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2001

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PARENTAL ASSESSMENT OF COLLEGE CHARACTER: BRAND IDENTITY AND CONSUMER BEHAVIOR IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

The concept of character development in higher education enjoys considerable professional support. Moreover, commercial marketers are aggressively promoting brand image and brand character to differentiate their products and services. However, there is a paucity of research on the marketing of a university's brand character. This exploratory research examines parental assessment of college character, its conceptual components and hierarchical factor structure. A discussion highlights practical implications for the marketing of a college's brand character.

INTRODUCTION

The reputation of any university is paramount in establishing or maintaining market position. Conard and Conard (2000) reiterated this sentiment when they examined the role that a college's reputation plays in establishing and maintaining a positive consumer perception. They discovered three factors that affect college reputation: academic concerns, campus ethos and practical values. Conard and Conard's rationale for their study was simple: "More is known about consumer behavior when purchasing soap or salty pretzels than how high school students select the college they will attend." Hence, Conard and Conard built on previous research published by Vaughn, Pitlik and Hansotia (1978), Maguire and Lay (1981), Murphy (1981), and the Carnegie Foundation (1986). Each research team found that financial aid, parental preference, academic programs, school size, location and cost are important factors in establishing and maintaining a college's academic reputation.

OVERVIEW OF BRAND CHARACTER

An academic reputation is a mindset. Knapp (2000), in his book *The Brandmindset* opens his first chapter by stating that a marketer should focus daily on one question: "How am I building our brand's equity?" This same question is appropriate for any university official interested in reputation management. Brand reputation and its equity, according to Knapp, represents the total public perception. This includes the concepts of quality, performance, loyalty and satisfaction. Knapp stressed the importance of how customers feel in

relationship to overall brand esteem. Moreover, he suggested that brand familiarity does not necessarily ensure brand distinctiveness. For emphasis, Knapp pointed out that regardless of how one rates quality, ultimately a product or service is only as good as the consumer perceives it to be.

A similar conceptual parallel exists in the university ranking game. Walleri and Moss (1995), as editors of *New Directions for Institutional Research*, addressed university assessment and the proliferation of guidebooks in their compilation of nine articles that evaluated college rankings. They discussed and offered institutional responses to the implications of the unfair weight given to academic reputation, but concluded that in today's world, reputation does matter. However, the question still remains: Do university officials know their reputation? What's more, do they understand any meaning behind their reputation?

There are many challenges in managing a brand's reputation. Few managers are capable of providing an objective, comprehensive assessment of their brand. According to Keller (2000), most brand managers are knowledgeable of one or two areas in which their brand excels but if pressed would find it difficult to identify the underlying factors to be considered for improving their brand's reputation. Given this, there is no reason to assume that university administrators are in any better position to evaluate their brand identity than the aforementioned brand managers. One of the most challenging tasks for university administrators is to determine if their college's reputation or academic programs are properly positioned. In practice they should

ask, "Do we command a particular niche in the consumer's mind?" Keller refers to this concept as "points of parity." Finding parity allows one competitor to develop an advantage over another by creating points of difference. Within a university system, marketing an intangible attribute is more often than not the point of parity. For example, it is common for university officials to promote character development in their student population.

Character has a myriad of official definitions and intuitive schemas. One could argue that character has observable signs, and others would stress that you cannot truly observe character. It is reasonable to assume that this type of academic question causes much debate. For brevity and clarity, however, the John Templeton Foundation (1999), in their college resource for parents, students and educators, explained character as being rooted in Greek writings. Here the Greek meaning for character is the constellation of strengths and weaknesses that form and reveal who we are. To that end, the Templeton Foundation lists in their guide profiles of exemplary programs, presidents, colleges and universities that inspire character development in students. In theory and practice, these programs focus on the virtues of honesty, self-control, respect and compassion. The Templeton Foundation offers a disclaimer, however, stating that many of the university profiles highlighted may not meet all the criteria as listed.

For clarification and extension, character development in college has a conceptual parallel in the marketing literature. Aaker (1996), in his book *Building Strong Brands*, introduced the idea that a brand personality is the set of human characteristics associated with a given brand. Building a brand's personality is a long-term, disciplined activity. The activities are essentially the same for Nike CrossTrainers and Northwestern University. Kotler and Fox (1985) stated that if an institution of higher education were to be responsive, it must have a strong interest in how its publics view the school, programs and services. Chevron (1998) postulated that a brand exists only through the values it reflects. Aaker and Joachimsthaler (2000) introduced a Brand Personality Scale that assessed five areas: sincerity, excitement, competence, sophistication, and ruggedness. All areas, as defined by Aaker and Joachimsthaler, could easily fit a character development model. More pertinent to higher education is The Josephson Institute of Ethics which proposes six pillars of character that are enduring and indispensable to ethical leadership (Jones and Lucas 1994). These pillars include trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship.

The concept of character development in higher education enjoys considerable professional support. In 1996, Boyer stated that each school should affirm its commitment to character by seeking to define virtues. The National Council for Social Studies (1997) called for educators to renew their efforts to teach character. Gough (1998) discussed the need to concentrate on fostering and ingraining moral habits that give one the ability to handle issues of character. Dahlin and Abbott (1999) strongly urged colleges to include institutional requirements that embody the bold vision of character development.

PURPOSE

Despite this emphasis on character development, there is a paucity of research on the marketing of character for institutions of higher education. In addition, there are few tangible signs of college character, given its intrinsic definition. Therefore, if college officials were interested in redefining their college's brand image to include character and differentiate it from other institutions, they should know what constitutes character from the consumer perspective. Topor (1986) and Wilbur (1988) addressed the complexities and challenges in repositioning the college image or brand identity. Yet, up to this time, no researcher has scrutinized the consumer perception of college character, identified salient factors inherent in college character, or offered marketing strategies for developing a college's brand character.

This exploratory research helps fill this void by addressing two qualitative research questions: 1) Can perceived components of college character be assessed by parents using popular university guidebooks?; and 2) Can a hierarchical factor structure be determined by clustering perceived components of college character in a rank-order? Given the nature and dynamics of consumer behavior in higher education, the overall purpose of this exploratory research is to determine the perceptual components of college brand character.

METHOD

Participants were drawn from a sample of three hundred and six ($N = 306$) parents attending an independent "Career and College Exploration Night" conference in Ohio. The purpose of the conference was to help parents and prospective students select a college or university. Parents heard a brief lecture on character efforts in higher education. Following the formal character introduction, the parents had an opportunity to read popular university guidebooks, pick up handouts, and secure a limited number of college catalogues. Before resuming the official program schedule, there was a

request for parents to fill out an open-ended questionnaire that assessed their perceptions of college and university character.

The questionnaire included fifteen lines for listing in rank-order the perceived attributes of college character. Each parent read a paraphrased character definition printed as a survey header. Character as a definition came from the John Templeton Foundation (1999) in their college resource for parents, students and educators. The Templeton Guide stated that character has come to mean the constellation of strengths and weaknesses that form and reveal who we are. Parents then selected and rank-ordered fifteen pieces of information that they perceived to reflect college character. There were in excess of two hundred pieces of information contained within the guidebooks that could have been chosen. As instructed, parents used only the information obtained from available conference resources: Barron's Profiles of American Colleges 1999; Peterson's 4 Year Colleges 2000; U.S. News and World Report: Best Colleges 1999; America's Best Christian

Colleges 1999; and The Templeton Guide On Colleges That Encourage Character Development 1999. When rank-ordered, the type of information perceived to determine college character was listed from the most important to the least important. A comment section was included to foster participant dialogue and clarification. Securing parental comments was intended to assist data interpretation.

RESULTS

Two hundred and twenty-one ($N = 221$) participants completed the questionnaire. When data were sorted, it was discovered that one hundred and twenty-six ($n = 126$) participants had eight common responses listed in the top fifteen. This addressed the first research question that asked if perceived components of college character could be assessed by parents using popular university guidebooks. The top eight responses, listed alphabetically in Table 1, identify college character with respect to parental perception.

TABLE 1
Top Eight Parental Responses Identifying College Character

RESPONSE	BRIEF DEFINITION
ACT	Composite entrance score of Freshman class
AFFILIATION	Public, private, or religious ties
FIRST YEAR	Universities with established "First Year Experience" programs
FOUNDED	Year institution founded
GRAD. RATE	Institution's graduation rate
LEADERSHIP	Institutions with programs to build leaders
PH.D.'S	Percentage of Ph.D.'s at the institution
SENIOR YEAR	Institutions that have programs, which connect meaning to undergraduate experiences

Note. Top eight responses, listed alphabetically.

The second research question explored if a hierarchical factor structure could be determined by clustering perceived components of college character in a rank-order. Table 2 highlights the top eight parental responses identifying college character listed in rank-order. For clarification, AFFILIATION could have received a higher ranking of two (2) from one participant and a lower ranking of six (6) from another participant. Hence, AFFILIATION would have a relative rank-order score of four (4) when averaged. Additional information in Table 2 highlights the range, listed as minimum-maximum and the standard deviation found for each assigned rank.

Table 3 is the hierarchical factor structure of parental responses that identify college character. This table illustrates two distinctive hierarchical factors: (1) Factor 1, composed of four items with average rankings ranging from 2.6 to 4.7; and (2) Factor 2, composed of four items with average rankings ranging from 6.0 to 8.6.

An equally divided hierarchical factor structure makes conceptual sense, given that eight items were found. Moreover, the largest difference between average rank scores occurs at the mid-point between "ACT" and "PH.D.'S."

TABLE 2
Top Eight Parental Responses Listed In Rank-Order

Item	N	Minimum	Maximum	Average	Std. Deviation
AFFILIATION	126	1.00	11.00	2.6667	2.3082
GRAD. RATE	126	2.00	9.00	3.6587	1.4487
FOUNDED	126	1.00	15.00	3.9286	2.7573
ACT	126	1.00	15.00	4.7381	2.6538
PH.D.'S	126	3.00	15.00	6.0317	2.2906
FIRST YEAR	126	3.00	15.00	6.2222	2.0234
LEADERSHIP	126	4.00	15.00	7.3889	2.0784
SENIOR YEAR	126	5.00	15.00	8.6508	2.1329

Note. Minimum - Maximum range reflects actual assigned rank. Therefore, not all variables have equal range, given the participants' ability to choose from over two hundred character items.

TABLE 3
Hierarchical Factor Structure Of Parental Responses

Item	Factor Label
AFFILIATION	EDUCATIONAL EFFICACY (ee)
GRAD. RATE	
FOUNDED	
ACT	
PH.D.'S	INSTITUTIONAL INTEGRITY (ii)
FIRST YEAR	
LEADERSHIP	
SENIOR YEAR	

Note. Factor structure derived from equal division of rank ordering.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This research addressed two questions of concern to university officials interested in assessing and marketing college character. The research findings elicit practical marketing implications. The first question examined if perceived components of college character could be assessed by parents using popular university guidebooks. Table 1 lists eight common items or themes. These findings support Aaker's (1996) assertion that like humans, a brand has a known set of recognizable characteristics. However, the findings do not lend support to the importance of financial aid or cost, in terms of perceived college character. This was the essence of reputation as determined by Vaughn, Pitlik and Hansotia (1978), Maguire and Lay (1981), Murphy (1981), and the Carnegie Foundation (1986). Perceived college character, as determined in this study, is comprised of

eight items: university affiliation, graduation rate, year founded, composite ACT score, percentage of Ph.D. faculty, "First Year Experience" programs, leadership programs and "Senior Year" experiences. It should be noted that an institution's affiliation (public or private) is intuitively related to assessing college character, for it occupied the first perceptual rank. However, there could be a strong religious component in this item, given the nature of many private institutions like Xavier University or University of Notre Dame.

In the comment section of the questionnaire, many participants equated a private institution with religious affiliation and quality. This finding lends credence to Knapp's (2000) claim that an academic reputation is a mindset. Moreover, the graduation rate of a university probably has pragmatic implications, but given the nature of the comments, the level of assumed

administrative or faculty support was paramount. In addition, the year founded as articulated by participants was an indication of institutional history with a subtle indication of tradition or quality. When participants discussed the standardized entrance test score (ACT) in their written comments, they referred to a type of student population with associated preconceived beliefs and expected academic challenges. Specific comments pertinent to the percentage of faculty with an earned Ph.D. suggested that participants evaluated this item as an expected quality of instruction and competency. For clarification, many parents commented that their goal was not to have their child—student taught by Master Level instructors (e.g., adjuncts, graduate assistants, or teaching assistants). Conversely, comments concerning “First Year Experience” programs and “Senior Year” experiences indicated the expected level of individual and professional attention given to students. Finally, the concept of university leadership opportunities is best viewed as “all or none.” For example, parental comments appeared to view leadership opportunities, or the lack there of, as an essential feature in character development. There was no extensive dialogue or specific examples, however.

The second research question examined whether an underlying rank-order factor structure existed when assessing college character. A two-factor solution was derived. These two factors appear to underlie parental perceptions of character in higher education. Factor One items include: University Affiliation, Graduation Rate, Year Founded and Composite ACT score of the Freshman class. Conceptually, Factor One became an indication of Educational Efficacy (ee). Factor ee considers student aptitude and the university’s historical capacity to actualize this aptitude in terms of graduation rates. Factor Two items include: Percentage of Ph.D. Faculty, “First Year Experience” Programs, Leadership Programs and “Senior Year” experiences. Conceptually, Factor Two became an indication of Institutional Integrity (ii). Factor ii demonstrates the perceived integrity of a university system. In essence, Factor ii reflects the university’s balanced efforts to acclimate the Freshman class while preparing graduating seniors to assume a leadership role, all under the auspices of highly qualified professionals. This factor may be a proxy for institutional quality.

In summary, two factors – Educational Efficacy and Institutional Integrity – were found to indicate character within a university system for the parents of graduating high school seniors. These findings were not conceptually different from Conard and Conard (2000) when they examined the role that a college’s reputation

plays in relationship to consumer perception. Although the authors posed different factor labels and items, the concepts of character and reputation are similar. Conard and Conard listed three factors, labeled as academic concerns, campus ethos and practical values. In any event, findings in this study support Keller’s (2000) sentiment that managers must be cognizant of the existence of underlying factors in brand identity beyond the obvious one or two items.

Finally, this study would be remiss if it did not point out some theoretically interesting omissions. First, the John Templeton Foundation expounded on the virtues of honesty, self-control, respect and compassion in relationship to character development. However, the responses listed in Table 1 hardly reflect Templeton’s overtly stated character traits. Parents perceived eight items — the composite ACT score of the Freshman class; public, private, or religious affiliation; universities with established “First Year Experience” programs; institution’s year of founding; university graduation rate; programs offering leadership opportunities; percentage of Ph.D. faculty; and “Senior Year” Experiences, which connect meaning to undergraduate experiences — as reflecting college character. Moreover, the Josephson Institute of Ethics and their six pillars of character — trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship — are not easily discerned from the research findings. The implication is that parental assessment of college character may differ qualitatively from what authorities expect individual students to learn. Perhaps the general public assumes these Templeton and Josephson characteristics to inhere in all colleges or universities. This finding would be similar to Aaker’s 1996 assertion that human characteristics are implicitly associated with any given brand. However, an alternative explanation could be that parents are more concerned with professional training than character development. Therefore, aggressively marketing academic integrity, volunteer service, substance abuse or sexuality programs may be counterproductive if items of Educational Efficacy or Institutional Integrity are omitted.

CONCLUSION

This study extended the Topor (1986) and Wilbur (1988) discussions on the complexities of reformulating a college image or brand identity in terms of marketing character. The overall goal was to develop a conceptual framework of consumer behavior when examining perceived character in institutions of higher education. The research design employed descriptive summaries, rank-orders, and derived hierarchical factor structures to investigate brand identity and character. This

study held brand identity as unique, given the brand image. For clarification, a university's image may or may not reflect the university's identity. Hence, this exploratory study examined if the perception of university character had recognizable features, and if those features, when packaged, impact consumer perception.

Findings suggested eight features of character as perceived by parents when examining popular college guidebooks. The features inherent within college character assessment were: affiliation, the university's public, private or religious ties; college graduation rates, as noted according to four to-five year matriculation; founding, the university's year of inception; entrance ACT, the composite score of the Freshman class; Ph.D., the university's percentage of doctorate level instructors; first year experience, established first year programs within the university; leadership, established programs to build leaders within the university; and senior year programs, established programs connecting meaning to undergraduate experiences. When factors were hierarchically derived, two rank-ordered vectors emerged

— Educational Efficacy (ee) and Institutional Integrity (ii).

This research extends the body of professional literature addressing character assessment in colleges and universities. However, acknowledged limitations include a regional sample, participant response restrictions, and qualitative models. Moreover, elements of character had no natural, inherent value. For example, some parents stated that single-sex residence halls, alcohol policies, student activities for fraternities and gay-rights or conservative clubs reflected college character. However, these items were not deemed as indicative of positive or negative character attributes. The purpose of this exploratory research was to underscore the dynamics of perceived character and not arbitrarily evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of each item. As such, further research would be needed to both confirm these initial findings and establish working definitions. Moreover, since this qualitative research focused solely on parents and their perception of college character, it appears warranted to include student perceptions in future quantitative studies of college character.

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