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Retrenchment in Higher Education: Public Perceptions and Marketing Implications

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Many institutions in higher education are actively engaged in the retrenchment process in order to achieve financial stability. This research examined public perceptions of retrenchment by conducting a series of modified Delphi groups. Results suggest a public awareness and belief that retrenchment will not impact academic or experiential quality. Presented is REDUCE – a retrenchment strategy for university administrators and marketing professionals.

INTRODUCTION

In the ever changing environment of higher education, business strategies and practices are now commonplace. The strategy of retrenchment – the reduction or elimination of unprofitable programs, services or products – is the focus of this research. Specifically, the marketing implications of a university's strategy of retrenchment are examined.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

For clarity and conceptual understanding, retrenchment in higher education is eliminating, redacting or restructuring administrators, staff, faculty, programs and services in order to build a sustainable financial future for the institution (Kavanah, 2013). The strategy of retrenchment is not a new phenomenon, and has been anticipated for at least four decades, given the Census data forecasting a declining student population from which to recruit (see Balderston, 1974; Baldridge & Tierney, 1979).

Due to the historical reality of declining enrollments, colleges and universities have engaged in the marketing and recruitment of students since the mid 1970s (Kotler, 1975; Stark, 1977; Fiske, 1979). The marketing strategies have become more sophisticated and aggressive over the years, as illustrated by

numerous researchers, analysts and practitioners (Chapman, 1981; Jugenheimer, 1995; Kittle, 2000; Pampaloni, 2010). Moreover, the *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education* is devoted exclusively to the profession.

College and university retrenchment strategies, however, can be portrayed as a more draconian effort to confront "the crisis in higher education" (Coy, 2014). Slaughter examined the practice over twenty years ago (1993a; 1993b) and found the rationale for the decisions to be debatable and the results to be inequitable. Finally, Sharrock (2014) has examined retrenchment efforts in Australia and reports that union and staff opposition often leads to intense media scrutiny. As a result, he recommends the posing and answering of four critical questions prior to any retrenchment effort: (1) Does it demonstrate a respect for people and their work?; (2) Will it support the academic mission?; (3) Is the process of decision-making consistent and fair?; and (4) Is it a strategic necessity for the institution? Given the likely media scrutiny of retrenchment efforts, it is somewhat surprising to discover a relative paucity of research examining public perceptions and the concomitant marketing implications of a university's retrenchment strategy.

RESEARCH PURPOSE AND QUESTIONS OF INTEREST

The purpose of this research is to examine public perceptions of university retrenchment and ascertain potential marketing implications. This review uncovered a modicum of research examining marketing strategies relevant to retrenchment. It is therefore hypothesized that research participants will discuss retrenchment vis-à-vis the quality of the educational experience. For example, it is known that organizations can secure a differential advantage with superior quality offerings (Reed, Lemak & Mero, 2000). Moreover, if retrenchment plans enhance quality perceptions, consumer attention and behavior will be positively influenced (Mittal & Kamakura, 2001). This perceived quality enhancement will likely engender customer (i.e., student) satisfaction, resulting in greater customer loyalty, revenue growth and profitability (Heskett, et.al., 2008). Other research indicates approximately 60% of students identify school atmosphere as the determinant factor in the decision to attend (Pampaloni, 2010). Therefore, if participants perceive retrenchment as a means to enhancing educational quality or institutional atmosphere, the effect could be positive. Finally, if cost cutting initiatives are thought to increase students' ROI, positive perceptions are likely (see Chabotara & Honana, 1990).

Specifically, six research questions are addressed: (1) Will a university's retrenchment plans influence the quality of education?; (2) What would be an indicator of university quality?; (3) Will retrenchment result in students changing their decision to attend a university?; (4) Will retrenchment influence how a student feels about a university?; (5) What should a university try hard **not** to eliminate in retrenchment?; and (6) What will be the financial implications of retrenchment for students?

METHODOLOGY AND STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

This research employed a modified Delphi focus group technique to determine stakeholder participants' perceptions, thoughts, feelings, opinions and beliefs toward university retrenchment efforts. The use of focus groups is common, particularly for future hypothesis development and testing (Morgan, 1997). Since no relevant literature was found that tested hypotheses pertinent to retrenchment outcomes, the use of modified Delphi groups is warranted. Delphi techniques differ from the traditional focus group method in that participants receive summaries, previous comments or results and then asked again to discuss the new information (Rowe & Wright, 2001). This iterative approach permits a narrowing down of essential themes by having participants evaluate and re-evaluate outcomes.

All Delphi groups were convened and conducted on the same day with participants attending a pre-college exploration workshop in the Midwest. The four groups of participants included the following: (1) Prospective students, sophomores or juniors in high school (n=14); (2) Current college students, sophomore thru graduate status, accompanying their siblings (n=16); (3) Counselors, employed at the

high school level (n=11); and (4) Parents, defined as grandparents, step-parents and guardians (n=18). All participants were volunteers and the facilitator enjoys over 20 years of professional experience.

The researchers facilitated four open-ended Delphi groups and an open-forum. This process allowed each group of participants to discuss thoughts, concerns or feelings related to retrenchment. Each group was given a brief definition of retrenchment and the six research questions for discussion. Each group was informed that they were free to explore or discuss any additional issues that surfaced. In addition, the latter half of each group (after the first) was reserved for reviewing information from the previous groups and participants were encouraged to process the new information. Finally, all participants (N=59) were invited to review in totality the findings and "recommend or develop" an appropriate marketing plan for institutions of higher education. This final group was operationally defined and processed as an open-forum, given the N size of 36. All findings were then clustered according to conceptual areas.

TABLE 1
COLLECTIVE RESPONSES: RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Will a university's retrenchment plans influence the quality of education?   All groups did not feel that the quality within their major would suffer; however, all expressed an expectation that changes in student services, fees and university maintenance would negatively impact students. Both prospective and current students discussed their experience listening to faculty complaining in class about cuts and up-coming cuts and having no input into the outcomes. Participants were worried about a hidden "ripple-effect" – although it was non-specific.
2. What would be an indicator of university quality?   Participant responses canvassed seven conceptual areas, listed in rank-order, from most reflective to least: i) Job/Graduate School placement rate; ii) Retention rate; iii) University Appearance and Maintenance; iv) Academic profile of university (ACT/SAT); v) Alumni giving rate; vi) Faculty publications/ patents/businesses; and vii) University endowment.
3. Will retrenchment result in students changing their decision to attend a university?   All participants agreed that they would only change their decision to attend a specific university if their major were dropped or department was planned to be phased out. However, all participants discussed how students change their majors multiple times in college. Many discussed how students can design-their-own majors.
4. Will retrenchment influence how a student feels about a university?   The general response was NO. However, participants reframed the question as, "Why would a student decide to attend a specific university?" Listed in rank-order were: University Reputation (not specific to academics, e.g. party school, town-gown relationship, sports, etc.); Safety; Location; Scholarship; Financial Aid; and Student Life.
5. What should a university try hard NOT to eliminate in retrenchment?   Participants reframed this question to, "What should be eliminated?", viz., "over-paid or useless" administrators; "over-the-top" sport facilities and "designer majors" for "sub-populations". Areas NOT to eliminate fell under the banner of student services: housing facilities; health centers; counseling; tutoring; recreation services; clubs; and security. However, participants stressed that administrators should never eliminate a program that defines a university.
6. What will be the financial implications of retrenchment for students?   All participants believed that their individual cost will still increase with retrenchment; most participants expressed suspicion when a university announces cost-savings measures. Counselors, parents and current students discussed how universities announce no increases and even reductions, but their student bills always mysteriously increase. Private institutions were viewed with more suspicion.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

All groups were aware of retrenchment. Prospective students reflected on how their high school exacted course fees, pay-to-play athletics and activity fees, due to levy failures. Current college students were the most vocal discussing reductions in student services like activities, landscapers/grounds keepers and cleaning staff. The counselors posed their own specific response back to the facilitator in the initial focus group, *"What you are really asking is – would you be more likely to cut or reduce faculty or majors with low graduation numbers or student services like tutoring, student activities, health services or recreation center?"* Of the total 59 participants, 54 chose to eliminate faculty or majors given this specific option ($p<.0001$). The collective responses of between-group agreement, representing the 6 research questions, are delineated in Table 1.

Table 2 highlights unique statements made by each participant group. Statements reflect both distinctive insight and a high intensity group discussion. All comments reflect negative assumptions, sentiments or perceptions related to retrenchment.

TABLE 2
PARTICIPANT GROUPS' FOCI AND DISCUSSION

Prospective Students: It is appropriate for private institutions to cut or restrict majors in retrenchment – but not public institutions. Public institutions should not cut programs just because of low numbers. A public institution has expansive moral and economic obligations to both the student and society. A student should be able to "make-their-own major". These high school students reflected on experiencing cuts in their high schools resulting in low teacher morale, specifically, with no increases or freezing of teacher salaries. However, they were unsure of how the faculty pay-structure worked. All agreed that faculty make "a lot of money", and this should not be an issue.
Secondary Topics included: universities not accepting post-secondary credit and overly restrictive housing options. In addition, if retrenchment did not affect them personally, they were "okay" with it.

Current College Students: They have watched and experienced cuts at their respective universities. Reflected on how administrators say cuts are "across the board," but that is never true – and if it were, "it still doesn't make sense". Focused on losing student services even though they pay a fee for most of them. For example, they discussed restricted hours for the health or recreation center. They were aware of many security, cleaning and maintenance staff being eliminated. Reflected on relating to these university employees as peers, mentors or even family. There are so many tenured faculty or departments that the university cannot remove for many reasons. Expressed frustration with the course/faculty/university evaluation process because nothing ever seems to be done as a result.
Secondary Topics included: extending the length of time required to live on campus, extra charges and fees, cancelling traditional entertainment activities, reducing hours of operations for student related services or reducing on-campus employment opportunities; cancelling courses because of low numbers which often results in delayed graduation. Eliminating certain majors could affect diversity on campus.

Counselors: They are aware of marketing and promotional techniques used to recruit students. They worried mostly about two areas: (1) students were going to have restricted or limited choice for social or developmental activities that lead to personal development; and (2) retrenchment would result in fewer adjunct professors with "real-world or work experience" – limiting students' professional development and networking activities.
Secondary Topics included: sustainability; alumni privileges and restrictions; and enticing students to enroll at non-Division 1 colleges so they can play sports – no or limited scholarship – in essence, a pay-to-play concept. Using a student's desire to play sports to drive enrollment and ultimately improve the university's financial solvency was viewed as wrong.

Parents: Discussed the need to dialogue "honestly" about retrenchment ideas or plans with all the stakeholders. A focus on the total quality of the educational experience, both in and outside the classroom. Concerned about job or graduate school placement and any cut that would interfere with student success. Return on investment (ROI) ignited a heated discussion regarding whether advisors or core faculty would counsel and persuade students (i.e. their children) to major in areas with no long-term ROI – just to prevent eliminating majors and save faculty positions.

Secondary Topics included: use of teaching assistants; larger class-size; limited career placements; little networking; questionable decisions related to sustainability; large salaries for administrators, coaches; and ballooning budgets for sports programs.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Public Perceptions and Emergent Themes

The research findings from all participant-groups suggest a deep familiarity with university cutbacks and retrenchment programs. Even prospective college students attending high school were well acquainted with the realities of failed levies, additional fees and teacher layoffs. As an emergent theme, all initial responses were focused on concerted retrenchment efforts attempting to minimize faculty reductions. As discussions progressed, however, participants expressed an acute concern with the elimination or reduction of services directly impacting the overall quality of the student experience. The most salient examples cited include safety and personal protection, housing maintenance and repair, health and preventative care services and a panoply of services related to academic achievement, tutoring and other critical student-life support and facilitative services. Finally, the majority of faculty reductions were perceived as justifiable, citing low student enrollments as justification. However, current students were quick to assert their belief that some majors of study are represented by faculty members who have a more pronounced impact on the community than just academic instruction. Moreover, these students continued their discussions around reassignment of such prominent and influential faculty members so as to continue direct contact with students.

All participant-groups differentiated between public and private university systems. Specifically regarding public institutions, the maintenance and continuation of majors or programs with low enrollments is justifiable when such programs provide for the greater community good. Ironically, private institutions are perceived to be engaged in a more competitive business environment, thereby justifying such cuts of unprofitable majors or programs as a sound business decision. In addition, all participants perceived less financial and fiscal transparency in private institutions vis à vis public institutions. However, participants believed the quality of majors and programs would be maintained if they were not eliminated in both public and private institutions, supporting the findings of Chabotara and Honana (1990). Finally, all participants exhibited mixed thoughts and beliefs regarding student return on investment (ROI). Specifically, a 50/50 split occurred when discussing the philosophical debate regarding whether it is the institution or the individual student-learner that determines student return on their educational investment.

Ironically, the fears and concerns of the participant-groups regarding retrenchment efforts were focused on the reduction or removal of programs or staff directly responsible for the delivery and management of support student services. Any professional even tangentially associated with institutions of higher education is well aware that these areas are the first to be cut. All participant-groups stressed the importance of not disrupting the student environment like social activities, health and safety or housing maintenance options. Anecdotal comments from counselors, current students and parents revealed their awareness of such services and others like concerts, on-campus speakers and dinners/productions already being eliminated. Interestingly, the need to continue and maintain majors or programs was perceived to not make pragmatic business sense in today's competitive environment. The focus on student ROI and the maintenance of the campus and student-life atmosphere and quality took precedence. Finally, as

previously discussed, all participants did reflect on how some professors should never be eliminated because of what they offer students, the institution and the greater community.

Marketing Implications

All stakeholders exhibit a fervent feeling in the development and delivery of a quality education and the maintenance of an appropriate institutional culture. Moreover, participants discussed the importance of location and the 'town-gown' relationship as a counterbalance to reductions in student activities. Overall, research findings suggest that marketers must continue to focus on the strengths of the university and the quality of the educational experience. Therefore, marketers should avoid areas that will result in dissonance and reduce the satisfaction level associated with the university, as Hogan, et.al. (2002) warned. Moreover, implementing an internal marketing program addressing faculty concerns is warranted, given that faculty thoughts and opinions toward retrenchment often permeate classroom instruction. A comprehensive review by Sharrock (2014) reveals how retrenchment efforts are detrimental to university marketing and promotion initiatives and often times lead to intense media scrutiny. However, this could be a salutary effect if faculty members understand, support and promote necessary retrenchment plans. Table 3 highlights the REDUCE model for the marketing of an institutional retrenchment strategy. This model is derived directly from the facilitated open-forum discussions wherein the participants developed and recommended strategic marketing plans for institutions of higher education. In addition, the REDUCE model supports and hones Sharrock's four critical questions approach prior to any retrenchment efforts.

TABLE 3
THE REDUCE MODEL: MARKETING A RETRENCHMENT STRATEGY

Review retrenchment plans by involving all affected stakeholders.

Educate the public on the life-long benefits of matriculating at a high quality institution.

Discuss the present and future impact of retrenchment efforts on sustainability and institutional reputation.

Understand that student services are perceived to be a physical, social, psychological and emotional necessity.

Cuts across the board are not believed to be logical, practical or justifiable – they must be strategic.

Engage alumni networks to promote career connections and enhance student ROI.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The use of Delphi groups in qualitative research exhibits limitations like moderator skill and experience as well as inherent differences among group membership and participation. Moreover, the interpretation of data, the clustering of concepts and emergent themes and meaningful insights is time

consuming and unique to the research team, thereby necessitating replication and further research. As a result, larger sample sizes and quantitative analytics are needed to enhance reliability and generalizability of results.

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