The Rise of Marketing in University Administration in Ontario, 1970-2010

Daniel J. Robinson
Information and Media Studies, University of Western Ontario, London, Ontario, Canada

Lindsay Carrocci Bolan
Faculty of Engineering, McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

Abstract

Purpose: The paper examines the rise of marketing practices at five Ontario universities (Lakehead, Windsor, Western, York, and Guelph) from the 1970s until 2010, illuminating the origins and later consolidation of marketing concepts like branding, segmentation, targeting and positioning at these universities.

Methodology: Researchers conducted semi-structured interviews with marketing and communications staff members at these five institutions. Researchers also examined institutional records, internal publications, trade publications, and other forms of historical documentation related to undergraduate recruitment, alumni relations, and institutional advertising.

Approach/Theory: We situate our treatment of this topic within the field of Critical Management Studies. Most notably, we draw on Per Skålén, Mark Fellesson and Martin 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.

Findings: Prior to the 1990s, there is little evidence of coherent, long-term marketing planning and branding strategies at Ontario universities. Starting in the 1990s, marketing discourse and practices began to proliferate, later becoming a routine feature of university administrative practices. This new reality is reflected by the spectacle of the Ontario Universities' Fair, numerous multi-media ad campaigns and branding initiatives run by universities, and the use of database marketing to identify and recruit students.

Keywords: post-secondary marketing, institutional communication, university advertising, Canada

Category: Research Paper

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 web purposes.” 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) would replace the current one (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.” 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 rebranded 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 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 F. 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, p. 53). 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 highlighted the negative effects of corporate fundraising for universities, beholding increasingly to customer service doctrines, performance indicators, and the business mantras of "vision statements, employee entrepreneurship, and strategic plans" (2002, p. 144). The commercialization of university research, former York University Dean George Fallis wrote, posed "great dangers" to the pursuit of basic research and the open dissemination of research results funded by private industry (2007, 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 obliged, 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, p. 17-18).

This is not a new story, nor one specific to Canada; Thorstein Veblen decried commercial influences in universities in 1918 and American 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 paper, 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, found in 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: 1) marketing activities and the administrative functions of university marketing and communication units, both past and present; 2) processes of university image-making and identity formation; 3) university rankings (e.g. Maclean's survey) and; 4) 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 advertising 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 Per Skålén, Mark Fellesson and Martin 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.
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; Foucault, 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 paper, we examine how a traditional model of discourse concerning the university — centred on ideas like academic freedom, sound pedagogy, 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 historical account of marketing’s emergence on university campuses, we examine how marketing concepts like branding, segmentation, targeting and positioning have contributed to the present-day “discursive order” of Ontario universities, imbued by the ethos of marketing management.

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Marketing and Ontario Universities Before the 1990s

For most of the twentieth century, marketing and advertising figured little in student recruitment and institutional promotion at Ontario universities (Carrocci, 2009, p. 6-7). 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, p. 15). 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 drawing comparisons with other schools (Tausig, 1980, p. 4). 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.” Most tellingly, Gladwell wrote, “there wasn’t a sense that anything great was at stake in the choice”; what mattered most was the experience made of it while there (2005, para. 3).

During the 1970s and early 1980s, recruitment-related advertising proved sparse. In 1976, Western and Guelph ran student recruitment ads in University Affairs, a trade magazine for post-secondary employees, suggesting a limited understanding of target marketing. 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 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

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, p. 3). At the time, Paul Axelrod notes, this was viewed as an example of the “more extreme and questionable” recruitment tactics found in Canadian universities (1982, p. 194). In 1980, University Affairs journalist Christine Tausig wrote that “extravagant” 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 (1980, p. 2).

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 institutions.
faculties and departments (University of Guelph, 2008). York’s promotional material “looked as if it had come from 60 different places” (York University, 2008). Many programs or faculties ran their own recruitment campaigns and central administrations ran multiple, sometimes conflicting, promotional efforts at a time. It was not uncommon 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 which 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 board room. 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 (Morgan, 2003, p. 114; Skålén, et al, 2008, p. 110). 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” (1972, p. 47) Kotler trumpeted in marketing’s flagship academic journal (see also Andreasen, 2001, p. 83). 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, and schools. In 1975, Kotler published Marketing for Nonprofit Organizations and, a decade later, Strategic Marketing for Educational Institutions, 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 post-secondary education, once thought divergent, even inimical, were portrayed as highly compatible (Marginson, 1999, p. 305). This was especially so, Kotler and Fox argued, when institutions faced social instability and structural changes, as did the burgeoning post-secondary education sector in the late 1960s and 1970s (1985, p. 8). In the 1980s, Buell notes, that a “marketing explosion” was taking place in many American colleges and universities with respect to alumni relations, fundraising, and student recruitment (1986, p. 1). 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,” citing its many inroads into governmental and non-profit organizations (Brownlie, Saren, Wensley, & Whittington, 1999, p. 112).

Marketing Concept Moves into Ontario Universities

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 which visited high schools across the province (Tausig, 1980, p. 2). 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” (1995, 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” (University of Guelph, 2008). In 2000, Western displayed a 12-foot high castle structure, with “larger-than-life” photos of students (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 like 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 (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 (CCAE), 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 and 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, filling these jobs with marketing professionals from outside academe. 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 Request 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.[1]

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 (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 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 (2011, p. 87). 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” (Lakehead University, 2008).

**Branding**

As concept and practice, branding creates and promotes ideas, identities, even “personalities” for products, services, or, for our purposes, post-secondary institutions (Strunken & Cartwright, 2009, p. 290; Arvidsson, 2005, p. 236). It fashions meanings by strategically shaping and directing the messages and images of an institution, typically reflecting its stated values and mission and that of constituents’ (e.g. students) experiences. 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” (Tim Horton’s) or a “Western Mustang.” In this sense marketing knowledge and related technologies that promote branding “constitute people as ‘governable
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 rebranding ran in Maclean’s, Canadian Business, and other magazines. “Campaign Western” ads ran in elevators, transit shelters and on billboards. Elements of the rebranding 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 rebranding 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 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 rebranding effort in 2007 (new logo and tagline -“Changing Lives. Improving Life”) as a “bold call to action” which 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 caché in the university marketplace” (Lakehead University, 2004; Abaya, 2008, para. 7). Viewbooks—promotional brochures or magazines which showcase the university to prospective students—also reflected branding logic. Symes describes Australian Viewbooks as more a cross between a teenage magazine and a tourist brochure than an informational profiling of the institution (1996, p. 139). 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 which specialize in education marketing. Edge was established in Toronto in 1995 to fill a market void: identifying, targeting, and recruiting potential students for post-secondary 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; Skålen et al., 2008, p. 101). 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 Academia accrue profits and command authority by “virtue of their capacity to speak in the name of the customer,” professing to know what he or she needs or wants (Clarke & Newman, 1997, p. 116-117).

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” (Clarke & Newman, 1997, p. 117).

After segmentation and targeting, universities seek to position themselves in the crowded post-secondary 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” (Mount & Belanger, 2004, p. 133). As one Windsor communications officer 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, differentiation is especially important for universities.

Universities attempt to identify and occupy a position within the educational market involving a unique set of services or attributes (Litten, 1980, p. 44). There are several ways that a university can position itself; 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 Chief Marketing Officer Richard Fisher explains:

this 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” (2005, para. 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, inter-city 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, the medium is a large part of the message: “it shows we’re creative, open-minded and in step with the real world” (York University, 2005a, para. 3).[3]

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, p. 65). 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...
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, on-line 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 notes, marketing assumes increasing importance in defining and promoting institutional identities (2005, 30). While possibly effective in garnering attention and “brand awareness,” Neil Tudiver worries that advertising to students as consumers has pitfalls; advertising and marketing campaigns “emphasize convenience, service, lifestyle, and reputation” (1999, p. 160). While these themes certainly resonate with consumer cultural values, they do not prepare students for a demanding academic experience (Côté and Allahar, 2007, p. 18).

Rankings
University ranking systems have reconfigured post-secondary education during the past two decades. The Maclean’s University Ranking Issue has been published since 1991 and is modeled 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 post-secondary 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 (Townley, 1994, p. 31-32; Skålen et al, 2008, p. 57). 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 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” like donors, government officials, and alumni (Scott, 2009, p. 3).

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 US ranking systems, however, Chang and Osborne (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 pre-occupation 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 underscores: “choosing 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” (Readings, 1994, 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, p. 5).[4]

Despite the recent backlash against rankings, Ontario universities remain enmeshed in this zero-sum game of prestige. [5] 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 which 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 communications specialist noted, “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 argue that these students view university education as a form of exchange, seeking maximum gain for minimal effort (2007, p. 43). 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 jumpstart 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, p. 15). 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. Absent here is the view that post-secondary education...
should cultivate democratic citizenship, what Martha Nussbaum describes as equipping students to “think for themselves, criticize tradition, and understand the significance of another person’s sufferings and achievements” (2010, p. 2). Rather, higher education reflects vocational means and neo-liberal ends, serving both economic growth and personal enrichment.

Universities target Gen Y youth with interactive, on-line communication and social media. University websites have changed from being primarily informational resources to interactive promotional tools. Photo albums on Flickr, YouTube videos, and 3D virtual tours, among other features, have helped to transform university websites beyond the mere provisioning of textual information (for example, Western University, 2005; Lakehead University, 2007b). 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 have changed but the media of communication as well. This reflects the view that university marketing should convey not only 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 that 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 (for example, Cloutier, 2009).

The interactive nature of social media, however, can launch contrarian voices onto otherwise “official” sites. Soon after Western announced its rebranding 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 which enables Facebook to be an exemplar of knowledge/power governance also served as a ready-made vehicle for oppositional discourses and nascent countervailing power.

Conclusion
Since the 1990s, marketing discourse and practices have proliferated to become routine features of the university administrative landscape in Ontario. In the 1950s marketing began its authoritative rise within the private sector; by the late twentieth century it had effectively transfigured activities like student recruitment, alumni relations, and external communications at Ontario universities. This new reality is reflected by the spectacle of the Ontario Universities’ Fair, multi-media 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 which have brought to the forefront designations like “customer” and “consumer” and downgraded ones like “citizen” or “student” (Morgan, 2003, p. 115). 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 observe, when educators and other professionals utter statements like “this is not a business” or “we teach students...not service customers,” they are often in response to “changing conditions of, and balances of power within” organizations (1997, p. 117). In the case of North American universities since the 1980s, this 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 adjuncts and graduate students (Bousquet, 2008).

There is nothing “natural” or pre-ordained about the inroads of marketing at Ontario universities. Historical, socially-contingent circumstances produced this outcome, which, of course, can be adapted or rolled back 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 gleaming 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 critical ideals, intellectual discord, and fractured, contested truths.

Notes:
[1] These are: 1) York – doug & serge; 2) Western – not currently with an AOR, but working with Kerr Smith Design on a number of large projects; 3) Windsor – HCA Advertising; 4) Guelph – Trajectory; and, 5), Lakehead – currently in search of AOR, but working with Fifty Strategy & Creative on a new marketing strategy.

[2] For instance, Windsor University has a “Windsor 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, that 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 3rd party sources, including information made public by the government and the Council of Ontario Universities.

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