

UNIVERSITY REPOSITIONING: A REVIEW OF FOUR CASES



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Editor's note: The following article presents the theoretical basis for and findings of a 1990 study. Readers interested in a full treatment of the data on which the author bases her conclusions are referred to the notes at end of the article.

In the early 1980s, there was a great deal of concern among higher education administrators over changing demographics and predicted enrollment declines. This period marked a change in both higher education and the admission profession as educational institutions realized that for a variety of reasons, they could not simply open their doors and expect floods of students. Instead, they would need to compete for students as well as other scarce resources. The remarkable extent to which colleges and universities have embraced marketing principles and rhetoric in their efforts to meet change by refining, redefining and expanding their roles in the public arena since that time needs to be explored. I refer to this process as "repositioning" and argue that it is accomplished most significantly on a symbolic level. Yet, as is perhaps all too clear, what happens symbolically is inextricably intertwined with the lived-experience of a university. Thus, as colleges and universities have moved from becoming market conscious to adopting Total Quality Management (TQM) and other audience-related quality assessment models, it is important to understand how this change happened, and how it continues to affect colleges and universities generally, and admission professionals specifically.

This can be done by examining the "front runners" in this particular arena of change, those institutions who were engaged in processes of repositioning (symbolically refining, redefining and expanding their roles in the public arena) just as a number of factors were converging to create a need for change. My 1990 study examined the admission materials and documents of four universities, Trinity University (Texas), Northwestern University, the University of Virginia, and the University of Michigan from 1975-1985 and beyond.¹ The data also included interviews with at least four administrators from each university. After a discussion of the study's findings, I examine how the criteria for excellence presented in *U.S. News & World Report's* "Best Colleges" rankings affects institutional repositioning. It is clear that the study's findings are crucial to our understanding of what lies ahead for administrators as they seek to balance the competing wishes of the university regarding institutional mission, quality and diversity.

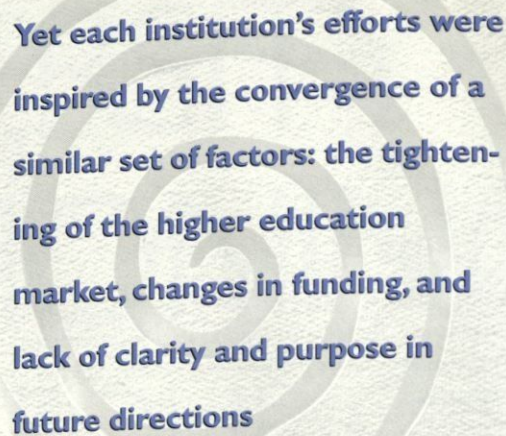
by Victoria J. Gallagher

Transformations

It is important to note that the symbolic maneuvering that characterizes university repositioning is an ongoing, continual process in relation to internal and external dynamics. As is evident in each of the case studies, repositioning is, at times, more explicitly and visibly highlighted as a part of university life and at other times the process recedes into the background of everyday procedures. The institutions "began" the process (in other words, began to feature it explicitly) at slightly different times: first, the University of Virginia with the admission of women in 1970 and ensuing changes in campus procedures and increases in student body size; second, Northwestern with its early incorporation of a "modern marketing" approach in 1974 to change student body composition; third, Michigan which simultaneously contracted and increased selectivity in the late 1970s and early 1980s; and finally Trinity with the drastic changes in quality and decreases in numbers of its student body during the early 1980s. Yet each institution's efforts were inspired by the convergence of a similar set of factors: the tightening of the higher education market, changes in funding, both federal and state, and lack of clarity and purpose in future directions, both institutional and social.

There are three key terms that are central to the way each of these institutions conceptualized and talked about change: mission, quality and diversity. The specific approach of each institution, however, varied. For instance, at Trinity, change was a matter of degree, a move towards specialization, a change in the *type* of institution Trinity would be. Specifically, a private, selective, liberal arts college, the "Amherst of the Southwest" according to a 1985 *Time* magazine article. A change in identity meant concrete changes as well: increases in the number and reputation of the faculty, increases in the average SAT score for accepted students, change in the geographical background of the applicant pool and student body, change in size through the elimination of most graduate programs, and change in the image the university presented to its publics.

The strategies of altering the internal composition of programs, changing the goals of recruitment, and creating the image of a solidified, mature institution might get more students, but there was little certainty about the results of those changes, particularly on the quality of life. Students (and parents and donors) were being asked to identify with a specific type — even though Trinity was a somewhat diluted representation of that type due to its history as a local school with a good number of transfer students, commuter students and part-time graduate students. In an interview with the author, then President of Trinity, Ron Calgaard described the 'old'



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Trinity as "... a kind of country club for relatively affluent, reasonably bright kids, not terribly demanding academically, but all right; a Texas institution." Thus quality of life cut both positively and negatively for Trinity. It established the university's place among "types" of institutions thereby providing a clear cut mission based on qualitative elements. But this change in image was being measured largely through quantitative means: test scores, numbers, financial resources. The qualitative and quantitative elements were not yet effectively joined and incorporated into the university's identity.

While at Trinity, change involved a move from a university without much focus to a focused, liberal arts institution, change at Virginia involved making choices that would enable the institution to better fulfill its role as a flagship state university. Virginia already, in one sense, fulfilled the type: it was founded by Thomas Jefferson to be just such a flagship institution and continues to be envied for its strong "organizational culture." The dilemma was that the composition of the "type" has changed. A flagship state university today is defined by its ability to train the best and brightest minds of the state, to accommodate and/or reflect the diverse population of the state, to produce the most research which will be the most helpful to the state in terms of its ability to attract business, industry, and medical technology, and to have a national reputation. In the Commonwealth of Virginia, one might add to this list the preservation of the state's proud historical legacy. While Virginia has trained its elites well and sustained commerce, it was not clear that Virginia had met the goal of educating *all* of its talented citizens. Thus, Virginia's challenge was to become more diverse; diverse in programs, in students, in outlook. The key question confronting Virginia was and continues to be: How can change, particularly in terms of diversity, be incorporated into a strong historical legacy? Since diversity has emerged as a transcendent term that brings together contradictory elements, becoming more diverse may simply be translated into becoming bigger (one of the strategies Virginia has chosen to adopt), with the issues seemingly resolved but, in actuality, far from it. If any institution's symbolic transformation does not succeed in at least bringing about a mutation of the issues, the informing controversies will continue to re-emerge until outside surrogate forces confront them and impose "resolutions" upon the institution. Examples of this kind of imposition in the past include affirmative action and open access legislation.

Both Trinity and Virginia were working to balance a strong emphasis on enduring, specific mission and identity with requirements for change. At Northwestern, the balancing act is almost entirely reversed. The image of the university and the place, as identified by Lake Michigan, the city of Chicago and the campus buildings, provide some sense of permanence but this permanence is *redefined as change*. To put it simply, what is permanent at Northwestern is a history of change called progress. The message was mobility: moving up in terms of social class, moving forward in terms of intellectual opportunities, and moving ahead in terms of job potential (and now, perhaps, moving forward in competitiveness, particularly athletic). Quality was defined by measures presented in charts, graphs and tables. The desired image and reputation were achieved through a change in institutional mind set and in the "culture," referring, essentially, to the demographics of the university. Concrete changes in the program and the physical plant preceded this while changes in the programs and faculty, for the most part, following on the heels of change in image and culture. The focus was on opportunity and the student's involvement in shaping his or her own experience. The concern: how to improve the quality of opportunities, an attempt to match the university with its students' growth potential beyond the initial admission "match." As William Ihlanfeldt, Northwestern's then Vice President for Institutional Relations made clear in a 1988 interview, adaptation in the guise of a permanent arc of change grounded these efforts: "So you've got to create a lot of different carrots for the 18-year-old as to why they should enroll and I think in this instance maybe the end result justifies the means whatever those means may be. . . . The vast majority of people go to college because they want to pursue an activity and at the same time as a bi-product they get a better job four years later. Now that's fine and if that's the 'drug' fine, and then when you get them, you have to do something with them and that's the opportunity."

Permanence redefined as a tradition of progress gives the impression of balance; the impression of a permanent identity and mission balanced against continual adaptation. What is lost is a sense of community which can accomplish the change rather than constant adaptation. If community at Northwestern is an impression, established by identification with individual rankings, and diverse programs, then the institution becomes reflective and reactive. Risk minimization is the roll of incremental change: things cannot *not* be accomplished.

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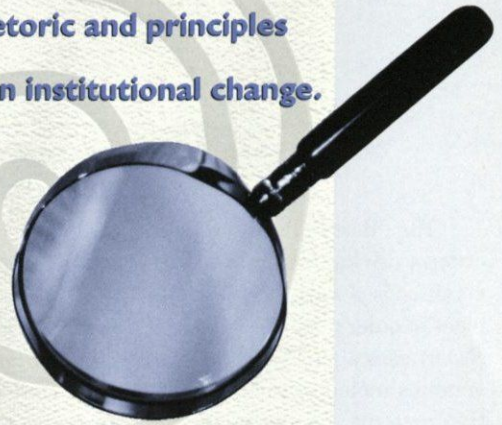
Michigan has also had a tradition of change in the form of academic and collegiate innovations: it was the first institution to use the seminar method of teaching, the first state institution to have a speech department (1884), the first institution to offer instruction in journalism (1890), the first institution to entirely own and operate a hospital (1869), and the list goes on. Michigan's institutional stability and enduring identity are assured by its ability to encompass great varieties of ideas, disciplines, groups and activities. The term "community" acknowledges this tradition and at the same time provides a clear sense of the changes at Michigan. In its attempts to move from being "the mother of state universities," as it was dubbed by Richard Moll in 1985, to being an international university, Michigan embraced community as a way to rid itself of a legacy of progress based primarily on growth and expansion. Instead, Michigan was seeking a stronger identity for the whole and less emphasis on the individual parts. To accomplish this, the university began to emphasize a legacy of undergraduate life. The school fight song, the school colors, the old campus buildings, all are strong symbols calling forth identity in memory. In evoking such memories, the university was trying to draw itself in, to re-establish and make firm the connections between all of its disparate parts.

The connection between community and diversity referred to above allows Michigan to portray itself as a community that embraces not only a wide variety of colleges, departments, and faculty, but also students who are ethnically, racially, and economically diverse. In this case, however, there is a gap between image and reality. In its long history, Michigan has not accomplished such diversity, at least to the extent of truly making the university a microcosm of the surrounding society. Despite an institutional commitment in the 1970s to achieve a 10% black enrollment, black student population has been consistently below that, making up only 6.4% of total enrollment in 1990, according to Virginia Nordbe, the Associate Vice President for Government Relations in a 1990 interview. Could a stronger sense of community accomplish diversity or would it simply reinforce implicit notions of what the university is about and who can thrive therein? Michigan was weighting the balance towards emphasizing its sense of self as providing private rather than public quality of education, emphasizing its history of innovations and its top rankings and downplaying, at least outside of the state, its state university image. Marketing, for Michigan, provided a way to reinforce this delicate balance: plan strategically and target different markets differently.

Marketing Repositioning and Other Critical Methods

In each of the case studies, marketing rhetoric and principles played a role in institutional change. Marketing provided a systematic mode of analysis by which to evaluate the organization's status and suggest potential avenues for future choices and development. In contrast to mechanistic, bottom line judgment of institutional functions, marketing acknowledges the importance of *how* things are done as well as what is done, thereby emphasizing the necessity of a communication strategy. The so-called four P's — product, pricing, place and promotion — make up one of the systems of criteria by which marketing is articulated. To evaluate the success of marketing efforts, then, criteria or objectives are established which fit the form of what an organization is to be about: producing and selling in accord with consumer demand. These criteria are then applied to organizations to determine the extent to which this underlying form is met and how it can be better met in the future.

For example, in a simplistic evaluation of the four case studies via marketing criteria, Northwestern might be said to be the most successful because of its advances in the areas of 1) product development: there are a great number of programs and options to choose from including specific programs designed to appeal to certain segments of the market such as the Honors Pre-medical Program, the Study Abroad Program and so on; 2) promotion: Northwestern was among the first universities to incorporate student profiles in view books and to hold out-of-state receptions, also the institution's visibility and the level of demand generated has increased as evident by soaring numbers of applications; 3) pricing: the university was priced to reflect its intended reality, that of a highly selective, private university (this aspect of the marketing formula is somewhat ironic when applied to universities given the recent scrutiny universities have come under for pricing strategies); and 4) place: Northwestern is identified with Chicago, with Lake Michigan, with the Midwest, this last being both a virtue and liability because Northwestern is not an Eastern school. In fact, based on marketing criteria, each of the institutions discussed here are somewhat successful because they responded well to consumer demand and capitalized successfully on the symbolic aspects of physical setting. These universities also developed product lines to further enable them to target markets, although there were varying degrees of success, particularly in targeting and recruiting African-American students. What was and is clear is that marketing criteria demand portrayal of university life and goals as having an underlying form for which educational institutions should be striving.



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The "Best Colleges" reports provide a clear example of formal criteria driving institutional definition. Ranking colleges and universities is a way of setting up standards that all institutions must meet in order to be "excellent." For example, *U. S. News and World Report* uses a number of different criteria to rank colleges and universities including academic reputation, student selectivity, retention patterns, faculty quality, and financial resources. Particular institutions are then shown to differ on their scores for each criteria. The institution achieving the best rating, in the most categories, is ranked number one. The epitome of excellence is chosen by aggregating and averaging scores and is presented as the model or form which others are to imitate if they too would be excellent. Criteria determining "excellence" are based on a system which recognizes and rewards prestige, research, and financial resources; a set of standards that is mutually dependent by virtue of the fact that each reinforces the others. Even categories such as "Best Buys" and "Up-and-Comers" are evaluated based upon amount of prestige, selectivity, and financial resources. Absent from these criteria are the most unique or advanced teaching/learning methods, the best teaching, the highest number of minority students, the best community outreach programs, the best senior projects/papers, and so on.

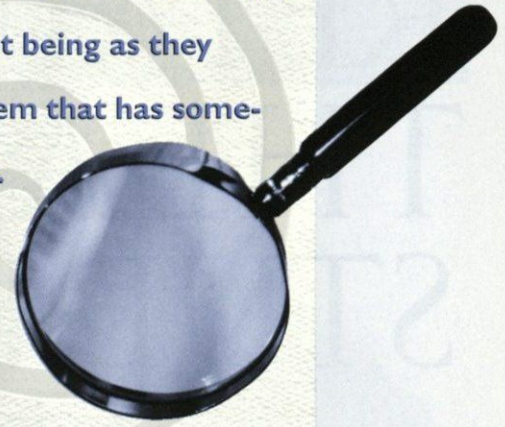
This standardization of excellence creates a homogenized vision and reduces the space for change. In particular, if higher education has indeed been in crisis, then why is even greater emphasis being placed on prestige, research, and financial resources? Perhaps the use of these kinds of standards to assess the excellence of higher education precipitated the crisis in the first place. As literary critic Kenneth Burke (1954) once suggested, the measure of uncertainty involved in a decision is mediated by the way in which the decision is made. Decisions may be made simply by applying ways of thinking "with which the deliberator is already quite at home" (xvii). The formal categories of marketing provide a style of thinking which is much "at home" in the minds of organizational leaders. Its theory and principles provide a widely accepted means for controlling organizational innovation and change. The transference to academic organizations reduces uncertainty and seems, to a certain extent, natural because of the fit with widely accepted measures of excellence.

Even as categorical ranking schemes are embraced by institutions, they are also regarded with some resentment and disdain. Virginia's administrators criticized national rankings of being less than rigorous and of playing too great a role in the public's perception of a college or university. Michigan administrators sought to overcome marketing rhetoric by adopting the notion of community even as they embraced target marketing principles. Administrators from each school readily admitted that rankings were more palatable if one's school was highly ranked and discredited with greater vigor if ranked low, but they also agreed that current ranking systems were reductive. This ambivalence in and around higher education regarding marketing and ranking systems presents a dilemma: the controversies that characterize higher education and that must be worked out in each institution are subverted by the criteria which fail to strike a balance between conflicting visions. As a result, there is a sense of things lost, of things not being as they should, of a system that has somehow gone astray.

While marketing represents one avenue of decision-making, the cultural approach in organizational behavior studies and interpretive approaches to organizational communication provide another.² These perspectives reflect an attempt to think in ways to which the deliberator is *not* accustomed by using metaphors to view the organization more creatively and holistically. However, they, too, may fall short by simply moving the focus of evaluation from a kind of imminent form held up to determine where an organization has failed, to a transcendent form which provides a glimpse of the whole albeit in light of often unexamined boundaries. In other words, while culture and identification may illuminate the nature of organizations, they too can cause problems by deflecting attention from the ways in which organizations are not like cultures and not like the process of identification.

What does all of this mean for higher education? Categorical standards and assessments restrict the range of what publics may consider excellent in higher education and, in so doing, force choices as to which of the competing wishes encompassed within colleges and universities will be recognized and fulfilled. In terms of the case studies and the rankings in *U. S. News and World Report*, these choices include the following: 1) research is being chosen over liberal education with liberal arts curriculums emphasized only to the extent that they support research, both "pure" and explicitly business-related, through the pursuit of "new knowledge"; 2) prestige and selectivity are being chosen over accessibility; 3) utility is emphasized but utility in the service of research and the needs of the

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job market; 4) diversity is being endorsed within the limits of selectivity; and 5) a secular rather than spiritual orientation predominates as is evident in the inability of institutions to articulate a clear sense of mission apart from "measures of excellence." The overall point is that analytic categories disembodiment the university without accounting for or getting at its symbolic richness or poverty. To correct this, administrators and admission professionals must be sensitive to the tension between where the university came from and where it wishes to go as the institution adjusts to changing public perceptions and expectations of higher education. ▲

NOTES

1. The study referred to is *Repositioning the University: Organizational Symbolism and the Rhetoric of Permanence and Change*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, Northwestern University, 1990.
2. The data referred to includes admissions view books and reports from the years 1975 & 1985 for all four schools, as well as other years as available up through 1990. The following interviews were also conducted:
 - William Ihlanfeldt, Vice President for Institutional Relations Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, 20 July 1988
 - Carol Lunkenheimer, Director of Admissions, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, 25 July 1988
 - Dr. Ron Calgaard, President, Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas, 8 September 1988
 - Sara Krause, Acting Director of Admissions, Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas, 8 September 1988
 - Mark Raney, Vice-President for Institutional Relations, Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas, 8 September 1988
 - Amy Batiste, Assistant Director of Admissions, Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas, 8 September 1988
 - Larry Grove and Karen Schoenberg, Associate Directors of Admission, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia, 11 January 1990
 - Louise Dudley, Bill Sublette and Chip German, Public Relations staff members, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia, 11 January 1990
 - Annette Gibbs, Center for Higher Education, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia, 11 January 1990
 - Robert Canevari, Dean of Students, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia, 12 January 1990
 - Gerlinda Melchiori, Deputy Director of Administrative Services, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1 February 1990
 - Don Swain, Associate Director of Admissions, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1 February 1990
 - Virginia Nordbe, Associate Vice President for Government Relations, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan 1 February 1990
 - Robert Holmes, Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 2 February 1990
 - Rick Shaw, Director of Admissions, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 2 February 1990

3. For an overview of the organizational culture perspective as well as other interpretive approaches to organizational communication and organizational behavior, see Linda L. Putnam and Michael E. Pacanowsky, eds., *Communication and Organizations: An Interpretive Approach*, (Newbury Park CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 1987, and Gareth Morgan, *Images of Organization*, (Newbury Park CA: Sage Publications, Inc., 1986). For an overview of identification in organizational discourse, see George Cheney, "The Rhetoric of Identification and the Study of Organizational Communication," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 69(1983).

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