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## “Part of the University Lexicon”: Marketing and Ontario Universities, 1990-2013

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# **“Part of the University Lexicon”: Marketing and Ontario Universities, 1990-2013**

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**ABSTRACT** *The authors examine the emergence and consolidation of marketing practices at five Ontario universities, beginning in the early 1990s, with a focus on student recruitment and the articulation and promotion of institutional identity. The five schools represent a cross-section of the university landscape in Ontario. Interviews were conducted with personnel performing communications and marketing-related functions. Institutional records, when available, were consulted, as were internal publications, trade publications, and print media accounts. The authors situate their treatment of this topic within the field of Critical Management Studies (Alvesson & Willmott, 2003) and related works dealing specifically with marketing. Most notably, they draw on Skålén, Fellesson, and Fougère (2008), who marshal critical theory and Foucault’s works on discourse and knowledge/power to demonstrate how marketing functions as a form of disciplinary power.*

**KEYWORDS** *Cultural analysis; Textual analysis; Historical analysis*

**RÉSUMÉ** *Les auteurs examinent l’émergence et la consolidation du marketing à partir du début des années 1990 dans cinq universités ontariennes, avec pour objectifs les processus de recrutement d’étudiants et l’articulation et la promotion de l’identité institutionnelle. Les cinq institutions représentent un éventail d’approches contrastantes en Ontario. Pour cet article, les auteurs ont mené des entrevues avec les responsables de la communication et du marketing œuvrant au sein de ces universités. En outre, ils ont consulté des documents institutionnels quand ceux-ci étaient disponibles, ainsi que des publications internes et commerciales et des comptes rendus provenant de la presse écrite. Les auteurs explorent ce sujet en ayant recours aux études critiques en management et à des écrits en marketing pertinents. Plus particulièrement, les auteurs s’appuient sur Skålén, Fellesson et Fougère pour leur théorie critique et sur Foucault pour ses écrits sur le discours et le pouvoir-savoir afin de démontrer comment le marketing fonctionne en tant que pouvoir disciplinaire.*

**MOTS CLÉS** *Analyse culturelle; Analyse textuelle; Analyse historique*

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## Introduction

In January 2012, the University of Western Ontario announced it would “rebrand” itself, adopting a new name, “Western University,” for use in “communication, marketing, and [for] web purposes” (Winders, 2012). Unveiled, too, were a new logo, type font, and official colour, a “deeper and richer” shade of the university’s trademark purple. A new Internet domain name ([westernu.ca](http://westernu.ca)) would replace the current one ([uwo.ca](http://uwo.ca)). Founded in 1877, the university has a small-c conservative reputation, buttressed aesthetically by ivy-draped buildings and manicured greenery. It counts many thousands of active alumni for whom “Homecoming Weekend” and class reunions are popular celebrations. To these alumni, “Purple and Proud” represents nostalgic embrace of alma mater coupled with coming-of-age intellectual awakening fixed in time and place. Why tamper with such fond associations, generations in the making, with such a wholesale change? The name change, part of a new “articulation of our brand,” Western vice-president (external) Kevin Goldthorp argued, would “structurally fix” the array of iconography and nomenclature found in faculties across campus: “a unified brand will ensure when Professor X in Engineering achieves success, that spill-over will go to Professor Y in Music because the reputation, the renowned, isn’t isolated by discipline” (Winders, 2012). A Toronto firm, Hahn Smith Design, managed the \$200,000 contract for the project, which involved surveys of alumni, students, faculty, and staff. In the end, president Amit Chakma promised, the re-branded university would provide a “formula for coming together” (Winders, 2012). Left unsaid was why such a program espousing campus-wide uniformity and consistency should trump heterogeneous offerings in this dual age of the “multiversity” and niche marketing. Or, for that matter, why one faculty, the Richard Ivey School of Business, would, ironically, be exempt from adopting the new logo and branding meant to “unify” the campus.

Two decades ago, such a marketing initiative at a university could have been read as satire. A headline like “Western rolls out new branding” invokes far less curiosity or indignation today than it would have a generation ago. Since then, practices and logic from the marketplace have made steady inroads within Canadian universities, as many scholars have noted. Bill Readings’ now classic critique, published in 1994, of universities’ embrace of student-as-consumer orientations and the corporate metrics of “excellence” and “value-for-money” has proven especially influential. York University professor David Noble (2000) raised alarms over the corporatization of Canadian universities, drawing attention to the profit motive behind online courses and distance education, coupled with the dominance of corporate executives on university boards. Their presence encouraged universities to serve the business goals of vocational training, capital accumulation, and commodity production (Noble, 2000). The independence and integrity of the university, along with academic freedom itself, Woodhouse (2009) argued, are threatened by the invasion of market forces. Pocklington and Tupper (2002) highlighted the negative effects of corporate fundraising for universities, beholden increasingly to customer service doctrines, performance indicators, and the business mantras of “vision statements, employee entrepreneurship, and strategic plans” (p. 144). The commercialization of university research, former York University dean George Fallis (2007) wrote, posed “great dangers” to the pursuit

of basic research and the open dissemination of research results funded by private industry (p. 261). Côté and Allahar (2007, 2011) offered stinging critiques of the pernicious effects of consumerism and corporatization on Canadian universities. In the “credential mart” students come not for intellectual enrichment or to acquire critical reasoning skills, but rather for light workloads, high grades, and academic programs geared to the job market. Universities, the new “edubusinesses,” mostly oblige, pressured by sliding government revenues and the concomitant need to admit and process more and more students. This “drift toward corporatization” has lowered academic standards, unleashed grade inflation, and replaced the liberal idea of the university with one defined by “results-oriented mandate[s]” and commercial logic (Côté & Allahar, 2007, pp. 17-18; see also Hanke & Hearn, 2012).

This is not a new story, nor one specific to Canada; Thorstein Veblen decried commercial influences in universities in 1918, and U.S. scholars have written extensively about this in recent years (for recent examples, see Bousquet, 2008; Donoghue, 2008; Menand, 2010; Nussbaum, 2010). Less examined, however, is one particular feature of commercialization—marketing—and its burgeoning role in university operations. In this article, we examine the emergence and consolidation of marketing practices at five Ontario universities, beginning in the early 1990s, with a focus on student recruitment and the articulation and promotion of institutional identity. The five schools represent a cross-section of the university landscape in Ontario, encompassing each of the three categories comprising the *Maclean's* survey and rankings of Canadian universities. Western is a “Medical-Doctoral” institution due to extensive graduate programs, research facilities, and programs in medicine and dentistry. Guelph, Windsor, and York are “Comprehensive” universities, owing to their wide range of undergraduate and graduate degrees, alongside research and professional programs. Lakehead represents a “Primarily Undergraduate” institution, offering mostly undergraduate degrees and a limited number of graduate or professional programs. These universities are also located in four distinct regions in Ontario: Southwest (Windsor, Western); South (Guelph); Greater Toronto Area (York); and North (Lakehead).

Researchers examined institutional records, internal publications, trade publications, and print media accounts. As well, semi-structured interviews (phone and in-person) were conducted with personnel who performed communications and marketing-related work at these universities, with questioning grouped around four main areas:

- marketing activities and the administrative functions of university marketing and communication units, both past and present
- processes of university image-making and identity formation
- university rankings (e.g., *Maclean's* survey)
- the “student as consumer” concept and corresponding marketing practices

These five universities have been highly active in marketing since the late 1990s, having undertaken at least two major marketing campaigns since then. These involved, at a minimum, the design of a new corporate logo to replace the traditional university crest, re-branding campaigns, and positioning strategies, all supported by extensive adver-

tising in print, broadcast, and online media, along with outdoor venues such as billboards, buses, and even ski lifts.

By the early 2000s, marketing discourse and practices figured prominently in campus administration, unlike a generation earlier. We situate our treatment of this topic within the field of Critical Management Studies (Alvesson & Willmott, 2003) and related works dealing specifically with marketing (see Brownlie & Saren, 1997; Marion, 2006; Morgan, 2003; Stern, 1996). Most notably, we draw on Skålén, Felleson, and Fougère (2008), who marshal critical theory and Foucault's works on discourse and knowledge/power to demonstrate how marketing functions as a form of disciplinary power. Their study forms part of a nascent body of works emerging since the mid-2000s that draws on Foucauldian theory to analyze marketing practices, knowledge, and institutions (Fougère & Skålén, 2013; Leitch & Motion, 2007; Tadjewski, 2011; Varman, Saha, & Skålén, 2011).

Marketing employs expert knowledge, techniques, and strategies to create and categorize individual and social identities, types, desires, and behaviours, which in turn can be subjected to more optimal forms of governance (Foucault, 1977, 1978). It creates consumer subjectivities, while serving as a source of "legitimacy not only for the consumption society but also for the managerial society" (Skålén et al., 2008, p. 17), a relevant point for university operations. In this article, we examine how a traditional model of discourse concerning the university—centred on ideas such as academic freedom, sound pedagogy, and research excellence—has, since the 1990s, been challenged and partially supplanted by a discursive mode rooted in marketing practices and principles and consumerist ideology. Following a brief historical account of marketing's emergence on university campuses, we examine how marketing concepts such as branding, segmentation, targeting, and positioning have contributed to the present-day "discursive order" of Ontario universities, imbued by the ethos of marketing management.

### **Historical overview**

For most of the twentieth century, marketing and advertising figured little in student recruitment and institutional promotion at Ontario universities (Carrocci, 2009). Their identities centred on mission statements and the perceived quality and reputation of academic programs. Universities need only, it was thought, provide factual information on courses, program offerings, campus services, and admission requirements to enable students to make informed choices (Hossler, 1999). Faculties and departments produced their own recruitment materials, with centralized roles limited to printing and distribution. In 1973, the Council of Ontario Universities established preliminary guidelines for student recruitment, advising against full-force advertising and comparisons with other schools (Tausig, 1980). This minimalist approach to recruitment is reflected in Malcolm Gladwell's description of his laidback approach to applying to Ontario universities in 1980. After "working off a set of brochures that I'd sent away for," Gladwell and his father drove once to the University of Toronto, where he visited a residential college and dorm. "There wasn't a strict hierarchy" of universities in Ontario at that time, and a "B average in high school pretty much guaranteed you a spot" (Gladwell, 2005, para 3). Most tellingly, Gladwell

wrote, “there wasn’t a sense that anything great was at stake in the choice” (para. 3); what mattered most was the experience made of it while there.

During the 1970s and early 1980s, recruitment-related advertising was rare. In 1976, Western and Guelph ran student recruitment ads in *University Affairs*, a trade magazine for postsecondary employees, suggesting the role of target marketing was limited. That year, Lakehead University aired radio ads promoting itself to prospective students and their parents. Located in Thunder Bay, far from the population centres of southern Ontario, Lakehead registrar Pentti Paularinne underscored in 1980 the imperative of geographic isolation: “We can’t afford to sit back smugly as some older, more established universities do and say we don’t have to advertise. It’s important to inform people of our existence” (Tausig, 1980, p. 3). Guelph also took to the radio airwaves, beginning in 1979, with an ad targeting teens featuring the following jingle:

High school’s behind me / I’m headin’ on out  
 Wanna keep on learnin’ / Gonna find myself  
 Find self a place / Gonna check out Guelph  
 Myself and Guelph (Axelrod, 1982, p. 194)

That year, Guelph also developed promotional posters and ran ads in weekly newspapers and *Teen Generation*, a magazine distributed free to Ontario high school students (Tausig, 1980). At the time, Paul Axelrod (1982) notes, this was viewed as an example of the “more extreme and questionable” (p. 194) recruitment tactics found in Canadian universities. In 1980, *University Affairs* journalist Christine Tausig wrote that “extravagant” (p. 2) marketing was viewed as undignified, even vulgar; university officials thought that students would suffer if recruitment practices went beyond a straight-and-narrow informational approach.

Prior to the 1990s, there is little evidence of coherent, long-term marketing planning and branding strategies at Ontario universities. Advertising, when used, was done on an ad hoc basis, more likely at smaller institutions like Lakehead. Little market research or long-term marketing planning was undertaken (Michael, Holdaway, & Young, 1993). In later interviews, campus communications officers described recruitment materials prior to the mid-1990s as “piecemeal” and haphazard, lacking a comprehensive marketing strategy. Guelph had a “mishmash” of publications developed by various faculties and departments (interview with communications officer, University of Guelph, 2008). York’s promotional material “looked as if it had come from 60 different places” (interview with communications officer, York University, 2008). Many programs or faculties ran their own recruitment campaigns and central administrations ran multiple, sometimes conflicting, promotional efforts at one time. It was fairly common for promotional materials involving alumni affairs and undergraduate recruitment to be administered by separate departments and printed by different companies.

### **The marketing concept**

Prior to the 1950s, marketing played a comparatively minor role in business operations, confined mainly to “post-production” functions involving sales and promotion. Corporate success was thought to turn on manufacturing and managerial innovation and efficiencies or financial acumen. Starting in the 1950s, proponents of what became

the “marketing concept” sought to invert this business formula: firms would profit more by producing goods and services that were known *in advance* to be needed or desired by consumers. Marketing—with tools like market research, segmentation, and targeting—would preface product design and manufacturing methods and not serve merely as a post hoc adjunct of sales. Marketing would drive business innovation and profits, eclipsing the primacy of Taylorism and productionist ideology in the boardroom. By listening to and then championing the consumer inside the corporation, the marketing ethos offered a form of public legitimacy, for both an inclusive marketplace and for big business’s responsiveness to customers’ needs (Levy & Luedicke, 2013; Morgan, 2003; Skålén, et al., 2008). By the late twentieth century, the marketing concept had launched the “customer into the reference point for every function of the firm” (Skålén et al., 2008, p. 157).

Marketing gained traction not only within the corporation but beyond it as well. By the early 1970s, marketing proponents, notably Philip Kotler, were employing terms like “social marketing” and the “generic concept of marketing” to champion its application beyond the marketplace. “Marketing is a relevant subject for all organizations in their relations with all their publics, not only customers,” Kotler (1972, p. 47) trumpeted in marketing’s flagship academic journal (see also Andreasen, 2001). Four years later, also in the *Journal of Marketing*, Shelby Hunt (1976) described the solid “consensus” among marketers that its approaches and procedures were “equally applicable to non-profit concerns” like museums, churches, zoos, and schools (p. 23). In 1975, Kotler published *Marketing for Nonprofit Organizations* and, a decade later, *Strategic Marketing for Educational Institutions*, (Kotler & Fox, 1985) co-written with Karen Fox. The latter proved a popular handbook for incorporating marketing know-how and techniques into the operations of universities, colleges, and other educational institutions. Marketing and postsecondary education, once thought divergent, even inimical, were portrayed as highly compatible (Marginson, 1999). This was especially so, Kotler and Fox (1985) argued, when institutions faced social instability and structural changes, as did the burgeoning postsecondary education sector in the late 1960s and 1970s. In the 1980s, Buell notes, a “marketing explosion” (1986, p. 1) was taking place in many American colleges and universities with respect to alumni relations, fundraising, and student recruitment. The domain and “managerial rationality” of marketing had expanded considerably to include religious, social service, state, and educational sectors. Scholars characterized the 1990s as the “decade of marketing” (Brownlie, Saren, Wensley, & Whittington, 1999, p. 112), citing its many inroads into governmental and non-profit organizations.

In Ontario, the earliest marketing and promotion-related developments centred on the Ontario University Registrars’ Association (OURA). Since the early 1970s, OURA had organized joint university liaison activities, such as the University Information Program, a travelling fair showcasing Ontario universities that visited high schools across the province (Tausig, 1980). OURA held annual conferences to discuss issues and trends in recruitment, admissions, and communications. It organized summer workshops to train liaison officers for the fall recruitment season. In 1995, an OURA review of liaison activities emphasized that the university system was in “need of a



're-think' and consequential refurbishing," involving a "more intensive job of articulating the role of universities and their achievements" (p. 8). In 1997, OURA organized the first Ontario Universities' Fair (OUF) in Toronto, now an annual exhibition held in early fall. The first fair proved modest, featuring mostly brochures, posters, and science fair-type displays, although Wilfrid Laurier impressed participants with a display featuring a movable part that flashed "WLU." Since then, the size and sophistication of the displays "have grown exponentially" (interview with communications officer, University of Guelph, 2008). In 2000, Western displayed a 12-foot-high castle structure with "larger-than-life" photos of students (interview with communications officer, Western University, 2009). By the early 2000s, the displays at OUF were far more elaborate, featuring professional designs, often with technically advanced features. Promotional items such as lanyards, T-shirts, and memory sticks were given away. In 2011, some 112,000 people—high school students, parents, teachers, and counsellors—attended the three-day event (Ontario Universities' Fair, 2012). Recent displays featured flat-screen TVs, iPad sign-in stations, and video slot machines. The Laurentian University exhibit in 2011 had a "5D" miniature campus set up, complete with a beach volleyball court and dorm room. For universities outside the Toronto area, the fair has become a major marketing and recruitment vehicle, enabling universities to make a "personal connection" with prospective students and their parents (interview with communications officer, University of Windsor, 2012).

Noteworthy too were institutional changes promoting professional recognition for marketing in higher education. In 1998, the Canadian Council for the Advancement of Education (CCAEE), a professional development organization, launched its Prix D'Excellence awards. Prizes were offered in such categories as student recruitment initiative, marketing/communications initiative, website design, and print advertising. The Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) is an international organization of professionals advancing educational institutions in areas such as alumni affairs, public relations, and fundraising/development. Since 2000, CASE has awarded Circle of Excellence prizes to institutions in 39 categories, including "Communications and Marketing." An emerging professional culture for marketing and communications in universities had emerged by the late 1990s, lending credibility and legitimacy to marketing-informed practices on campuses.

By the late 1990s, Ontario universities were increasingly coordinating undergraduate recruitment with public relations operations. This was usually done through a central recruitment or public relations department, often in collaboration with a marketing firm. In 1997, Windsor, in collaboration with the Toronto consultancy Spencer Francey Peters (now Cundari SFP), launched a combined recruitment, fundraising, and reputational campaign under the slogan "The Degree that Works." As part of the campaign, it ran ads in the *Windsor Star*, the *Globe and Mail*, and *Maclean's*. Other schools moved to entrench their marketing and promotional operations. In 2003, both Lakehead and York created the positions of Director of Communications and Chief Marketing Officer (CMO), filling these jobs with marketing professionals from outside academe. The CMO for York, Richard Fisher, had previously handled accounts for Nissan, Moosehead, and Taco Bell while a managing partner at the ad agency



TBWA/Toronto. That same year, Western created the position of Associate Director of Creative Services to head marketing initiatives focused on recruitment and reputation management. As universities expanded their internal communications departments, they increasingly sent out requests for proposals to ad agencies and marketing firms to assist with market research, promotional planning, and advertising. Three of the five universities in this study have an advertising agency of record (AOR) to advise on marketing and advertising efforts.<sup>1</sup>

By the early 2000s, Ontario universities were boosting internal and external communications operations, along with spending on recruitment (Steele, 2009). At Windsor, the budget for promotional efforts rose from \$622,000 in 2002–2003 to \$1,200,000 in 2007–2008 (interview with communications officer, University of Windsor, 2008). The base budget for Western's Communication and Public Affairs office more than doubled, from \$913,230 in 2000–2001 to \$2,265,352 in 2010–2011 (Western University, 2012c). By the mid-2000s, university recruiting, Coates and Morrison (2011) write, had become a "growth industry" in Canada, with universities spending "hundreds of thousands of dollars" to woo students and influence high school guidance counsellors (p. 87). Interviews with marketing and communications personnel further revealed that marketing's former "hard sell" stigma was on the wane. A Windsor administrator described in 2008 how most universities had "come around to the point of view that marketing is an important part of what we need to do" (University of Windsor, 2008). Marketing, a former "dirty word," a Guelph communications officer underscored, was now fully "understood" (University of Guelph, 2008). A Lakehead official described how when she first arrived there in the early 2000s, marketing terminology was not common. But now "everyone talks about my 'AOR,' my 'creatives,' and my 'media buys'—it's really great to listen to them talk. It has become part of the university lexicon" (interview with communications officer, Lakehead University, 2008).

## **Branding**

As concept and practice, branding creates and promotes ideas, identities, even "personalities" for products, services, or, for our purposes, postsecondary institutions (Arvidsson, 2005; Strunken & Cartwright, 2009). Extending beyond logo or trademark, branding transpires within a "complex network of social discourses that is animated by multiple brand interest groups talking about and materially expressing their ideas of the brand's intended meaning" (Levy & Luedicke, 2013, p. 61). Branding fashions meanings by strategically shaping and directing the messages and images of a service, product, or institution, typically reflecting its stated values and mission and the experiences of its constituents. Strong brands create trust, affinity, attachment, even a sense of commonality. When done effectively, the identities' of these participants (or customers) take on brand associations, whether as a "Tim's Girl" or a "Western Mustang." In this sense marketing knowledge and related technologies that promote branding "constitute people as 'governable consumers' with characteristics that are stable and knowable" (Morgan, 2003, p. 127). Universities can be quite forthcoming about their branding practices, even describing them on their websites.<sup>2</sup> Symes (1996) describes campus branding as the process of "transmuting a bland institution into a brand

name,” one that “stands out amongst its peers, like an Oxford, a Harvard, with a clearly defined and crystallized educational aura and set of resonating images” (p. 136). Wernick (2006) goes further, describing branding as the “monetization” of academic reputation: in which “every dimension of the institution” is “pressed into the service of cultivating a public image in line with its management’s chosen competitive strategy” (p. 566).

Successful branding does not occur overnight, as a Windsor official underscored: “It takes many years to build a brand, and patience isn’t necessarily the order of the day here” (University of Windsor, 2008). The embrace of branding, in certain instances, starts with fundraising or development campaigns and then extends to other areas of university promotion and internal communication (e.g., website, merchandise, letterhead). In 2000, Western launched a comprehensive re-branding and fundraising campaign, “Campaign Western,” in collaboration with BBDO, a Toronto ad agency. The campaign was designed to address the graphic inconsistency at Western as well as the fact that “external [actors] don’t have a clear understanding of what Western stands for and what its unique strengths [are] as a university” (Anderson, 2000, para. 6). The coat of arms was replaced by the tower logo, alongside the tagline “Leading. Thinking.” Ads featuring this re-branding ran in *Maclean’s*, *Canadian Business*, and other magazines. “Campaign Western” ads ran in elevators, in transit shelters, and on billboards. Elements of the re-branding campaign featured in fundraising initiatives, and then, soon after, in internal communications, student and staff recruitment, and alumni relations. Officials cited follow-up surveys to argue that the re-branding campaign was successful in shifting Western’s reputation as a second-rate party school to that of a leading research-intensive university. (If so, then this success was short-lived, since a key rationale for its subsequent re-branding in 2012, according to vice-president Goldthorp, was that others were “calling us a ‘party school’” [Winders, 2012, para. 21].)

For universities, branding forms part of a centralized communications strategy aiming to position and maintain the institution “in the choice set” (Sevier, 2001, p. 78). University of Guelph president Alastair Summerlee described his university’s re-branding effort in 2007 (new logo and the tagline “Changing Lives. Improving Life”) as a “bold call to action” that encapsulated the university’s mission and strategic objectives (University of Guelph, 2007). Commenting on this campaign, a Guelph communications officer affirmed the primacy of the marketing ethos, noting how it was “time to update the brand and review our purpose (as branding is all about) and find better ways to explain it to ourselves and our stakeholders, and find ways to differentiate Guelph among competitive institutions” (University of Guelph, 2008). In 2004, Lakehead introduced a “Visual Identity Program” to streamline communications materials and messaging and “create its own cachet in the university marketplace” (Abaya, 2008, para. 7; Lakehead University, 2004). Viewbooks—promotional brochures or magazines that showcase the university to prospective students—also reflected branding logic. Symes (1996) describes Australian viewbooks as more a cross between a teenage magazine and a tourist brochure than an informational profiling of the institution. In Canada, a Windsor viewbook cover from 2006 featured a smiling, face-painted sports fan on the cover, while another from Brock University in 2007 had an

image of a skydiving economics student. In 2011 the Lakehead viewbook cover showed students jumping off a dock into a scenic Northern Ontario lake. Viewbooks offer full-page images, profiles of students, and information on student services. They emphasize recreational activities and lifestyle attributes, with information on program and admissions presented most often near the end, almost as an afterthought.

### **Segmentation/targeting/positioning**

Edge Interactive and Academica Group are two Canadian firms that specialize in education marketing. Edge was established in Toronto in 1995 to fill a market void: identifying, targeting, and recruiting potential students for postsecondary institutions, using database marketing and related technologies. It counts some 30 employees. Its proprietary database and software, ezRecruit, is used to “automate, target and track all interactions” with “prospects, applicants, parents, and counsellors” (Edge Interactive, 2012, para. 2). In 2005, Academica Group was formed in London, Ontario, though the firm’s principals had worked in education marketing for the previous decade. Academica provides market research, brand consulting, and strategic marketing planning to colleges and universities, helping institutions attract students, “enhance [their] reputation,” and ensure that their “brand stays vital” (Academica Group, 2012, para. 1).

Within this “one-to-one” marketing mould, Edge promises to “personalize” contacts “between the university and students” (Coates & Morrison, 2011, p. 87). Edge segments markets (prospective students) by age, income, geography, or lifestyle characteristics and then targets them by direct mail, phone, or email. As such it both “structures” and “visualizes” the market of prospective students, knowledge of which in turn produces the “governable” consumer-student (Morgan, 2003, p. 129; Skålén et al., 2008). This is emblematic of what Clarke and Newman (1997) term the “politics of information” involving the business discourse of managerial marketing. Through the use of market research, database analysis, focus groups, and other marketing technologies, firms like Edge and Academica accrue profits and command authority by “virtue of their capacity to speak in the name of the customer” (Clarke & Newman, 1997, pp. 116–117), professing to know what he or she needs or wants. This type of “customer” knowledge, derived mainly from quantitative data, is credited as more reliable and predictive than the qualitative, informal knowledge underpinning professional knowledge of “clients,” “patients,” or “students” (p. 117).

After segmentation and targeting, universities seek to position themselves in the crowded postsecondary marketplace. Mount and Belanger (2004) argue that the impetus to stand out has seen universities turn to image management techniques common in the private sector. Image and reputation “have become highly marketable commodities, assisting as they do to differentiate institutions from one another and enhance the marketability of a given institution’s offerings” (p. 133). As one interviewee at Windsor noted: “Canadian universities can all pretty much claim with validity that they turn out a good product—that their profs care about students, that their researchers are changing the world, that they are going to provide the best student experience” (University of Windsor, 2008). Given this seeming uniformity, differentiation is important for universities seeking to be attractive to prospective students and par-

ents making enrolment decisions. But this differentiation still needs to fall within the normative framework of student-parent expectations for a high-quality educational experience. Thus, as Leitch and Motion (2007) argue, universities must “therefore manage the tension between differentiation and normalisation when establishing a brand identity in each of these discourse contexts and must do so in ways that do not then bring any of these brand identities into conflict with the others” (p. 78). A university should stand apart from the herd, but still be familiar and low-risk.

Universities attempt to identify and occupy a position within the educational market involving a unique set of services or attributes (Litten, 1980). A university can position itself in one of several ways: it can foreground geographic location, size and faculty-to-student ratios, or mission statement and character (e.g., research-intensive). In each instance, the university targets and appeals to specific segments of society. For instance, Lakehead’s remote location is a disadvantage to some; to fashion a competitive advantage, it promotes itself as Green and “Indie,” a gathering point for environmentalists and social activists. The positioning claim is sometimes found in the school’s slogan or mission statement. York’s slogan, “Redefine the Possible,” flows from the concept of interdisciplinarity, as former CMO Richard Fisher (2005) explains:

[T]his interdisciplinary thing is no chimera, but is grounded in the mission outlined by York’s founding president, Murray Ross, in 1960: “No one in his right mind would today oppose the need for a high degree of specialization. But to have specialization and nothing else is to possess but half an education ... we shall try to break down the barriers of specialization, to give to York University students a sense of the unity of knowledge.” (paras. 2–3)

York’s “Interdisciplinary” campaign featured images with a range of “points of view.” For example, a *Globe and Mail* plastic newspaper wrapper reads: “An environmentalist sees deforestation ... a finance major sees circulation numbers ... a Canadian studies student sees a national icon.” Fisher believes that “York is redefining the way that students select and identify with a university.” With help from doug & serge (formerly the doug agency), a Toronto ad firm, York’s public relations and recruitment efforts have taken on a creative edge. Advertisements for their “Interdisciplinary Campaign” ranged from plastic newspaper covers to floor-cling ads in movie theatres. Moreover, audio and video spots were broadcast on radio and television, in elevators, and during movie previews in theatres. Poster ads ran in streetcars, intercity trains, and subways. Online ads were placed on then popular teen sites such as MySpace.ca and on education-related news and information sites such as Macleans.ca. According to Fisher (York University, 2005a), the medium is a large part of the message: “[I]t shows we’re creative, open-minded and in step with the real world” (para. 3).<sup>3</sup>

Mission statements also relate to positioning strategies. Western, which promotes its research orientation and its quality of campus life, has a mission statement that doubles as a slogan: “Western provides the best student experience among Canada’s leading research-intensive universities,” or, as a slogan, often shortened to “best student experience.” Strategic planning reports in 2001 and 2006 underscored the mission statement’s importance in reputation management and student recruitment at Western. Mission statements, however, can also seem trite and generic, as researchers

have shown, since they do not articulate a distinctive ethos or curricular specialty (Finley, Rogers, & Galloway, 2001). Bill Readings sardonically noted this: "University mission statements, like their publicity brochures, share two distinctive features nowadays. On the one hand, they all claim that theirs is a unique educational institution. On the other hand, they all go on to describe this uniqueness in exactly the same way" (Readings, 1994, p. 12). Symes (1996) similarly notes that the focus on mission statements and positioning strategies reflects the extent to which marketing discourse has permeated education, how the "discursive universe of academia is moving away from its humanist and critical ideals" (p. 137). These changes underscore a university that is actively adopting positioning strategies in order to stake claims within the educational marketplace. Positioning strategies, like those used for commercial products, appeal to segments of prospective students, rather than a homogenous group. As such, a stylized, image-centric account of the educational service is generated and promoted to a targeted set of prospective students, rather than an information-laden description of curricular offerings and campus services (Symes, 1996).

In some cases, positioning can pit universities against one another in the contest for students, faculty, and donors. In 2004, York launched a "subway domination campaign," which blanketed the St. George subway station (a major transfer point and a University of Toronto subway stop) with advertisements (York University, 2005b). Two years later, Western placed a billboard ad near McMaster University. Lori Gribbon, Western's Director of Undergraduate Recruitment and Admissions, responded to the resultant minor controversy by saying that this so-called sneak attack was "just the way of the world" (Van Harten, 2006).

In 2006, Lakehead launched its "Yale Shmale" campaign, supported by TV spots, online ads, T-shirt giveaways, and posters throughout the Toronto area. The "Yale Shmale" ads featured a picture of then U.S. president George Bush and the message that attending an Ivy League school did not equate with high intelligence. The campaign, according to the news release, sought to position Lakehead "as a smart choice for both current and prospective students" (Lakehead University, 2007a, para. 2). The ad's unflattering portrayal of Bush sparked controversy among Lakehead students and professors, especially after it became a story on national and international news programs (see "Canadian University in Campaign Row," 2006; Girard, 2006; Mark, 2006; Patrick, 2006; "University Pokes Fun with Yale Shmale Campaign," 2006). The campaign, for obvious reasons, made no direct comparisons between Lakehead and Yale, or other Ivy League universities; rather it sought to position Lakehead as an "Indie" university, the smart choice for youths who "want to make a difference in the world." As universities embark on such a "positional arms race," Richard Wellen (2005) notes, marketing assumes increasing importance in defining and promoting institutional identities (p. 30). While it is possibly effective in garnering attention and "brand awareness," Neil Tudiver (1999) worries that advertising to students as consumers has pitfalls; advertising and marketing campaigns "emphasize convenience, service, lifestyle, and reputation" (p. 160). Although these themes certainly resonate with consumer cultural values, they do not prepare students for a demanding academic experience (Côté & Allahar, 2007).

## Rankings

University ranking systems have reconfigured postsecondary education during the past two decades. *Maclean's* "University Rankings" issue has been published since 1991 and is modelled on the *U.S. News & World Report* survey, first issued in 1983. For the *Maclean's* survey, participating schools are broken down into three categories: "Medical-Doctoral," "Comprehensive," and "Primarily Undergraduate." The report consists of statistical surveys of 24 key indicators of "excellence." The rankings are also based on perceptions and opinions of the institutions from over 5,000 people across Canada (e.g., guidance counsellors, CEOs). *Maclean's* also publishes its yearly "Guide to Canadian Universities" (an informational book on Canadian universities and programs) as well as "Student Surveys" and "Best Professional Schools" issues. Another survey, *The Globe and Mail Report Card*, is published annually, presenting the results from its surveys of current and recent postsecondary students. A final "letter grade" based on the mean scores is assigned to each university.

University rankings, as a classification system, constitute a form of disciplinary power. This taxonomy operates as a technique of hierarchical power (producing "winners" and "losers") and as a producer of knowledge (comparative data in selective, weighted categories). The effect here is both to frame reality while also generating increasing data and knowledge about this reality (Skålén et al., 2008; Townley, 1994). For example, the *Maclean's* survey places large research-intensive universities like York and Waterloo in the "second-tier" Comprehensive category largely because they do not have medical schools. For York and Waterloo, the comparative frame of reference is both circumscribed (no longer comparable to peer institutions like Western or Queen's in the Medical-Doctoral group) and prescriptive (directing resources to improve standing within the Comprehensive group).

Ontario universities, like their American counterparts, are cognizant of ways to boost their rankings. They have launched re-branding campaigns designed in part to bolster the school's reputation among internal and external audiences (guidance counsellors, corporate executives) who may participate in the surveys. In this sense, reputation is not static or linear, but cyclical. In marketing parlance, "school spirit" becomes "brand loyalty," with the goal of increasing "brand awareness" and producing more favourable responses by survey participants. For this reason, branding the university extends beyond student recruitment and alumni relations; it promotes a "brand relationship" with a variety of external stakeholders, many of whom are not alumni. Toronto communications consultant David Scott (2009) describes rankings as a key feature of university marketing efforts. They exert a "distinct impact" on the reputation of universities, which in turn influences "crucial audiences" (p. 3) such as donors, government officials, and alumni.

The proponents of university rankings argue that they provide transparency and accountability. They equip people with information to "pick the best university, the best buy, the institution with the strongest reputation for excellence in teaching and research" (Harris, 2007, p. 3). In their analysis of U.S. ranking systems, however, Chang and Osborn (2005) argue that rankings serve to abstract and quantify the material conditions of higher education, rendering them as exchangeable commodities. This



is especially problematic because rankings quantify that which should be assessed qualitatively (e.g., student engagement, faculty instruction). Less an objective yardstick than a subjective, socially constructed measure, rankings carry the risk of becoming an all-consuming preoccupation for schools, an end in themselves (Calhoun, 2006; Chang & Osborn, 2005). They can also re-define universities as “products” to be evaluated, compared, and consumed by students and parents, as Readings (1994) underscores: “[C]hoosing a particular university over another is presented as not all that much different from weighing the costs and benefits of a Honda Civic against those of a Lincoln Continental” (p. 28). By their very nature, rankings produce “losers” alongside “winners”; not surprisingly, in 2006, 22 universities ended their cooperation with the *Maclean's* survey, citing methodological concerns (Cramer & Page, 2007).<sup>4</sup>

Despite the recent tactical refusal to participate in the *Maclean's* survey, Ontario universities remain enmeshed in this zero-sum game of prestige.<sup>5</sup> High rankings continue to be cited in press releases, alumni newsletters, promotional materials, viewbooks, and websites. The use of rankings in positioning statements is less common, and potentially problematic as Guelph learned in 2007. Four times before that year it had ranked first in the *Maclean's* survey among comprehensive universities, a fact that featured prominently in its recruitment strategy and corresponding materials (University of Guelph, 2006). When the school fell to fourth place in 2007, it suddenly needed a new marketing message. “If you make rankings your positioning statement,” another interviewee underscored, “then you are always going to be a victim of circumstance” (York University, 2008).

### Generation Y

Generation Y youth, those born after 1983, are the primary demographic market for today's universities. This generation is characterized as consumer-oriented, careerist, technologically savvy, and sheltered by overprotective parents (Coomes & DeBard, 2004; Levine & Dean, 2012; Strauss & Howe, 2000). Many are said to see higher education primarily as a stepping stone for a successful work career and consumer lifestyle. Côté and Allahar (2007) argue that these students view university education as a form of exchange, seeking maximum gain for minimal effort. Exemplars of a “feel good, materialistic, consumerist society,” Gen Y students have set their sights high on well-paying, professional careers that for many may be unattainable (Côté & Allahar, 2007, p. 105). They attend university not for intellectual engagement or critical awareness, but owing to high school grade inflation, helicopter parents, and a culture of credentialism. University education is “sold” to Gen Y students as a precondition for white-collar careers or entry to professional schools (Côté & Allahar, 2007; Talburt & Salvio, 2005). For example, in 1997 Windsor ran an ad campaign in national print media with the slogan “The Degree that Works.” Four years later, Western ran ads bellowing “Get A Job,” followed by an explanation of how internships jump-start successful careers.

Universities promote a version of “consumer choice” via new and extended program offerings. One of Western's positioning statements deals with “flexibility in choice of curriculum,” and recruitment materials tout the more than “400 different majors, minors, and specializations” (Western University, 2006). The 1995 *Ontario Liaison Review* proclaimed that as the “quality of liaison improves, the universities benefit



and the students, our customers, are best served” (OURA, 1995, p. 11). “Student consumers” of today expect more than a warm handshake and a friendly smile. They want to know student-to-teacher ratios, entering averages, scholarships, and study-abroad opportunities (Hossler, 1999). Former Ontario premier Bob Rae’s (2004) review of higher education in Ontario held that students increasingly “view themselves as active purchasers of academic services, and are calling for stronger quality assurance standards and ‘valued’ credentials” (see also Rae, 2005). They want to know what a degree will mean for them after graduation. (The website of York’s Faculty of Liberal Arts & Professional Studies highlights its “degrees with flex appeal,” able to “fit almost any schedule” [York University, 2013]).<sup>6</sup> Students, in this vein, become the “consumer sovereigns” of the academy; serving their needs first and foremost, in keeping with the marketing concept, constitutes a “commonsense philosophy.” This remains so, as Naidoo, Shankar, and Veer (2011) argue, even when it is shown that the consumerist turn in higher education results in “passive and instrumental learners” (p. 1156) and eroded academic standards (see also Marion, 2006). Absent here is the view that post-secondary education should cultivate democratic citizenship, what Martha Nussbaum (2010) describes as equipping students to “think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person’s sufferings and achievements” (p. 2). Rather, higher education reflects a customer orientation and a vision of vocational means and neoliberal ends, all of which is geared to the enhancement of economic growth and personal wealth.

Universities target Gen Y youth with interactive online communication and social media. University websites have changed from being primarily informational resources to being interactive promotional tools. Photo albums on Flickr, YouTube videos, and 3-D virtual tours, among other features, have helped to transform university websites beyond the mere provisioning of textual information (e.g., Lakehead University, 2007b; Western University, 2005). When, in 2007, Guelph redesigned its website as part of a branding initiative, it incorporated Facebook, iTunes, and the Weather Network into the new template. University officials host online recruitment chats and participate actively on Twitter and Facebook; some universities, including Western and Windsor, have developed in-depth social media strategies and hired full-time specialists to “heighten [their] online presence” (University of Windsor, 2012). Students post entries about their experiences in university-branded blogs; university channels on YouTube play host not just to convocation speeches and fundraising pitches, but to student hip hop performances. It is not just the nature of recruitment materials that has changed but the media of communication as well. This reflects the view that university marketing should not only convey the values and expectations of the institution, but also “parallel the educational expectations of ... its readers, to resonate with their ideologies about schooling” (Symes, 1996, p. 133). The interactive and participatory nature of new media mirrors the way Gen Y youth employ media. It also reflects Adam Arvidsson’s (2005) view that powerful branding involves a form of “productive consumption” in which consumers (or students) “perform” the brand, whether by wearing a T-shirt, toting a Starbucks cup, or creating and posting to YouTube a lip-dub video shot on campus (e.g., Cloutier, 2009).

The interactive nature of social media, however, can launch contrarian voices onto otherwise “official” sites. Soon after Western announced its re-branding in 2012, the university’s Facebook page was overwhelmed with negative feedback from alumni and students. Darcy Michelle described “Western University” as sounding like “some online diploma school.” For Melissa MacLeod, the new name was reminiscent of a “sketchy career college that advertises during Jerry Springer.” Frustration with marketing overkill prompted Eileen Wennekers to write: “I’m really glad that I am now a product that can be subsumed under a ‘unified brand’. Seriously marketing people, do you talk to ANYONE besides each other?!” Katie Kania declared that “I go to UWO. I will never in my life call it WU. It sounds cheap.” Melanie Kok concurred that “Western University” sounded “fake.” Stephanie Leys lamented that “they are not just taking away the name of the school, but the history, reputation, prestige and identity of the university” (Western University, 2012b). A recurring theme among the many dozens of posted comments was the sense of “cheapness” associated with the new name. Left unclear in most cases, however, was whether this involved a cheapening of the pre-existing (University of Western Ontario) “brand name” or whether branding itself diminished the gravitas and public standing of the university as a social institution.

Notably, in this instance, the same media platform and marketing logic that enables Facebook to be an exemplar of knowledge/power governance also served as a ready-made vehicle for oppositional discourses and nascent countervailing power. In Foucauldian relations of power, nothing remains stable or unidirectional (Tadajewski, 2011). From a marketing management standpoint, the blunt and controversial nature of the name change would suggest that Western ran afoul of what Leitch and Motion (2007) prescribe for university branding: it should promote “interpretive openness” rather than narrow, finite meanings. This path of “strategic ambiguity” works best in institutions with numerous and potentially conflicting stakeholders, for example students and alumni with a strong attachment to the university’s name and history.

## Conclusion

In January 2013, less than three years after joining UWO, vice-president Kevin Goldthorp announced his resignation in order to become a senior vice-president at a Toronto hospital. The architect-in-chief of the “rethink” of the “university’s brand strategy” would himself be absent for this “major step forward” (Winders, 2013). Goldthorp’s brand-centric ethos serves as a present-day reminder of how thoroughly marketing discourse and practices have, since the 1990s, proliferated to become routine features of the university administrative landscape. In the 1950s, marketing began its authoritative rise within the private sector; by the late twentieth century, it had effectively transfigured activities such as student recruitment, alumni relations, and external communications at Ontario universities. This new reality is reflected in the spectacle of the Ontario Universities’ Fair, multimedia ad campaigns and branding initiatives run by universities, and the use of database marketing to identify and recruit students. University-based marketing, with its “customer-oriented” managerial rationality, mirrors broader changes in public discourse that have brought to the forefront designations such as “customer” and “consumer” and downgraded ones such as “citizen” or “student” (Morgan, 2003, p. 115). In Foucauldian terms, it has resulted in the production of new

forms of systematized information and corresponding knowledge (ezRecruit, brand consulting, strategic marketing); brought new cadres of postsecondary experts (marketing and advertising professionals); and re-invented subjectivities for key participants (student-as-consumer-sovereign) (Varman et al., 2011). Marketing the academy represents, it would seem, the initial stages of an epistemic change concerning the university as both object of study and vehicle for social mobility and social critique. This process has not gone unnoticed or unchallenged, as seen with the many academic works on the commercialization of the academy. As Clarke and Newman (1997) observe, when educators and other professionals utter statements like “this is not a business” or “we teach students ... not service customers,” such statements are often in response to “changing conditions of, and balances of power within” (p. 117) organizations. In the case of North American universities since the 1980s, neoliberalism has meant declining faculty governance and professorial autonomy, coupled with the corporatization of “managed education,” seen most glaringly with the rise of low-wage teaching labour in the form of adjuncts and graduate students (Bousquet, 2008).

There is nothing “natural” or pre-ordained about the inroads of marketing at Ontario universities. Power relations, in the Foucauldian sense, are bidirectional and always potentially reversible. Historical, socially contingent circumstances produced this outcome, which, of course, can be changed by individual or collective endeavour, whether in political, social, or cultural forms. Nor should we discount entirely the possibility that a more progressive version of “social” marketing could be realized, one that would make organizations more attentive to the needs and views of constituents and stakeholders, the merits of social diversity, and the efficient delivery of services, while also serving as brake to the excesses of “one size fits all” bureaucracy. Marketing first emerged as an academic discipline in the late 1800s as a progressive force aiming to analyze and highlight how monopoly power distorted commodity markets. Early marketing theorists and educators aligned themselves with social and economic reformers, in opposition to the Carnegies, Morgans, and Rockefellers (Morgan, 2003). As a result, marketing conceived of its purpose as both instrumental and ethical. It served the “public good” by gleaning and channelling consumer needs and wants into the corridors of corporate power. Proponents of opinion polling, which began in the 1930s as an outgrowth of consumer research surveys, similarly cast that practice as a democratizing force serving public interest over “vested interests” (Robinson, 1999). Like opinion polling, marketing today promotes corporate and state power more so than it does grassroots expression in the marketplace, or in the academy. Before considering any possible future democratic promise for marketing, we first must come to terms with its current discursive power in promoting a top-down, “unified brand” version of the university, at the expense of one imbued with heterogeneous and critical ideals, intellectual discord, and fractured, contested truths.

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## Notes

1. These agencies are 1) York—doug & serge; 2) Windsor—HCA Advertising; 3) Guelph—Trajectory; 4) Western—not currently with an AOR, but working with Kerr Smith Design on a number of large projects; and 5) Lakehead—currently in search of an AOR, but working with Fifty Strategy & Creative on a new marketing strategy.
2. For instance, the University of Windsor has a “UWindsor Brand” website (University of Windsor, 2007), Lakehead has a “Visual Identity Program” (Lakehead University, 2004), and Western also has a “Visual Identity” website, which includes a section on the “anatomy of the brand,” logo application, and a toolkit (Western University, 2012a).
3. In 2005, York won the prestigious CASE “Grand Gold Award” for best university marketing campaign in all of North America. York’s subway domination campaign also won a Gold Award for best community/public relations program.
4. The Education Quality and Accountability Office (EQAO) administers standardized math and English tests to primary and secondary school students in Ontario. The push for externally mandated performance data such as EQAO or Common University Data Ontario (CUDO) is part of a larger push for greater transparency and accountability for public organizations. These standardized testing and “performance indicator” trends encourage the use of positivist, quantitative measurements, which often lack context, as funding guidelines.
5. *Maclean’s* continues to rank the schools that have opted out. The magazine changed its methodology to include the use of third-party sources, among them information made public by the government and the Council of Ontario Universities. The universities’ move to opt out of the *Maclean’s* survey suggests more a tactical withdrawal from a particular survey methodology than it does a retreat from a general strategy informed by marketing.
6. Thanks to a *CJC* reviewer for suggesting this site.

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