to change. Even moreso, have a compelling reason to change. It is a hard thing to do; don’t take it lightly.” To determine if a name change is warranted, an Ohio Valley University administrator recommended doing research prior to considering a new name:

The first thing I would tell them to do is to do the research. You have to do this. There are obvious reasons why colleges move to university status. One is that they are already a university and they have to claim that name

for themselves. They have organized into schools and [have] graduate programs – Marietta College is a perfect example. I did not talk to anybody at Marietta College, although we looked at their philosophy. Marietta is unique. They like the mystique of the “college” identity. They have the tweed jackets and the crew team. I don’t know anyway to describe it other than the mystique of retaining the name “college.” I very much get the impression that Marietta is stately. Marietta could just as easily make the switch to Marietta University and it would be a natural fit for them. They are already functioning as a university. For some reason they are [so] confident in all of their programs that they don’t need to make the jump to university status *per se* – but they are already functioning as a university. The other reason that colleges move to university status is because of brand repositioning. We found some research that students prefer to go to a university rather than a college. That was one of our survey questions. “Would you prefer to attend a college or a university?” The overwhelming response was for the university choice. Then you have to probe deeper on why that is. “What’s the appeal?” I think it’s status more than anything else. That’s just my opinion. “My son’s going to the university,” and that type of thing. The first thing I would tell you is to do the research. I come from a strong marketing background. I worked with a marketing research consultancy in Marietta, Ohio. I also worked with a very large advertising agency, and I’m a big believer in research and

looking at doing research first and finding out what it tells you. I think it is important to develop strategies that will accomplish what the research says.

Because every college is different, one West Virginia administrator counseled that each circumstance will dictate a different course of action:

I think that every situation has its nuances. I think the advice that I'd tried to heed came from Sir Eric Ashby, and he wrote it years ago. "Unless you have known an institution well or loved it long, you shouldn't tamper with it." I think there are some institutions, however, where the school is nearly bankrupt when a new leader comes in. The worst thing you could do is to respect its traditions . . . so each leader – each of us goes into a different situation.

Continuation

It is one thing to initiate the rebranding process, but quite another to see it to completion. This often requires additional resources apportioned to promote the new name. As one administrator reflected,

The thing that I would have done differently is that I probably would have allocated more resources in communicating the name change. We did a good job in communicating the name change, but I would have liked to have done a lot more with it in terms of a branding perspective. This includes calling the Department of Highways and getting that green sign on the highway exit changed from "College" to "University." This all has an associated cost.

One administrator felt that her institution had not done enough to position the school for success after the name change. She suggested focusing on mission, having the infrastructure to support the change, and being serious regarding post-change marketing.

I think it's beginning to take on its own identity. It's got a long way to go because the branding messages are all over the place. We can't figure out what we want to be when we grow up. In hindsight, I suppose in looking at it you want to be entrepreneurial, but there comes a point that if you keep throwing all that crap on the wall and you don't have the infrastructure to support it and your customer service doesn't follow-through, you're going to be developing an identity that you're not going to be proud of. We have to be as much results oriented as we are revenue oriented. I still think there is a lot of work to do in positioning the name. I hope for the institution's sake that it never changes its name again. It's very expensive. I think if the university doesn't do what it is supposed to from a marketing standpoint that they are not going to be out in front.

Another administrator analyzed the timing of his institution's change and felt that, in hindsight, summer was not the most opportune time to unveil a new brand.

If I had to do it all over again, I would not have done it in June, but rather I would have done it when the students were here on campus. I think I would have involved the student government in it. I would have had the student body president also be a part of the signing [of the name change resolution]. I didn't have any flack from it, but I'm just saying as I'm looking back, I wish there were more students on campus when we had the

ceremony. If you are going to do that, why not have the student body president be a part of it?

When Cincinnati Bible College and Seminary's Board of Trustees approved the new umbrella brand of Cincinnati Christian University on September 9, 2004, the school wisely decided to unveil the name during its annual Reunion and Alumni Weekend. The new name allowed the school to consolidate its various programs under one name while retaining the individual names of the undergraduate college and graduate seminary. The September 23 date also coincided with the school's 80th anniversary. With a large number of students and alumni on campus, the event culminated in a celebration called "Lighting on the Hill: An Historical Celebration" (2004). The event provided Cincinnati Christian University with the opportunity to commemorate this historical event with representatives of most of the institution's stakeholder groups being present.

Integration

Only four schools (two in West Virginia and two in Ohio) in this study participated in mergers related to the institution's rebranding. In retrospect, West Virginia University's absorption of West Virginia Institute of Technology could have had better long-range results. One WVU official suggested that their attempt to soften the blow of the merger had a detrimental effect: "I do think that we may have been a little too respectful of the local culture and maybe should have been a little more assertive on some things. It would have gone faster and smoother." When asked what WVU would have done differently, another official responded,

That's a great question and it is the question. The army has a program they have called "after action review." I think that any "after action review," and that is fair of this merger, you would have asked: "Should we have pushed harder for it to become a division right away and said 'no deal' unless it's a division?" We were trying to be helpful to the school and that part of the state. We always struggle to have the same presence that we have up here. I think that Marshall's merger with the Graduate College was easier because they just took the president out and did the thing their way. It probably made the merger easier and probably made it a more positive experience two years later for everybody. That is the first question I would ask: "Why an affiliation, why not just merge?" The Potomac State and COGS model show that these strategies work better. I think that the second thing is you should study other college mergers closely in other parts of the country. Pay attention to local culture, local history, and the local traditions. Look at the matchmaking and above all anticipate problems. Third, it takes money to merge in the short run. We probably should have asked the legislature for some money to make it easier to go through some of these transitions. Anything we were trying to do had to be squeezed out of either their budget or ours.

Reiterating the strategy as employed by Marshall University when it acquired West Virginia Graduate College, a WVU administrator speculated that the post-merger issues would have been minimized: "Right now you would have had a different result and the hard feelings would have been behind us. The slow death of the culture is very

tough. I think [MU President] Wade Gilley understood that and went for the divisional status right away.” Another administrator, however, characterized Gilley’s strategy as “a little bloody.” While there were issues at the former West Virginia Graduate College, a WVU official noted,

Like you said, “for years it real bloody,” but then it was over. This has taken a lot of time a lot of my time, a lot of the provost’s time, and a lot of the assistant provost’s time to make this merger work. I think we can see the light at the end of the tunnel, but it has been a long tunnel.

Part of the problem with the Tech merger was that WVU did not feel that it had a champion in Montgomery to make the change work. At Potomac State College, the move to divisional status in 2005 had few problems. WVU administration credited this success to having the right individual [Kerry O’Dell] in place as campus provost. One WVU administrator explained,

Again, leadership makes a difference. We put in a very strong leader who was a faculty person here and who understood the culture . . . He mixes well with the town and he has made a big difference because he did not fight the culture here. He understood it . . . and it’s not the legislature he calls when he has a problem, it’s someone who can really help him.

According to WVU officials, the current WVU Tech provost (and former president) has been making the necessary changes since taking the helm in 2005:

Charles Bayless had been here and understood this campus [WVU]. He got two of his degrees here, but he also had been to Tech as a student. His

belief was that, if he didn't do something to change the culture and strategy down there, his alma mater would fail. He has been a champion for positive ideas whatever they are, including moving engineering or whatever it took to keep that campus alive. He is not afraid to merge the backroom operations, the computer systems, to install a food service that is cheaper through a WVU program, or to have things printed here. Anything that is cheaper, he'll do through us. To him, it wasn't a loss of control. It was his business background saying this makes sense.

Part of the success of this model, as another WVU administrator recalled, is to effect positive change by giving local constituents the sense that they have control of their own destiny. This was the experience with Potomac State's move to divisional status.

I've come to believe that, as long as you give them [Tech] some sense that they have local control with some parts of it, they will actually look to us [WVU] for the leadership. When you provide reasons why this is the way we need to do things, they usually will fall right in when you say, "I think this is why we need to go this way. You can still do these things locally, but this is how we handle things at Morgantown." I've found they've actually welcomed that.

Epilogue

In preparing for a "college-to-university" change, administrators have advised that research on whether such a change is necessary should occur first. A broad-based support of the change will aid in making it palatable to constituent populations. Even if the

change agent is making the decisions, stakeholders at least need to feel that they had a voice in the matter. Also, do the necessary research to prepare for the change.

Following the rebranding decision, institutional administration needs to follow through with the rebranding's overall success. Monies need to be allocated for continuation of the brand awareness, and the institution must have a focused mission. The proper infrastructure needs to be in place to support the change. Last, timing is critical for the maximum effect of the name change announcement or implementation.

In regard to institutional mergers, an analysis of the success and failures of other institutional amalgamations is recommended. Sometimes, a "quick and dirty" takeover is preferred over a long, slow, and perhaps painful gradual integration. The Marshall University/West Virginia Graduate College model has been more successful than what occurred with WVU and West Virginia Institute of Technology. The proper leadership at the merged campus is also critical for complete integration.

Concerning the rebranding process, the administrative recommendations indicated that strong leadership is essential to effect the "college-to-university" change. It takes more than vision; it requires an administrator who has the ability to lead. At the University of Charleston, President Thomas G. Voss demonstrated that he could envision success for the struggling institution, but he was unable to lead the transition to that level. Eventually, UC was able to attain that goal many years after the fact.

Prophetic of Voss' destiny, the major symbol of his name change initiative simultaneously departed as he did. During the same year as his firing, the pink Chinese dogwood trees all died one by one. An administrative faculty member remembered, "It's kind of ironic. It was after the name change and Dr. Voss left. The soil on the riverbank

was not friendly to dogwood trees and so all of the dogwood trees we planted died. No one now believes that there was a line dogwoods along the bank.”

Perhaps the moral of this story should be, “Vision without leadership will not prosper.” As for Voss, he left higher education for 17 years after his dismissal from UC. When he returned to academia as interim president of New York’s Rockland Community College in 2001, his colorful presidency was once again under fire. Voss’ problems at Rockland began when he repeated organizational changes and firings that were similar to his UC agenda.

Upon the expiration of Voss’ contract in 2003, State University of New York (SUNY) officials replaced him. A problem arose, however, because the institutional board of trustees had approved an 18-month extension of Voss’ contract without the SUNY system’s approval. SUNY officials believed the board overstepped its authority and ignored this extension. On July 2, 2003, two presidents arrived on campus and Voss vowed not to leave. When security guards boxed up his belongings and changed the locks later that afternoon, Voss attempted to run the institution as a president in exile from an exclusive Manhattan literary club some 30 miles away (Evelyn, 2003b).

With an odd habit of referring to himself in the third person, Voss explained the situation regarding his presidency in absentia: “He just doesn’t run the college from his rightful place in the president’s office” (Evelyn, 2003a, p. A19). Rockland’s board filed suit against SUNY for clarification on issues of control, but eventually dropped the suit after amassing over \$90 thousand in legal fees. At the official expiration of Voss’ extended contract in April 2004, he sued the school and county for \$135 thousand in back wages (Evelyn, 2004). In December 2005, a New York State Supreme Court Justice

denied the motion for summary judgment and dismissed Voss' complaint. He appealed and the court's Appellate Division upheld the earlier decision in March 2007 (Netter, 2007).

Voss' pretentiousness is consistent with the memories of those who knew him at The University of Charleston. One administrative faculty member explained, "If I were going to capture him in one word, it would be 'showman' . . . Things were events." Another UC administrator characterized Voss as "a visionary who had wild ideas. He had a compelling story to tell, but he was not skilled at management, implementation, analysis, and getting things done right."

Likewise, an Ohio administrator emphasized the importance of leadership: "To be successful, this [rebranding] process requires a high ranking 'institutional champion' with good political instincts and the power to ensure coordination of institutional efforts and energies." In addition to a "competent staff to take care of the details," one administrator could not underestimate the need for strong leadership in regard to rebranding:

Honestly, he [the president] can be a pretty hard taskmaster, but he was great during this. He drove it. He saw it through. I think you have to have someone leading that will really keep his or her finger on it all the time and see that it is going forward. You really have to have somebody who owns it and who will push it through.

Another administrator advised that for any institutional endeavor (including rebranding) to be successful, an institutional president must set the pace:

The president is the pacesetter of the institution. There are two problems, however, that I see with institutional leadership. First, leadership is in very short supply and in high demand. Second, people don't understand leadership. They think that consensus is leadership. That is the antithesis of leadership. Leadership gathers ideas, but then makes a decision and then goes forward and then gets the consensus. If other people fall out, that's fine if they can't keep up with the pace. It's very difficult to find top quality leadership today. You can find many "hangers on" – "Give me my money and I'll wait for my pension." You can find the status quo. Finding the kind of people who want to be pacesetters and who will keep the place going but keep up with their own kind [other pacesetters] is not easy. Leaders are often beat. If you lead, you're going to be beaten up. It's the nature of the position. A leader is like a good hound dog. A good hound dog is going to get his nose bloody, but he's going to cut trail. You can hold on and be content being in the middle [of the pack], but who wants to be in the middle. If you're on the tail end, then you know what you can expect to get from the tail end of the dog.