

ALIKE BUT DIFFERENT: HOW THREE PRIVATE LIBERAL ARTS COLLEGES
COMMUNICATE PRESTIGE, LEGITIMACY, AND DIFFERENTIATION DURING
THE STUDENT RECRUITMENT PROCESS

by

WESLEY RAY FUGATE

Under the Direction of Erik C. Ness

ABSTRACT

Higher education institutions are often on a quest to increase institutional prestige. Despite the emerging literature around what activities constitute prestige-seeking behavior (O'Meara, 2007; Toma, 2008; Toma, 2012), the research on prestige-seeking behavior at liberal arts colleges is thin, and the research literature is nearly void of any analysis of how messages of prestige are communicated.

The purpose of this dissertation is to explore how three liberal arts colleges of varying prestige levels communicate with prospective students. The study does not attempt to discern intent by institutional officials, but merely to understand what messages are being communicated, and how these messages relate to the concepts of prestige, institutional theory, and strategy. Five different literature streams -- liberal arts colleges (Breneman, 1994), communication (Grunig & Grunig, 1992), prestige (O'Meara, 2007; Toma, 2008; Toma 2012), institutional theory (Meyer & Rown, 1977), and competitive strategy theory (Ghemawat & Rivkin, 1999; Poter, 1985) -- guide this comparative case study of three liberal arts colleges (Wheaton College (MA), Trinity College (CT), and Williams College) and what they communicate to prospective

students. Data collected from viewbooks, institutional websites, Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter are combined with observations from campus tours and admission information sessions. The data are analyzed via pattern matching techniques.

The study concludes that 1) the primary message communicated to prospective students is about academic programs; 2) in addition to the messages related to prestige-generation, six other areas of messages emerged as major areas of emphasis; 3) institutions communicated to prospective students each area of prestige generation, although at varying levels for each type of message and for each institution; 4) institutions communicated different types of messages more often via certain types of delivery methods; 5) the majority of messages are legitimizing; 6) institutions attempt to differentiate their message but often the message is not truly differentiating; and 7) differentiation primarily occurs through an institution's "suite of programs."

The implications for research include suggestions for future studies to expand the audience of the messages being received. Implications for practitioners include how to more effectively communicate messages to prospective students and their families.

INDEX WORDS: Social sciences, Education, Higher education, Liberal arts colleges, Prospective students, Student recruitment, Marketing, Communication, Admission, Enrollment, Educational marketing, Institutional theory, Legitimacy, Competitive strategy, Differentiation

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DEDICATION

For my parents, Marshall and Jackie Fugate, who were never afforded the opportunity to attend higher education but who impressed upon me its importance and made great sacrifice to ensure that I was able to achieve this highest degree.

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I should also acknowledge the entire faculty and staff of Institute of Higher Education at UGA. What an amazing family! I am especially appreciative of all the

support from Heather Lotane, graduate coordinator. It would also be appropriate for me to thank two former members of the IHE family: Chris Morphew and Doug Toma. Chris served as my first advisor before leaving for opportunities elsewhere, but he was one of the reasons I chose to attend IHE. Finally, Doug Toma, a great friend and scholar, was my second advisor who we lost much too early to cancer. His wisdom is contained throughout this document.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	v
LIST OF TABLES	xi
LIST OF FIGURES	xii
CHAPTER	
I Introduction.....	1
Context.....	1
Problem.....	3
Purpose and Research Questions	4
Significance and Implications.....	5
II Review of the Existing Literature	7
Liberal Arts Colleges	7
Communication.....	16
Prestige.....	22
Institutional Theory.....	29
Competitive Strategy Theory	34
III Research Design.....	39
Research Strategy.....	39
Case Selection Strategy.....	40
Data Collection and Analytic Techniques	42

Trustworthiness.....	46
Limitations	46
IV The Case of Wheaton College	48
Overview.....	48
Methods of Delivery	49
Messaging	54
V The Case of Trinity College.....	71
Overview.....	71
Methods of Delivery	72
Messaging	77
VI The Case of Williams College	96
Overview.....	96
Methods of Delivery	97
Messaging	102
VII Cross Case Analysis	123
Overview.....	123
Methods of Delivery	123
Messaging	127
VIII Conclusion	151
Review of the Study.....	151
Findings.....	152
Liberal Arts Colleges	155
Research Implications.....	155

Implications for Practitioners.....	159
Conclusion	163
REFERENCES	164

LIST OF TABLES

	Page
Table 1: Categories of Prestige-Seeking Behaviors.....	44
Table 2: The Emphasis of Message Type by Institution.....	129

LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1: Sample Wheaton College Viewbook Page (p.12).....	51
Figure 2: Wheaton College Viewbook General Knowledge Page (p. 2-3).....	55
Figure 3: Wheaton College Viewbook Pages on the Peacock Regatta (p. 26-27).....	61
Figure 4: Sample Trinity College Viewbook Page (p. 8)	73
Figure 5: Trinity College Viewbook Pages Highlighting Study Abroad (p. 16-17).....	80
Figure 6: Sample Williams College Viewbook Page (p. 7).....	98
Figure 7: Williams College Viewbook Page Highlighting Four Seasons (inside cover).	116

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Context

The quest for institutional prestige is consuming officials in American higher education. Consider this: *U.S. News and World Report*, *Princeton Review*, *Consumers Digest*, *Forbes*, *Kiplinger's*, *Washington Monthly*, *Newsweek*, *The Daily Beast*, *Colleges that Change Lives*, and the Indiana University Center for Postsecondary Research through their *National Survey of Student Engagement* are just a few of the many magazines and organizations attempting to rank the United States' best colleges and universities. Rankings mania has spread across the country, with colleges and universities continually striving to climb the prestige ladder (Toma, 2012). In fact, there are so many rankings that *MoneyWatch* has now developed a ranking of the rankings in an attempt to make some sense of the mayhem.

Students are taking note of these rankings, as well. In fact, from 1995 to 2009, the percentage of students who claimed that the rankings were very important to their college choice steadily increased from 10.5% to 18.5%, with over 54% now stating the rankings are somewhat or very important to their college decision-making process (Higher Education Research Institute, 2007; Higher Education Research Institute, 2009). With new types of college rankings coming out so frequently and with students becoming increasingly reliant on them for their college choice process, it is not surprising that institution officials are paying more consideration to how they can increase prestige. In

fact, more than perhaps ever before in history, higher education officials are strategically communicating to various constituencies in order to influence perceptions of their institution.

There is a growing body of research that focuses on the efforts officials at some institutions are exerting to increase their schools' prestige (Aldersley, 1995; Berdahl, 1985; Brewer, Gates, & Goldman, 2002; Clotfelter, 1996; Ehrenberg, 2003; Massy & Zemsky, 1994; O'Meara, 2007; Riesman, 1956; Toma, 2003; Toma, 2008; Winston, 2000). Formally, O'Meara (2007) calls this "striving," or attempting to reposition an institution through a variety of approaches towards greater prestige. There are a variety of common strategic tactics that institutional officials use to increase prestige, including recruiting and enrolling more accomplished students, increasing focus on research, strengthening and adding graduate programs, and articulating messages about the position of the institution (O'Meara, 2007). Toma (2008, 2012) describes these actions as positioning for prestige.

Toma (2012) charts two different paths for institutions to increase their prestige. First, borrowing from institutional theory, he suggests that in order to legitimize their institution, officials will try to mimic other institutions that are successful (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Toma, 2012). At the same time, however, the search for prestige leads institutions to distinguish themselves from their competition in order to gain the attention of prospective students (Kirp, 2003; Toma, 2012). Thus, a paradoxical relationship emerges. Institutional theory suggests that institutions will mimic the behaviors of their more successful peers in order to achieve legitimacy, while the strategy literature suggests that institutions should seek differentiation (Toma, 2012). Based on these

theories, one would expect institutions to become more homogenous and divergent at the same time, a paradoxical relationship for institutions to be sure. Institutional leaders must delicately balance the needs of the institution as they try to navigate this bifurcated path between legitimacy and differentiation.

Problem

While there is a growing body of research that focuses on the efforts officials at research institutions are exerting to increase their schools' prestige, little attention has been given to liberal arts colleges, which are less likely to rely on major athletic programs or research dollars to develop their notoriety (Aldersley, 1995; Berdahl, 1985; Brewer, et al., 2002; Clotfelter, 1996; Ehrenberg, 2003; Massy & Zemsky, 1994; O'Meara, 2007; Riesman, 1956; Toma, 2003; Toma, 2008; Winston, 2000). These smaller institutions typically emphasize a stronger commitment to teaching. Financial strength is believed to be a significant factor for any type of institution to increase its prestige (Brewer, et. al, 2002). Yet, apart from that, how else might an institution increase its notoriety? Do liberal arts colleges increase prestige-using methods similar to those at research-intensive institutions?

At the same time, research is increasing on what messages institutions communicate to prospective students (Hite & Yearwood, 2001; Hartley & Morpew, 2008). Institutions, whether intentionally or not, can communicate messages of prestige. Institution officials face the challenge of attempting to sell prospective students and their families on the notion that they are similar to other prestigious colleges or universities but are just different enough that students should enroll there, rather than at a more

prestigious institution. This presents interesting conflicts for how an institution can effectively communicate and achieve both desired goals.

Because of the lack of research in this area, a need exists to study prestige as it relates to liberal arts colleges. In particular, there is a need to know what messages officials at liberal arts colleges communicate. How do officials at these institutions communicate to prospective students as a way of legitimizing themselves while simultaneously differentiating themselves, and how does an institution's response to this conflict in strategies affect prestige-related messages? This study seeks to fill that void.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this multiple case study analysis is to explore how three liberal arts colleges of varying prestige levels communicate with prospective students. The study does not attempt to discern intent by institutional officials, but merely to understand what messages are being communicated and how these messages relate to the concepts of prestige, institutional theory, and strategy. In particular, the study is limited to private institutions from the same geographic region and are ranked in the top tier of liberal arts colleges by the *US News and World Report's 2011 Best Colleges* ("Best Liberal Arts Colleges," 2010). Two central questions guide this inquiry:

- 1) What messages do private liberal arts colleges communicate to prospective students and how do these messages relate to prestige-seeking behavior?
- 2) How do concepts related to strategy and institutional theory explain the messages communicated by private liberal arts colleges in their attempt to position for prestige?

Significance and Implications

The significance of this study rests on its contributions to the literature for both scholars and practitioners. For the scholarly research literature, this study adds to the understanding of what messages institutions communicate to prospective students and how these messages relate to prestige, institutional theory, and strategy. It also provides practical implications for institutional officials who communicate with prospective students and aim for their institution to appear more prestigious.

As stated earlier, research is increasing on what messages institutions communicate to prospective students (Hite & Yearwood, 2001; Hartley & Morpew, 2008). This research, however, is limited in scope. Most of the research examines simply the viewbook, ignoring in-person interaction and digital media such as institutional websites and social media. This study contributes to the literature by providing analysis of messages sent to prospective students by a variety of different mediums. Results from this analysis illuminate how liberal arts colleges are similar and dissimilar to other institutions in what messages they communicate. Researchers interested in the challenge institutions face from the pull between legitimizing and differentiation messages benefit from the findings of the study. Finally, the research contributes a deeper understanding about the role that prestige plays in student recruitment communication.

This study informs practitioners, particularly at private liberal arts colleges, on the use of communication as a tool in the race for prestige. It illuminates the challenge officials face as they try to differentiate their institutions, while not becoming so unique that they stray away from their peers. At the same time, the study allows institutional

officials to understand further how certain messages communicated to prospective students not only aid in the recruitment of students, but also position the institution for even greater prestige.

The following chapters will further detail this study. Chapter two will review the literature upon which the study is predicated. The third chapter will explore the research design of the study. Chapters four through six will be individual chapters dedicated to each of the institutions in the study. The seventh chapter will look across all three institutions to see themes that might emerge. The final chapter will serve as a conclusion of the study and point to implications that emerge from the research.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE EXISTING LITERATURE

Liberal Arts Colleges

Liberal arts colleges are one of America's greatest success stories. Very few institutions, except for a few religious and government organizations, can rival their longevity (Breneman, 1994). Liberal arts colleges are the oldest form of higher education in the U.S. (Pascarella, et. al, 2005). Our nation's first institution, Harvard University (then Harvard College), was a liberal arts college when it was founded in 1636, as were all of the colonial colleges (Koblik, 2000). In fact, liberal arts colleges were the predominant form of U.S. higher education in the 17th, 18th, and 19th century.

Over time, however, institutions have changed. In 1900, two-thirds of all students still attended a liberal arts college (Breneman, 1994). The massification of higher education would soon come and dramatically change those statistics. To many, the 1950s and 1960s were the heyday of liberal arts colleges, with enrollment growth slow but steady (Breneman, 1994). Higher education, however, was beginning to make a shift. No longer was the public conceiving higher education primarily as a public good. Increasingly, they viewed it as a private good (Breneman, 1994). As higher education welcomed soldiers returning from war to its campuses, the rise of the university would overshadow the once prominent liberal arts college movement.

By 1957, 40% of all institutions were liberal arts colleges and 26% of all students in higher education attended a liberal arts college (Breneman, 1994). The 1970s began a

difficult period for liberal arts campuses, especially due to the economic conditions. Despite predictions of the demise of many liberal arts colleges, the 1980s saw enrollment growth for this institutional type. By 1987, 16% of all institutions of higher education were liberal arts colleges and 4.4% of students were attending a liberal arts college (Breneman, 1994). By 2000, only 4% of all bachelor degrees awarded came from liberal arts colleges (Koblik, 2000).

The number of liberal arts colleges that exist today is believed to be somewhere between 210 and 230, depending on how liberal arts colleges are defined. Breneman (1994) and Koblik (2000) suggest that there are 212 “true” liberal arts colleges. Breneman (1994) defined “true” as those institutions that award more than 40% of its degrees in the liberal arts and are somewhat selective. The last time the Carnegie classifications included Baccalaureate-Liberal Arts Colleges as a category was in 2000. At that time, the classification reported 228 liberal arts colleges.

So just how does one define a liberal arts college? The literature does not provide a universal definition. According to Astin (2000), liberal arts colleges are some of the most diverse institutions. He cited the large disparities between spending per student, selectivity, and the difference in curriculum, as examples. For instance, curriculum at some institutions is restricted to only undergraduate, pre-professional education. At other campuses, graduate programs have emerged and the curriculum is increasingly professional. At the same time, campuses wrestle with whether or not the curriculum should have an extremely rigid core curriculum, on one extreme, to design your own programs, on the other (Astin, 2000).

Perhaps the most frequently cited source on liberal arts colleges is Breneman (1994). He provides a clear picture of the liberal arts college. Foremost, liberal arts colleges focus on undergraduate education (Breneman, 1994). While some may have limited graduate programs, that is in no way their emphasis. In fact, most of the student body is also of the traditional college age of 18-24 (Breneman, 1994).

Secondly, liberal arts colleges are residential in nature (Breneman, 1994). In order to achieve many of their desired outcomes, liberal arts colleges have a very high proportion of students who live on campus. Frequently, faculty and administrators live on campus or very close by. This creates an academic setting, both in and out of the classroom.

Liberal arts colleges are small (Breneman, 1994). By being small, they can create intimate learning environments. Breneman (1994) suggests that most institutions are between 800-1800 with very few having more than 2,500.¹ This allows institutions to have small average class sizes. In fact, these institutions boast low student to faculty ratios, rarely larger than 15 to 1 (Breneman, 1994). They focus on student interaction with faculty, in and out of the classroom. An example of this interaction is the collaborative research opportunities faculty members often afford undergraduates.

Most liberal arts colleges are at least somewhat selective (Breneman, 1994). While the level of selectivity may vary (to as few as 20% for institutions as prestigious as Williams College), most liberal arts colleges attempt to carefully craft a class, as the economic conditions will allow. For some institutions, this reality has changed significantly due to the recent economic downturn.

¹ Breneman's seminal work on liberal arts colleges was written in 1994. Various authors suggest that liberal arts colleges are increasing their size, thus most institutions are most likely in the neighborhood of 1,000-3,000 today.

This smaller size helps build a collegial atmosphere, much like the fictitious Heritage College that Birnbaum (1988) describes. At most liberal arts colleges, shared governance is an important part of the campus culture. The president is more likely a first-among-equals (Birnbaum, 1988). There is significant interaction between faculty of all disciplines, not just their own. Birnbaum (1998) describes these faculty as “locals” who are dedicated to the institution, not “cosmopolitans” who are more closely aligned with their field of study. The faculty at liberal arts colleges have different expectations and reward systems (Breneman, 1994). They have a commitment to teaching undergraduates, and thus have a larger teaching load. Research and service always come second to the teaching mission of the college, which the institutions reflect in the tenure and promotion process.

From a curriculum perspective, liberal arts colleges pride themselves on education for education’s sake (Breneman, 1994). The curriculum is not professionally oriented. Instead, it teaches students to read and write well, while developing critical thinking and analytic skills (Breneman, 1994). Due to being more pre-professional than professional, there are a limited number of majors offered at liberal arts colleges, and they are predominately in liberal arts fields. Liberal arts colleges try to educate the whole person—body, mind, and spirit (Lang, 2000). Thus, learning does not stop at the classroom door. Because of their emphasis on holistic learning, education takes place in the residence halls, in the dining room, or even on the athletic field (Hersh, 2000). This holistic educational experience helps liberal arts colleges educate students on citizenship and social responsibility (Lang, 2000).

Some researchers have high praise for liberal arts colleges. Hersh (2000) boldly states that liberal arts education is the most important kind of education for the 21st century. He goes on to state that liberal arts campuses provide the optimum education environment and that liberal arts colleges have more profound positive effects on its students and their outcomes than other types of institutions (Hersh, 2000). Astin (2000) echoes those sentiments stating that liberal arts colleges frequently offer the best in educational practices and come most closely to the right balance between research and teaching.

Yet, how does the data match up to these claims? Pascarella, et. al (2005) found mixed evidence about the impact of liberal arts colleges. In their review of the literature surrounding liberal arts colleges, these authors conclude that it is the educational environment, not the type of institution, which has the greatest positive effects (Pascarella, et. al, 2005). They go on to state, however, that liberal arts colleges most frequently have the type of environment needed for positive outcomes.

Based on their review of the literature, Pascarella, et. al (2005) conclude that liberal arts colleges have higher student engagement than other types of institutions. Additionally, liberal arts college students have increased levels of measured aspects of personal development than students from other types of institutions (Pascarella, et. al, 2005). Through their own research, Pascarella, et. al (2005) find that liberal arts colleges employ good practices in undergraduate education and have empirical data to back up those claims. They also conclude that liberal arts colleges have higher value added than other types of institutions. Hersh (2000) claimed that the attributes that most affect cognitive and socio-emotional development, retention, and satisfaction are frequent

evaluation and follow-up, a residential campus, a connection to the institution within the first two years, high standards and expectations, active learning, individualized learning, collaborative learning, frequent faculty interaction, high academic engaged time, and high student engagement. He goes on to say that these attributes are most often found at liberal arts colleges.

Astin (2000) concludes that liberal arts colleges consistently produce high student learning outcomes, existential outcomes, and fringe benefits. He found that liberal arts college students state that they are more satisfied with their faculty, quality of instruction, and general education requirements than their peers at other types of institutions are. His research suggests that liberal arts college students are more likely to be elected to student office while an undergraduate and complete a bachelor's degree. Additionally, he discovered that students who attend liberal arts colleges have a higher chance of enrolling in graduate study, being awarded a graduate fellowship, and earning a doctoral degree than students at other types of institutions.

Astin's (2000) work suggests that liberal arts college students are more likely to view the institution as more student oriented. Students at these institutions also have more trust for the campus administration. Finally, Astin (2000) concludes that students at liberal arts colleges are more likely to view their institution as dedicated to social change.

Pascarella, et. al (2005) concluded that the most profound effects of a liberal arts campus occur in the first year. These effects also increase after the student completes college. The research team concluded that these positive effects do not differ based on age, gender, race, or pre-college academic abilities or extra-curricular activities. Thus, it

appears that liberal arts colleges do have a profound effect on their students compared to other types of institutions.

Unfortunately, the challenges facing liberal arts colleges today are not small. It is perhaps more difficult for liberal arts colleges to survive today than at any other time in their history, particularly for those lower on the prestige ladder. While authors have written numerous manuscripts to discuss these challenges (e.g. Bonvillian & Murphy, 1996; Breneman, 1994; Neely, 2000), they can generally be described in five themes: economics, curriculum, market, administrative structure, and elitism.

Economic realities are truly affecting liberal arts colleges. In fact, Breneman's account of the economic challenges facing liberal arts colleges in 1994 is just as applicable today. Some liberal arts colleges are struggling. While there have been relatively few closures, the truth is that many institutions have left their liberal arts roots in order to survive. The cost of higher education is rapidly increasing, although for liberal arts colleges which were already considerably more expensive, not as high percentage wise as public institutions. Yet still, we are not sure when students will hit their price ceiling, although that time may be quickly approaching. This is also occurring at a time when federal and state financial aid is decreasing, affecting the need for institutions to be able to provide a subsequent discount to students. Liberal arts colleges are on a tenuous continuum between limited control of enrollment levels and limited control over unfunded student aid (Breneman, 1994). There is opportunity from this threat, however. As public institutions see rapid increases in costs and state appropriations continue to decline, there is great potential for liberal arts colleges to reposition themselves compared to public institutions.

Secondly, the liberal arts curriculum is a threat to liberal arts colleges. Pascarella et al., (2005) state that the public either lacks the knowledge of or has a complete misperception of what liberal arts colleges teach. Additionally, the public does not see the applicability of the knowledge gained through a liberal arts education to workforce skills (Pascarella, et. al, 2005). Because liberal arts colleges have fewer faculty members, they are less able to cover courses required for a modern curriculum (McPherson and Shapiro, 2000). Simply put, the curriculum of liberal arts colleges is not perceived to be responsive to student desires or the job market (Breneman, 1994). Thus, liberal arts colleges must make the connection between what they are teaching and skills needed in the job market (Pascarella, et. al, 2005).

Thirdly, liberal arts colleges have market issues. The U.S. is losing liberal arts colleges (Neely, 2005). They are experiencing mission drift, becoming research colleges, and increasing professional programs (Breneman, 2000). Institutions employ rationalized myths that they are indeed liberal arts colleges, in order to appease alumni and donors, when in actuality they no longer look anything like a liberal arts college (Toma, 2012).

Competition is increasing. Liberal arts colleges have to compete for faculty with universities, which offer higher salaries (Breneman, 1994). From a student recruitment standpoint, liberal arts colleges are competing with the public sector perhaps more than ever before (Bonvillian and Murphy, 1996). Universities are adding honors programs to try to recreate the intimate educational experience of a liberal arts college on a much larger campus, luring away extremely bright and talented students (Toma, 2012). Public institutions are also doing a better job of recruiting wealthy students, which is causing an upper income melt on liberal arts campuses (McPherson & Shapiro, 2000). Due to the

high sticker price at these institutions, full pay students are crucial to their funding strategy and not enrolling these upper-income students has a profound effect on the institutions' ability to subsidize the education of other more financially needy students. Finally, competition has increased in the area of development. With more and more universities focusing on increasing development efforts, alumni of liberal arts colleges frequently have split loyalty between their graduate and undergraduate schools, and that may impact donations to liberal arts colleges (Neely, 2005).

A fourth challenge for liberal arts colleges is increasing administrative structures. Neely (2000) suggests that overhead costs are too high (Neely, 2000). McPherson and Shapiro (2000) state that liberal arts colleges spend a higher percentage of their expenses on administrative structure than do larger universities. Bonvillian and Murphy (1996) disagree and cite the Council of Independent Colleges' assertion that there is no empirical evidence to suggest that liberal arts colleges do not experience the same economies of scale as do larger institutions. Nevertheless, liberal arts colleges officials must be weary of adding too much of an administrative structure that they cannot adequately financially support, just to match the services offered by other types of institutions.

Finally, liberal arts colleges face the perception of elitism (Breneman, 1994; Neely, 2000, Bonvillian & Murphy, 1996). Astin (2000) states that the public equates a liberal arts education as an inaccessible form of higher education. The perception is that a liberal arts education is a luxury (Pascarella, et al., 2005). Many in the public see a liberal arts education as elitist and out of their reach. No doubt, the sticker price, although not normally what students pay after significant discounting, has something to do with this perception. Liberal arts institutions must do a better job of communicating to

students and families the true cost of obtaining a liberal arts education and the benefits associated with such an education. The next section explores just how these institutions communicate, particularly as it relates to prospective students.

Communication

Meyer and Rowan (1977) suggest that the more highly institutionalized the environment in which the organization exists, the more time and energy organizational elites devote to managing their organization's public image and status. Toma (2008) suggests that institutions are "becoming increasingly professional in framing messages for outsiders, to better shape and manage the perceptions of their institution (p. 37)."

Numerous words have been used to describe the various communication functions, including communication, advertising, marketing, and public relations. Perhaps Krachenberg (1972), when first suggesting that institutions were indeed engaging in marketing activities, no matter what an institution called it, was hinting at a debate that would develop in future years about the definitions of the various forms of communication. No matter the terminology, the emphasis on communication strategies in higher education has become an increasing focus, particularly in recent decades.

In *Strategic Enrollment Management: A Primer for Campus Administrators*, Dolence (1993) suggested that there should be strategy involved in enrollment management. This, according to Dolence, involves marketing. Dennis (1998) also suggests that marketing, including promotion and position, should be a component of a comprehensive enrollment and retention management function in higher education. Yet, marketing in higher education has been challenging. Because organizations as complex as a college or university often have different parts of the organization operating

differently from each other, there can be limited consistency and coordination among these units (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott, 2003). Thus, a well-conceived vision or strategy may be not be implemented in the same way, if at all, than another unit within the organization.

Consequently, college and university advertising and communication efforts often lack a consistent message, which hurts the institutions' brand (Armstrong & Lumsden, 1999). Recently, Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) has arisen in business as a way of developing a coordinated, consistent message across an organization. IMC attempts to integrate the elements of communications, such as advertising and public relations, in order to create balanced, consistent messaging that strengthens the organization's brand (Anderson, 2001).

This study will rely on the four public relations models presented by Grunig and Hunt (1984). Described through P.T. Barnum's infamous quote "There is a sucker born every minute," the first model, known as the publicity or press agency model, uses persuasion and manipulation to influence the intended audience to behave as the organization desires (Grunig & Grunig, 1992). While all of the models of public relations are present in higher education, this form may be less used. Diploma mills, which offer diplomas, but are not accredited and frequently request nothing more from a student than payment, including academic performance, use this model.

The public information model serves as the second model of public relations. Often known as the journalist in residence model, this model usually consists of an institution distributing press releases with mostly factual, but rarely negative information.

Institutions often employ a number of people to help with this form of public relations, even at the college or departmental level.

It is important to note the difference between the first two models, described above, and the latter two, which follow. The initial models use one-way communication to relate to the various publics. Grunig and Grunig (1992) describe one-way communication as communication from the organization to the public, with no communication back from the public to the organization. The third and fourth models use two-way communication, an innovation in public relations. With two-way communication, practitioners not only provide information to their publics, but they seek information from their publics (Grunig & Grunig, 1992).

The two-way asymmetrical model, which tries to understand the motivation of people, and, by using research, determine which message can best manipulate the public into behaving as the organization desires, is the third model (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Grunig and Grunig, 1992). An example of this in higher education might be some campus screening committees. In this scenario, an administration official establishes a screening committee to solicit feedback about candidates for a position. In actuality, the administration official knows what candidate she plans to hire and uses the screening committee to learn more about the opposition to her preferred candidate. In actuality, the committee exists merely as a public relations tactic to garner buy-in to the hiring process.

The fourth and final model is the two-way symmetrical model, which uses two-way communication to understand and communicate with the publics, rather than merely using the research to try to persuade the public. An example of this in higher education might include an institution developing a committee of local community leaders to

discuss the institution's master plan for growth. If the institution listens to the concerns of these community members and alters their plans to address their concerns while still accomplishing their own goals, they have achieved true two-way symmetrical communication.

The literature is growing regarding different ways of effectively communicating during the student recruitment process. According to Dennis (1998), publications need to maintain a consistent look and message, although that message could certainly be applicable to other means of communication. Despite a call for the expanded use of direct mail (Wolff & Bryant, 1999), there is limited research on written admissions documents, especially the college viewbook. Studies that do exist include a comparison between the descriptions in viewbooks and the perceptions of prospective students (Durgin, 1998), analysis of the percentage of viewbooks that mention certain topics (Hite & Yearwood, 2001), analysis of visual images in a small number of viewbooks (Hite & Yearwood, 2001; Klassen, 2000), and an examination of viewbooks in the context of a particular student life issue (Grimes, 2001; Hite & Yearwood, 2001). Perhaps the most thorough examination comes from Hartley and Morphew (2008) who conducted a content analysis of viewbooks to see what messages are being sent to prospective students, which concluded that, according to viewbooks, each campus was an "idyllic haven" (p. 677).

As one might expect in this technological age, there has been suggested increased use of websites in comprehensive marketing efforts (Wolff & Bryant, 1999). Despite that, the literature is limited in its discussions on websites, particularly social media, as it relates to higher education. Linbeck and Fodrey (2009) provide an overview of current practices in the field and what might be expected in the future. The National Research

Center for College & University Admissions suggests that most universities are still quite cautious in their approach to Web 2.0 tools (Raths, 2009).

There is some literature that discusses the role of communication in higher education as it relates to institutional theory and strategy. Perhaps most directly answering the question is Morpew and Hartley's (2006) analysis of mission statements. Morpew and Hartley (2006) contend that institutional theorists would suggest that mission statements are normative, existing because they are expected to exist (such as their requirement to exist during accreditation processes). These theorists conclude that mission statements are ritualistic and mythological, important not for the direction they provide but for their legitimizing function. As Morpew and Hartley (2006) suggest, mission statements demonstrate that an institution knows the "rules of the game," which in this case is that you must have a mission statement to be considered legitimate by outside constituents. Organizational theorists (Meyer & Scott, 1980; Meyer & Rowan, 1977) contend that organizations must incorporate some processes and structures, because they are normatively prescribed. The findings of the study suggest that colleges and universities are using their mission statements to communicate to external audiences that the institutions are doing what they want them to do.

Morpew (2002) also discusses the potential for changing the name of an institution from college to university for the purposes of legitimizing. In his study examining which types of institutions change their names from college to university, Morpew (2002) postulates that "colleges become universities to seem more legitimate to the external environment" (p. 210). While the study does not directly answer *why* an institution changes its name, but rather *which* type of institution changes its name,

Morphew draws a hypothesis from this proposition to state that less selective postsecondary institutions were more likely than selective institutions to change their name, which the study supported.

A few studies do exist which suggest what institutions are communicating. For example, Hartley and Morphew's (2008) study on college viewbooks, while not grounded in institutional theory or strategy, does reveal what types of messages college viewbooks communicate. A study could be conducted to compare the messages communicated in this study with the initiatives that various researchers have suggested legitimize an institution to examine common trends. Additionally, the findings of the Hartley and Morphew (2008) study could be analyzed to discover if there are any truly differentiating messages from other institutions, or if the institutions are communicating generic messages.

In addition, Taylor and Morphew's (2010) work on baccalaureate college mission statements could prove useful, too, in studying differentiation and legitimization via communication in higher education. In this study, the authors review the mission statements of baccalaureate colleges to understand better how they represent themselves to their various constituencies. There is some evidence that mission statements are used to legitimize the institution and could be an area for further exploration in this discussion.

Whether intentionally or unintentionally, institutional officials communicate messages of prestige through the various ways they communicate to their institutions constituencies. The next section looks at this topic of prestige and examines its relationship to higher education. Included in the discussion are ways in which institutions have used to increase prestige.

Prestige

Building off the work of Mintzberg (1987a, 1987b), Chafee (1985), and Keller (1983), Toma (2012) frames strategy as “aspirations, such as heightening legitimacy and enhancing autonomy through moving to “the next level,” as well as the actual approaches toward positioning for greater prestige, such as the activities that institutions are undertaking to attract more students” (p. 4-5). Essentially, Toma (2012) suggests that prestige is to higher education as profits are to corporations. Thus, it should not come as a surprise that institutional officials are increasing their focus on prestige, and researchers are responding by increasing the study of the topic. Despite this increased focus on research, there is not a universally agreed upon definition of prestige in the higher education literature. In fact, few authors even choose to define it.

Brewer, et al (2002) attempt to distinguish the difference between reputation and prestige. They state that reputation measures the present, can be measured in absolutes, and can be positive or negative. Each area of an institution can receive a different measure of reputation, according to the authors. Prestige, on the other hand, is not amenable to absolute measurements, must be positive, and is a characteristic of the institution as a whole, including its history. Prestige, they contend, is relative to other institutions. This definition is not universally accepted, however. In fact, Toma (2008, 2012) uses the two terms interchangeably in his writings.

Rankings measure institutions against each other, and O’Meara (2007), Toma (2008, 2012), and Kirp (2003) all point to rankings as a way to measure prestige. When asked for what institutions are striving, O’Meara (2007) puts it succinctly-- ratings. Toma (2012) suggests that the status hierarchy in American higher education is captured

each year through the *U.S. News and World Report* Best Colleges rankings, the most famous of the higher education rankings. These rankings are primarily input driven, focused on such areas as academic reputation, selectivity, institutional resources, faculty resources, alumni giving, graduation rates, retention rates, and graduation rate performance (O'Meara 2007). While various types of rankings have existed throughout history, the first modern day form of rankings emerged in the 1970s with the introduction of the Carnegie Classification System. While this system was not intended to serve as a ranking system, institutions began to aspire to climb to higher levels within the classification. The system, until 2000, used variables commonly identified with prestige in its methodology, such as selectivity and federal research funding. Rankings systems became household names beginning in the 1980s, starting with the introduction of *U.S. News and World Reports Best Colleges and Universities* in 1983.

Institutions understand that there is a “next level” and pursue activities to reach it (Toma, 2012). O'Meara (2007) identifies the pursuit of prestige in the academic hierarchy as striving. Similarly, Toma (2008, 2012) refers to this pursuit as positioning for prestige. While most institutions are interested in improving in rank, their strategy is as much to maintain status, understanding the difficulty in actually advancing in the rankings (Toma, 2012).

Brewer, et. al (2002) suggests that various institutional types are concerned with prestige. In fact, Toma (2008) explored the pursuit of prestige at various types of institutions within the same market (metro Atlanta) and found some interesting results. Increasingly, comprehensive institutions are no longer concentrated on teaching, as aggressive presidents and faculty who were unable to secure positions at research

institutions push a research agenda in order to move the institution up the academic hierarchy. Community colleges are more concerned with how many students they enroll, how many students successfully transfer, and what are the job placement rates of its students. These institutions boast about the success of their students after they transfer, including trend data that suggest that their students outperform the other students at the transfer institution once they arrive. Community colleges are also developing articulation agreements with increasingly prestigious institutions so that they can highlight those relationships during student recruitment.

Though all types of institutions can have a focus on prestige, the prestige ladder in the U.S. is most associated with research universities and traditional liberal arts colleges (Toma, 2012). Accordingly, much of the research on prestige has focused on research institutions. Some private liberal arts colleges used prestige-seeking behaviors to their benefit in the 1970s and 1980s, when many institutions of this type were predicted to close. Instead, the institutions adopted prestige-seeking behaviors such as merging single sex institutions, adding professional degrees and distance learning programs, and increasing endowment building (O'Meara, 2007).

As would be expected, institutions vary considerably by their level of prestige. Brewer, et. al (2002) suggest that there are three types of institutions: prestigious institutions, prestige-seeking institutions, and reputation-based institutions. Prestigious institutions, according to the authors, are institutions that are at the top of the academic hierarchy. Prestige-seeking institutions are those institutions investing resources into prestige-seeking behavior. Reputation-based institutions are institutions that are tuition dependent and are responsive to student need.

Just how is prestige increased on campus? O'Meara (2007) suggests that there are "prestige generators" that institutions use to affect their standings. A review of the literature finds that colleges and universities have employed a number of common strategies in order to increase prestige, with admission, amenities, activities, and academics being the main arenas (Geiger, 2004; Gumprecht, 2008; Kirp, 2003; Newman, Couturier, & Scurry, 2004; Toma, 2003; Toma, 2008; Toma, 2012; O'Meara, 2008, Brewer, et. al, 2002).

Toma (2012) notes that most approaches institutions use to position for prestige emphasize recruiting students that advance institutional aspirations. The professionalism and expansion of student recruitment, as well as an increased focus on marketing is an indication of this trend (Toma, 2012). Institutions are developing aggressive financial aid packages in order to lure their top prospects into enrolling.

In order to gain more elite students, academic programs are seeing similar investments. Institutions are improving undergraduate and graduate programs, enhancing honors colleges, focusing on research for undergraduates and faculty, and increasing study abroad programs (Geiger, 2004; Kirp, 2003; Toma, 2012, O'Meara, 2007). Perceptive faculty even couch their support of revised curricula in strategic and positioning terms in order to secure support and funding (Toma, 2012).

For many institutions, there is a renewed focus on graduate education and research (Toma, 2012; O'Meara, 2007). The increased focus on research has also caused institutions to reevaluate its faculty recruitment, roles and rewards plans (O'Meara, 2007). Universities are now aggressive about recruiting faculty stars. They do this through offering great infrastructure such as new research labs and libraries, as well as

altering their faculty roles and rewards. The teaching load is decreasing at many institutions, allowing faculty to spend more time focused on research. Tenure and promotion processes are also being more heavily swayed to research production at many types of institutions.

Campus facilities have become a tactic for institutions to differentiate themselves more easily than through academic programs (Gumprecht, 2008; Toma, 2003; Toma, 2008; Toma, 2012). Officials believe this growth is necessary in order to keep pace with their peers in the race for prestige and resources, prestige and resources thought to be linked concepts (Brewer, et al., 2002). In other words, as prestige increases, resource dependency decreases. Investments in infrastructure represent both an offensive and defensive stance, because constructing facilities is an arms race, with competitors matching or exceeding the moves of their competition (Toma, 2012).

Because so many rankings use retention and graduation rates in their methodologies, institutions are spending increased resources on advising and academic support to help ensure that no student slips through the crack (Toma, 2012). These efforts are particularly high for diversity students. Campuses are adding cultural centers and other support mechanisms in order to recruit top-notch diversity prospects, which Toma (2012) sees as an important component of prestige.

One certainly could not exclude athletics from the prestige conversation (Toma, 2003; Toma, 2008). Much like outstanding facilities and programs help recruit non-athletes, they, too, attract athletes who can improve an athletic program's standings. Thus, institutions increasingly are building improved stadiums, practice and training facilities, and academic enhancement centers for athletes. Athletic conferences are being

reconstituted, TV contracts being renegotiated, and lucrative salaries being offered to coaches of major programs. The arms race in athletics shows no sign of slowing down, as the notoriety gained from successful programs helps increase institutional prestige.

Additionally, institutions are increasing staffing and resources in order to build endowments (Toma, 2012). Institutional and faculty resources play a large role in some ranking schemes, and institutions realize that increased resources will increase prestige. Thus, it is now rare for an institution either not to be in a campaign or planning a campaign aimed at increasing endowments for student scholarships and faculty support.

Nearly all institutions focus heavily on external relations (Toma, 2012, O'Meara, 2007). Whether through marketing, advertising, public relations, or communications, institutions are spending more time thinking about how to communicate the successes of the institution and imply that the institution is increasingly prestigious. Branding has played an important role in those efforts (Toma, 2012; O'Meara, 2007). Ultimately, it is not enough to do all of these prestige-generating activities if no one is aware that they have occurred. For that reason, the communication strategy is even more crucial to prestige-seeking efforts.

Perceptive institutions also are using innovative approaches to communicate (Wolff & Bryant, 1999). Kirp (2003) highlights a number of these tactics. He finds institutions providing subsidized "weekends of exploration" in London, England, opening a Hillel House and reviving a Jewish studies program in order to add culture and high ability Jewish students, and creating a "reaction program" to counter competing offers of financial aid packages to wealthy students. An institution can change its name from a

less desirable one to one more academically focused, or merely change from a college to a university, just to appear more prestigious (Kirp, 2003; Morpew, 2002).

Institutions are also focusing on what Toma (2012) describes as “collegiate character.” Whether emphasizing a liberal arts college’s urban setting, an institution’s religious orientation, or its unique programmatic offerings, institutions are finding ways to use, and market towards, their niche. Moving to “the next level” works best when institutions are pushed to differentiate themselves (Toma, 2012). Of course, one can easily question the true “differentiation” provided by these niches.

Does this focus on prestige matter in the end? O’Meara (2007) explores this question and concludes that it does matter because consumers perceive that prestige equals quality (O’Meara, 2007). Consumers want the positive externalities and tangible benefits associated with attending a prestigious institution, such as admission to top graduate programs and high job placement rates (Toma, 2012).

Similarly, prestige leads to increased resources, which leads to increased prestige, and the cycle continues (Toma, 2012). Institutions must be astute about ways to increase their resources, and while prestige seeking is expensive, it can reap rewards. For example, take the case of the typical institutional donor. Donors are more interested in giving to causes that will likely increase prestige and less interested in contributing to “keep the lights on” (Toma, 2012).

While some may view prestige-seeking behaviors as negative, Brewer, et al. (2002) also suggest that some inherent good comes from prestige-seeking behaviors. Prestige-seeking institutions attempt to do better, improving excellence, and thus, increasing overall industry standards (Brewer, et. al, 2002). In fact, some of the

innovations in higher education emerge because of institutions trying to climb the prestige ladder.

Of course, there are reasons why prestige should not matter. First, prestige does not equal quality, despite that common perception. In fact, most rankings are developed with inputs that only imply the quality of an institution before students attend, instead of measuring the value added during the educational process. For example, institutional selectivity is not an accurate indicator of the use of best practices in undergraduate education (O'Meara, 2007).

Pursuing prestige often does not make good economic sense, for if it did, then for-profit institutions would be pursuing prestige (Brewer, et. al, 2002). Part of this economic dilemma stems from the fact that prestige seeking may require institutions to make tradeoffs, and at times, these institutions may be unaware they are making those tradeoffs (O'Meara, 2007). Often institutions will invest in prestige-seeking behavior not knowing the opportunity cost of not having spent those dollars in other areas.

Toma (2012) suggests that there are two different broad paths in order for higher education institutions to achieve prestige. First, institutional officials can legitimize their institution by emulating its successful peers, as suggested in institutional theory. Secondly, they can differentiate themselves, as the strategy literature advocates. The next two sections explore these different paths.

Institutional Theory

Institutional theory suggests that organizations are likely to incorporate practices and procedures defined by prevailing rationalized concepts and institutionalized society (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). This, in turn, increases the legitimacy of the organization and

their prospect for survival. Organizations risk being seen as less legitimate if they stray away from the normative organizational model for their field (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983, Meyer & Rowan, 1977). These practices and procedures are incorporated more for legitimacy purposes than for efficacy (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Many of these practices and procedures become powerful myths within the organization; so much in fact, the organization adopts them ceremonially (Meyer & Rowan, 1977).

Organizations often model themselves after similar organizations in the same field that they perceive to be successful (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Consequently, over time, organizations begin to become homogenous as they adopt innovations of these aspirational organizations. Organizations must incorporate some processes and structures because they are normatively prescribed (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Meyer, Scott, & Deal (1981) call these “institutionally conforming structure(s)” and suggest that they lead to a greater understanding of an organization’s legitimacy (p. 47). It is institutional isomorphism that promotes the success and survival of organizations, because the institution gains the legitimacy and resources it needs to survive (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). According to DiMaggio & Powell (1983), “Organizations compete not just for resources and customers but for political power and institutional legitimacy, for social as well as economic fitness” (p. 150).

DiMaggio and Powell (1983) illuminate three different types of isomorphism: normative, coercive, and mimetic. In their quest for prestige, institutions of higher education can be susceptible to all three types (Toma, 2008). Normative isomorphism results from the professionalization of an industry (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). Professionalization is the struggle of members of an occupation to define their working

conditions and methods, control the production of the producers in the field, and establish legitimacy for their occupational autonomy. Institutions may experience normative forces internally, such as graduate students being acclimated to the professoriate, consequently furthering the concept of what structures and processes are legitimate (Toma, 2008).

In coercive isomorphism, outside pressures or requirements cause organizations to become more similar (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). This type of isomorphism stems from political influence and the problem of legitimacy. It is a result of both informal and formal pressures by other organizations upon which an organization is dependent as well as the cultural expectations of society. Coercive isomorphism need not be overt, as its name might imply. In fact, it can be subtle and understated. For example, in higher education a more overt example of coercive isomorphism might be accreditation processes, which has clearly defined requirements in order to maintain accreditation. A less overt example results from the fact that institutions can feel coercive pressure from those upon whom they rely for resources (Pfeffer, 1982; Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). In particular, there can be a coercive effect on colleges and universities as officials seek strategies to increase their endowments.

Mimetic isomorphism is significant in higher education. Mimetic isomorphism is the standard response to uncertainty (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Uncertainty leads to imitation or modeling. Meyer and Rowan (1977) conclude that when there are ambiguous goals, poorly understood organizational technologies, or when there is uncertainty, organizations may model themselves after other organizations. Those organizations being modeled may be unaware that they are being modeled and may not

wish to be modeled (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Nevertheless, they have little choice as their strategies are often diffused widely. This diffusion may occur unintentionally, indirectly through employee transfer or turnover, or explicitly through consultants or trade associations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

Colleges and universities might also seek to reduce uncertainty by mimicking strategies that aspirational institutions employ in order to avoid risky, unproven strategies. A strong example of mimetic isomorphism in higher education is the rise and fall (and now rise again) of early action and early decision admission programs and need blind admission policies. As industry leaders such as the Ivy League (and the Little Ivies for liberal arts colleges) alter their admission and financial aid programs, slowly, other institutions follow.

Toma (2012) suggests that there are five reasons why institutions pursue common strategies that lead to legitimacy and autonomy, and, thus, resources: (a) network influences; (b) more interest in legitimizing themselves than finding efficiencies; (c) more homogeneity over time; (d) rationalized myths; and (e) satisficing. First, organizations are subject to influences within networks (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). In higher education, there is an overall network where institutions follow what is going on strategically at leading institutions. This information is easy to obtain through professional associations and trade journals, providing the institutions with the information they need to replicate market leaders in order to lend legitimacy to their institution. The segmentation in higher education, as well as consortia in which institutions group themselves, constitute clear sub-networks in higher education (Toma, 2012). Benchmarking is another area where institutions create a sub-network.

Institutions identify peer institutions, in addition to aspirational institutions, with which to compare themselves. This allows the institution to compare their progress to similar institutions, as well as those they yearn to be more like. This process is challenging and can be misleading, because benchmarking rarely uses true output measures, instead focusing on measures associated more with prestige than quality (Toma, 2012).

Secondly, organizations are more interested in legitimizing themselves through reference to other organizations than seeking efficiency (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). This legitimacy helps to ensure resources and stability. Toma (2012) operationalizes this through the example of donors. They are less interested in funding general operations than providing support for specific activities that enhance prestige. Another example includes tuition discounting in order to recruit more accomplished students, which reduces the institution's bottom line (Ehrenberg, 2002; Geiger, 2004; McPherson & Schapiro, 1998). Toma (2012) believes that when institutions do find efficiencies, they do so in order to fund legitimizing efforts. He includes the examples of deemphasizing the core of what the institution does and focusing more on peripheral activities that can generate revenue, such as outsourcing of campus services (Zemsky, Wegner, & Massy, 2005; Kirp, 2003), as well as establishing satellite campuses for students in professional fields (Zemsky, Wegner, & Massy, 2005; Newman, Courtier, & Scurry, 2004).

DiMaggio and Powell (1983) wrote that, over time, organizations become more homogenous by adopting the innovations of leading organizations, or isomorphism. They define two different types of isomorphism: competitive isomorphism that is driven by the response to the markets and institutional isomorphism that is driven by

competition for legitimacy. Toma (2012) suggests that by imitating market leaders, a form of institutional isomorphism, institutions reduce uncertainty. On the other hand, decidedly different approaches provide a risk that could worry donors, government, and ranking calculators, all of which favor a more traditional approach.

Fourthly, institutions often develop narratives that sometimes have little connection with reality, known as rationalized myths (Pfeffer, 1982; Zucker, 1987). These myths reassure both internal and external constituencies, while connecting to institutional purposes (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Scott, 1983). An example of such a myth is a small college that has framed itself as a traditional liberal arts college but in actuality its activities are nothing like a traditional liberal arts college (Kraatz & Zajac, 1996). Because so few consumers of higher education understand the difference between a true liberal arts campus and that of a more comprehensive institution, it is easy to send the signal that the institution is a liberal arts college and receives all the benefits associated with that.

Finally, institutions may limit themselves to a few familiar paths. Known as satisficing, institutions strive for merely a satisfactory outcome, even if that outcome is not the optimal outcome (Simon, 1947). In such a competitive environment, this provides comfort in the familiar, instead of significant risk-taking endeavors.

Competitive Strategy Theory

On the other end of the bifurcated path to prestige is competitive strategy. “The foundation of competitive strategy is differentiation” (Toma, 2012, p. 13). Competitive strategy literature suggests that firms, in this case, institutions of higher education, are more successful when they differentiate themselves in order to gain greater market share,

gain a more attractive portion of the market segment, or move to a more promising segment (Toma, 2012). Toma (2012) discusses five different topics upon which the competitive strategy literature focuses: (a) positioning, or pursuing different activities or similar activities in different ways; (b) diversifying or expanding; (c) the favorability of the structure of an industry; (d) developing competitive advantage either through increasing customer willingness to pay or lowering production costs; and (e) developing a brand.

Toma (2012) defines positioning as “a firm outperforming rivals by establishing a difference that it can preserve, either pursuing different activities or similar activities in a different way” (p. 14). Positioning is also one of the three prescriptive schools of strategy that Mintzberg, Ahlstrand, and Lampel (2005) describe. Positioning is important as it relates to differentiation. Porter (1979) asserts that firms gain advantage through positioning. Positioning consists of differentiating from rivals and having interlocked activities, which are difficult for competitors to match (Porter, 1987; Porter, 1996; Porter 2008a). Porter (1996) describes a number of different approaches to positioning, including serving only a particular: aspect of an industry, customer type, or particular area.

Diversification and expansion serve as the second topic that Toma (2012) identifies as central in competitive strategy. Piskorski (2005) suggests that one way to diversify and expand is to develop multiple units in different markets. Satellite campuses and early enrollment programs for high school students serve as examples. Piskorski (2005) goes on to describe two scenarios to move forward with expansion. First, entering a new market must improve the competitive advantage of other units. For example, an

institution may open a campus in a foreign country as a way of supporting its main campus. Secondly, ownership of a unit must be more advantageous than outsourcing, partnering, or other relationships. Thus, opening a bookstore as a means of revenue is not a wise strategy if the institution can achieve more profit through outsourcing, for example.

Thirdly, Porter (2008b, 1979) identifies four types of threats to entry into an industrial structure: a) barriers of entry, b) powerful suppliers and buyers, c) the threat of substitute products, and d) rivalries among competitors. While there are few formal barriers to entry into higher education, the power of incumbency and the large startup costs serve as more informal barriers into the higher education arena. As for powerful suppliers, faculty, with perhaps the exception of top performing researchers, are relatively undifferentiated and have limited leverage. While students, the buyers, can “shop around” for better financial aid packages, most students are relatively uninformed about the product they are purchasing. Institutions can shape their image to these students through marketing. There is no substitute for residential education, and, marginally, some risk of substitution for those students seeking the convenience of distance education programs (Toma, 2012). Finally, competition among rivals is fierce in higher education as institutions constantly battle for position.

Fourth, if institutions are increasingly becoming more isomorphic, competitive strategy theory would suggest that institutions must somehow differentiate themselves in order to gain a competitive advantage (Toma, 2012). Ghemawat and Rivkin (1999) suggest that competitive advantage can be achieved in two ways: increasing the difference in what someone will pay for a product and the cost to produce the good or

configuring the activities of an organization to do something unique and valuable. The institution could develop a low cost, lesser product or develop a superior product at a low cost, but neither is practical for an institution seeking to maximize legitimacy. Instead, the institution can increase the consumers' willingness to pay without significant increases in cost, a product differentiation strategy.

Porter (1985) proposed that there are three ways to develop a competitive advantage: a) offering a product at lower cost, known as operational excellence, b) marketing differentiated products that attract a higher price, a form of product leadership, and c) focusing on a targeted market, known as customer intimacy (Porter, 1985; Porter, 2008a; Treacy & Wiersema, 1993). Community colleges and less-selective comprehensive institutions are likely to produce education at a lower cost. These institutions emphasize accessibility and convenience rather than the luxury amenities other segments in higher education emphasize. Secondly, research institutions and liberal arts colleges can offer product leadership, offering a product akin to a luxury good. Consumers attending these institutions are looking for the intangible benefits of attending such a prestigious institution. Finally, some institutions have characteristics aimed at appealing to a certain type of student. Institutions may emphasize their urban or rural setting, but the differences programmatically are not that different.

Finally, one way to better market a good in order to create a competitive advantage is through branding. A brand is the name and symbols that differentiate the goods of one seller from those of another (Aaker, 1991). To build a brand, an institution must develop a distinct identity and maintain consistent and coherent images (Keller, 2003). Brands shape how customers experience the product in a sensory manner (Holt,

2003). Simply put, “branding is about asking, ‘When a person hears our name, what does he or she think?’” (Antcil, 2008, p. 35)? Temple (2006) makes the connection that what some refer to as university branding is actually institutional reputation and image. Thus, it becomes even more important for institutions to ensure that they do whatever it takes to live up to the brand they create (Antcil, 2008). In the case of marketing and higher education, perception can be reality (Antcil, 2008).

Unfortunately, universities and colleges underemphasize differentiation in their endeavors to move to the next level (Toma, 2010). Toma (2012) suggests that for many institutions, the mere appearance of differentiation accomplishes their goals, and that in actuality, claims of distinctiveness are more marketing driven than actual distinctive points about an institution. In essence, there is rarely difference in academic programs or the services offered by student affairs professionals. Many institutions are building the same types of modern amenities and are enhancing their study abroad and honors programs. While more attention to real differentiation would provide a better result, the differences between institutions, no matter the marketing strategy to define the institutions as distinct, are modest, at best (Toma, 2012).

This study may reveal if Toma’s (2012) assertion that very little real differentiation occurs is true. The study will draw on each of the strands of literature discussed in this chapter to learn more about what messages liberal arts colleges are sending to prospective students. It will explore these messages to see if they are legitimizing or truly differentiating.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH DESIGN

Given the purpose of this study to deepen the understanding of how private liberal arts colleges communicate to prospective students, this dissertation follows a qualitative research design. Qualitative research provides a way to understand the meaning ascribed to a social or human problem (Creswell, 2009). Most often, qualitative research seeks to answer the question *what* or *how*, instead of *why* (Creswell, 1998). By its nature, it is an inductive method that allows for the understanding of the complexity of an individual circumstance (Creswell, 2009). Because the study explores an issue through one or more cases in a bounded system over time using multiple sources of information, the case study method of inquiry is employed (Creswell, 2007). This chapter outlines the research strategy, case selection strategy, data collection and analytic techniques, and limitations of the study.

Research Strategy

This study employs a comparative case study research strategy. Yin (2009) states that the case study is used to “contribute to our knowledge of the individual, group, organizational, social, political and related phenomena” (p. 4). The case study’s strength lies, according to Yin (2009), in its ability to incorporate a variety of evidence, including documents, observations, and interviews. Multiple case studies are more robust than single cases due to the ability to conduct analysis within and between cases. Yin (2009) describes two forms of multiple case studies: holistic or embedded. This study will be a

holistic study because there is a single unit of analysis. In addition, Yin (2009) suggests that multiple case studies use replication, where one case is studied in depth with successive cases examined to see if there are patterns to previous cases. Using institutional theory and differentiation strategy to guide the study, the cases are selected in order to predict similar results, known as a literal replication (Yin, 2009).

Case Selection Strategy

Qualitative research requires a purposeful sample (Creswell, 2009).

Straightforward theoretical approaches may only require two to three literal replications in order to establish some degree of certainty (Yin, 2009). This study employs four criteria for case selection. First, the institutions must be ranked in the top tier of liberal arts colleges by the *US News and World Report's 2011 Best Colleges* ("Best Liberal Arts Colleges," 2010). Secondly, the institutions must be located in the same geographic region within short distance of each other. Generally, I selected schools in the same geographic location due to similar characteristics of the institutions. For example, it would be more difficult to compare an institution in the northeast to an institution in the southeast, due to differences in cultures, traditions, and behaviors of students and institutions. The northeast was selected due to the high number of liberal arts colleges in the region, as well as for the culture of bright students attending those intuitions.

Third, each institution must be in a different subset of first tier institutions in the *US News and World Report's 2011 Best Colleges* rankings ("Best Liberal Arts Colleges," 2010). One institution currently is ranked as the number one institution, and according to the theoretical framework, is likely to be emulated by the other institutions in the study. A second institution is striving to be a part of the "top 25" while a third institution

is striving to be in the “top 50,” both very different and distinct subsets of the top tier. Finally, because this study seeks to be literal replication as defined by Yin (2009), the cases had to be similar in institutional type, student body, and style. Thus, public institutions, single-sex institutions, and institutions with extremely different education philosophies were excluded from the study.

The three institutions selected for this study are Williams College, Trinity College (CT)², and Wheaton College (MA)³. Williams College is located approximately 135 miles from Boston in a rural, northwestern Massachusetts town known as Williamstown. It has an undergraduate student population of 2,000 and serves as an aspirational institution for the other liberal arts colleges in the study, due to its 1st place ranking by *U.S. News*. It is the oldest of the institutions in the study, having been founded in 1783, as well as the most selective, accepting only 20% of its applicants. It offers two graduate programs.

Located in Hartford, Connecticut, Trinity College has the largest undergraduate student population of the three institutions being studied with approximately 2,400 undergraduate students. It also offers a limited number of graduate programs. The college admits approximately 41% of applicants and currently ranks 36th by *U.S. News*.

Wheaton College, founded in 1834, is the youngest of the institutions and is located in between Boston, Massachusetts and Providence, Rhode Island in Norton, Massachusetts. It has the smallest student population in the sample with approximately

² There are a number of institutions with “Trinity” in its name in the U.S., including multiple known as Trinity College. Often, this campus is identified as Trinity College (CT). For the purposes of this study, Trinity College will refer to Trinity College (CT).

³ There are two Wheaton Colleges in the U.S. The second is located in Illinois. Typically, the two institutions are distinguished as either Wheaton College (MA) or Wheaton College (IL). For the purposes of this study, Wheaton College will refer to Wheaton College (MA).

1,600 students, all of which are undergraduates, and currently ranks 59th by *U.S. News*. The college admits approximately 59% of its applicants.

Data Collection and Analytic Techniques

The study focuses on a content analysis of the admission communication strategy of these three institutions. Content analysis is a method of examining text and images in order to identify messages and meaning (Krippendorff, 2004). Krippendorff (2004) suggests a series of structured activities to analyze visual media.

The first step is *sampling*, where clear criteria for selecting the media analyzed are developed. Yin (2009) has three principles of data collection, which apply when considering sampling. First, use multiple sources of evidence, known as triangulation. Secondly, create a case study database. Thirdly, maintain a chain of evidence.

The success of the case study, according to Yin (2009), lies in its use of multiple sources of evidence. Yin (2009) points to six different sources of evidence, of which two, document analysis and direct observation, were used in this study. For document analysis, I analyzed both written documents and electronic documents. For written documents, I examined each college's viewbook, perhaps the most quintessential form of communication for college admission offices. With respect to electronic documents, I examined the institutions' homepages, the admission offices' websites, and the colleges' Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube sites. These social media sites were particularly relevant as they provide opportunities for two-way communication, which Grunig and Hunt (1984) suggest develops mutual understanding between both parties in the dialogue. For the online media, I examined the sites over a period of three months in order to get a wide sampling of the messages communicated.

The second source of evidence is direct observation. I observed both an admission information session for prospective students at each site as well as participated in a campus tour. Again, these mediums were important for the analysis because there was an opportunity to explore more than just one-way communication, as presented in written documents. I anticipated that the institutions communicated slightly different messages via each medium, but that these messages still attempted to legitimize the institution.

According to Krippendorff's (2004) second step, known as *unitizing*, the researcher must identify a set of discrete themes drawn from theory and related literature. Krippendorff (2004) suggests that this step may occur in various places in the design of a study. For the sake of this study, I made the decision to develop discrete themes before the recording process. Based off the writings of Toma (2008, 2012) and O'Meara (2007), I identified categories for prestige-seeking behavior (see Table 1). To make this list more manageable, I developed primary categories and sub-categories. Nine primary categories and twelve sub-categories were identified. Some examples include athletics, research funding, infrastructure, innovative academic programs, study abroad, and service learning (Toma, 2008; Toma, 2012, O'Meara, 2007). Through each of these categories, either institutional officials chose to legitimize their institution by mimicking behaviors of institutions to which they aspire or wish to be compared, or they attempted to do something outside the norm in these categories that would differentiate their institution from its competition.

The third step described by Krippendorff (2004) is *recording*. This involves interpreting what one sees or reads while using observer-independent rules to code. For

Table 1-Categories of Prestige-Seeking Behaviors

Primary Category	Sub-Category	Developed from
Academic Programs		Toma, 2012
	Innovative Programs	Toma, 2012
	Study Abroad	Toma, 2012
	Service Learning	Toma, 2012
	Honors Program	O'Meara, 2007; Toma, 2012
	Research Funding	Toma, 2008; Toma, 2012
	Undergraduate Research	Toma, 2012
	Graduate Programs	O'Meara, 2007; Toma, 2008; Toma, 2012
Infrastructure (student affairs, academics, and athletics)		Toma, 2012
Student Recruitment & Retention		O'Meara, 2007; Toma, 2012
	Financial Aid and Discounting	Toma, 2008; Toma, 2012
	Retention	Toma, 2008; Toma, 2012
Faculty Recruitment, Roles, and Reward		O'Meara, 2007; Toma, 2012
External Relations		O'Meara, 2007; Toma, 2012
	Institutional Identity/Branding	O'Meara, 2007; Toma, 2008; Toma, 2012
	Endowment	Toma, 2008; Toma, 2012
	Development	Toma, 2012
Diversity		Toma, 2008; Toma, 2012
Athletics		Toma, 2008; Toma, 2012
Resource Allocation Decisions		O'Meara, 2007
Comparison to other Institutions		Toma, 2012

the observations, I developed a protocol to record the information collected, providing a method of recording both descriptive and reflective notes. I also kept a field diary in order to record my own thoughts and feelings throughout the data collection process. Finally, I made notations in the margins as I reviewed the viewbooks. The data was

broken down into small text segments or images that I coded based on content and filed with others with the same code. As there was only one researcher in this study, the point of developing observer independent rules was not for the purpose of maintaining consistency across multiple researchers as much as it was to help ensure that codes do not drift and that if a different researcher wanted to replicate the study, they could do so and get similar results.

The fourth activity recommended by Krippendorff (2004) is systematically tabulating and summarizing the data, known as *reduction*. Miles and Huberman (1994) recommend that this analysis take place both within-case for each individual case, as well as between cases, which will be observed in this study. This study also uses one of Yin's (2009) recommended strategies for analyzing the data: use theory to guide the analysis.

Yin (2009) also identified five analytic techniques, two of which I used in this study. First, the study uses pattern matching. Pattern matching uses the data to look for trends, patterns, and differences. Secondly, the study uses explanation building, which is a form of pattern matching. The goal of explanation building is to use the case study data to be able to explain the phenomenon being studied. It is important to note that data collection and analysis in qualitative research should be a simultaneous process (Merriam, 1988), and thus the analysis began as the data collection began.

Finally, Krippendorff (2004) proposes making *inferences*. In this activity, the researcher constructs inferences based on patterns developed from the data. By using these five activities that Krippendorff (2004) proposes, along with analytic techniques proposed by Yin (2009), the study is an example of strong qualitative research methods.

Trustworthiness

To protect the study against threats to validity and reliability, this study employed the four general tests for the trustworthiness of any empirical study as suggested by Yin (2009). First, the researcher must ensure that the study can be repeated with the same results, known as reliability. I developed a case study protocol prior to the collection of the data to ensure that as the researcher I did not stray away from the study's original intent. I also maintained a case study database as a repository for all of the data collected in the study, which will allow other researchers to access the original data.

Secondly, to ensure the use of the correct operational measures, known as construct validity, I used two techniques as suggested by Yin (2009). First, I incorporated multiple sources of data. Secondly, I maintained a chain of evidence in order for another researcher to be able to deduce how I reached my conclusions.

The third test of trustworthiness is internal validity, where researchers try to identify a causal relationship. Yin (2009) proposed four techniques for strengthening internal validity. I employed two of these techniques in this study: pattern matching and explanation building.

The final test, external validity, helped to identify a domain to which the study can be generalized. Yin (2009) suggested that multiple case studies are more generalizable than single case studies. This study consisted of three different cases of liberal arts colleges, and I employed replication logic (Yin, 2009).

Limitations

This study is limited primarily by the research design, case selection, and intent of the study. While this study provides some insight into how these three particular

institutions face this dilemma, further research is required to be able to generalize these findings. In addition, this study is designed to focus on communication to prospective students and their families, and yet there are many more audiences to which these institutions communicate, such as guidance counselors, alumni, donors, and fellow institutions (who are instrumental in improving an institution's reputation score in the *US News and World Report Best Colleges* rankings), which could be explored.

Secondly, the focus of the study is limited to a regional set of schools. Further research could illuminate the challenges of this dilemma in areas where liberal arts colleges are not as numerous such as the mid-west, west, and south. Additionally, the cases only reflect top tier and more specifically the top 75 institutions. For a deeper understanding of all liberal arts colleges, cases would need to include institutions ranked lower in the top tier, as well as subsequent tiers.

Finally, the intent of this study is to understand what messages institutions are conveying to prospective students and how those messages relate to the concepts of prestige, institutional theory, and strategy. The study is not designed to discern the intent of those creating the messages. It is difficult to know whether the message crafters intend to convey prestige or whether the messages were included simply because prospective students value that type of information. Further research is necessary to answer these questions.

CHAPTER IV

THE CASE OF WHEATON COLLEGE

This chapter, as well as the chapters on the other two cases, follow a similar structure. First, the chapter includes an overview of each institution. The next section examines the various methods of delivery of messages and provides a brief overview of the data sources. In the final section of each chapter, I report and discuss the data by theme.

Overview

Wheaton College is a highly residential liberal arts college located in Norton, Massachusetts, a town of 20,000, about 35 miles from Boston and 20 miles from Providence, Rhode Island. Founded in 1834 as a female seminary, the College became a four-year liberal arts college for women in 1912. In 1988, it opened its doors to men to become a coeducational institution. With 1,600 students, Wheaton is a medium-sized liberal arts college, offering over 40 majors and 50 minors. The College has 150 full-time faculty members, allowing the College to have a student to faculty ratio of 11 to 1 and average class sizes of 15-20 students. The College claims 15,000 alumni. The student body hails from approximately 45 states and 70 countries. The cost of attending Wheaton in 2011-2012 is \$41,600 with a comprehensive fee of \$52,564 (*The Wheaton year in (pleasingly controversial) ideas*, 2011; Wheaton College website, 2011).

The academic curriculum of Wheaton is based on foundational underpinnings, an interdisciplinary exploration, and at least one major. The foundational underpinnings,

known as Foundations, require students to participate in a First-Year Seminar, a writing requirement course known as English 101, two courses in a foreign language, one course in quantitative analysis, and one course that discusses a culture “Beyond the West.” In Wheaton’s Connections program, students organize courses around a common theme in order to explore the connections among the disciplines. Students must take either two sets of two-course connections or one three-course connection. Each course in a connection must come from a different academic area of the six at the College: creative arts, humanities, history, social sciences, math and computer science, and natural science. Finally, throughout their on-campus coursework at Wheaton, students must take a course in each of the College’s three academic divisions: arts and humanities, natural sciences, and social sciences.

When you walk onto the campus of Wheaton College, you immediately get the sense that you are in a small, intimate learning environment steeped in history. The 400-acre campus projects what one might expect of a small college in New England. Of the 400 acres, 120 are developed, with the rest being forest, fields, and wetland. The campus contains 81 buildings with a variety of architectural styles. The upper campus is the historic part of campus and is mostly Georgian Revival style. The lower campus is more modern and international style (*The Wheaton year in (pleasingly controversial) ideas*, 2011; Wheaton College website, 2011).

Methods of Delivery

Viewbook

Wheaton’s viewbook, *The Wheaton year in (pleasingly controversial) ideas* (2011), is short in length and the amount of text contained within is low, due to a strong

emphasis on large photographic backgrounds (see an example in Figure 1). General facts, figures, and information about the College are reduced to eight pages. Another 20 pages are devoted to “The Year in Ideas,” which is alluded to in the title of the viewbook. The pages provide one to two page glimpses into “some of the most important, unexpected, possibly world-changing ideas” from the College (p. 1).

Twitter

Wheaton’s use of Twitter is minimal, with fewer than 30 posts during the study period. Only four other accounts link to the College’s account (www.twitter.com/wheaton) during that time, and those four links are the result of the College’s only use of retweeting.⁴ The College rarely uses hashtags in its posts, so as to connect it to a conversation thread.⁵ Similarly, it rarely directly linked to other Twitter users in its posts. The College did use URL shortening to connect its followers to more information about its posts.⁶ The messages sent by the College via Twitter appear less strategic and more about providing updates on campus happenings.

Facebook

Wheaton has spent more time developing its Facebook presence. The College’s page (www.facebook.com/WheatonCollege) has a personalized tab that links visitors to other Wheaton related pages. It also has a small number of photos and videos posted for

⁴ You can link to a Twitter account through retweeting another user’s post, mentioning a fellow user’s username, or replying to a user’s account. Retweeting is posting another user’s post on your account. A mention is a tweet containing another user’s Twitter username, preceded by the “@” symbol. A reply is a tweet that begins with another user’s username and is in reply to one of their tweets.

⁵ The # symbol, called a hashtag, is used to mark keywords or topics in a tweet. Users can then search for certain hashtags to see conversations based on that keyword or topic.

⁶ URL shortening takes a long URL (or specific character string that constitutes a reference to an internet resource) and shortens it, frequently to be used in social media programs that limit the number of characters used.



THEMED LIVING

In one of our student-run theme houses, students with shared interests (world health, outdoor education, sustainability) cook and do chores and generally live like real people in a house. Rosemary Liss (with the lovely orange scarf, at a shared meal at ECCO House) has lived in the House of the Living Arts for three years. "We do a lot of cooking together, which turns out to be a huge benefit. It's a way of spending quality time with friends. And there are bigger social and cultural meanings to meals, too, which I discovered in a First Year Seminar called 'The Rituals of Dinner.' Wheaton is all about going at subjects from different perspectives." Rosemary Liss is a senior studio art major.

Figure 1: Sample Wheaton College Viewbook Page (p. 12)

visitors to view. The College posts more regularly on Facebook than Twitter and provides brief facts, links to interesting stories, and updates about events at the College. Friends of the College post on the College's page at a moderate level, but the College rarely responds to these posts.

YouTube

Wheaton's YouTube page (www.youtube.com/user/WheatonCollegeMA), while not robust, uses the medium to convey a variety of messages and for different audiences. Initially, the College only used its YouTube channel to deliver sections of video from various campus events. In the past year, however, the College has uploaded videos more focused on conveying targeted messages about the College, particularly the In Focus series. This series contains short videos highlighting certain topics such as residence life, the Farmer's Market, and the Rugby team. Additionally, recent videos convey campus traditions and relationships with faculty, staff, and students.

Website

The College's homepage (www.wheatoncollege.edu) and admission website (www.wheatoncollege.edu/admission) provide adequate links to information important to prospective students. Interestingly, however, the College does not provide links to its social media sites on either site, which may suggest that social media is not a high priority strategy for communicating with the College's constituents. This leaves the prospective student to search for these sites on his or her own, something they may be less likely to do without the ease of clicking on a readily available link. This is particularly concerning for Wheaton, because when you attempt to search for Wheaton

on Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube, it is difficult to discern between this institution (located in Massachusetts) and another institution by the same name located in Illinois.

Campus Tour

The campus visit experience begins with visitors parking in a lot on the far edge of campus. As visitors make their way to the admission office, they pass perhaps the most unattractive portion of campus, lower campus. The Office of Admission itself is in a non-descript building located off the central lawn of the campus on the more historic upper campus. Inside, visitors find a beautifully furnished waiting area with composites of tour guides from each of the recent years. The staff warmly greets each visitor, offering warm beverages and a comfortable place to relax. The tour itself then leaves the admission office and wanders its way through much of the central campus, going inside the historic library, the athletic center, the new center for science and technology, the student center, a first-year residence hall, a humanities classroom building, the performing arts center, and a dining hall.

One female student, dressed in a distinct blue Wheaton College coat, led the tour. She greeted each participant individually and asked each participant to introduce themselves individually to the group. The tour lasted approximately an hour, and at the conclusion, the guide gave each participant a bag of Wheaton M&M candies, as a reference to the Mars family that founded the Mars candy company, and of whom one is an alumna of the College. The family donated the lead gift to fund the over \$40 million Mars Center for Science and Technology which opened in the fall of 2011.

Admission Information Session

A veteran admission staff member and one student delivered the admission information session. There were no audio-visuals used, nor script. The College held the session in a classroom in the student center that was not well lit or particularly alluring. The group involved was small, with only two families participating. The information session lasted approximately an hour, with ample time for questions from the audience.

Messaging

Academic Programs

From the outset, Wheaton tries to convey itself as an academically focused institution. The title of its viewbook suggests that Wheaton is a place where ideas are discussed, if not debated, and flourish. In fact, the first page of the viewbook states that the College's students and faculty "don't take anything for granted, (and) love a good debate" (p. 1). Elsewhere in the viewbook, the College uses text in a variety of fonts and sizes to highlight important messages about the College (see Figure 2). The most visible of these messages is "General Knowledge," located in the center of both pages in the largest size font, which is both the title of the page and also a reference to the academic pursuit (p. 2-3). Of the 15 messages in this display, over 50% are academic in nature.

Specifically, the College highlights what it believes is a truly innovative general education program. Part of this program, which the College highlights most, is the Connections element. Each of the various mediums of communicating to prospective students integrates this theme well. In fact, it has almost become a brand within itself. When you visit the Wheaton College homepage, the page uses the language "major connection" to highlight articles regarding majors. Similarly, it states "Life is an

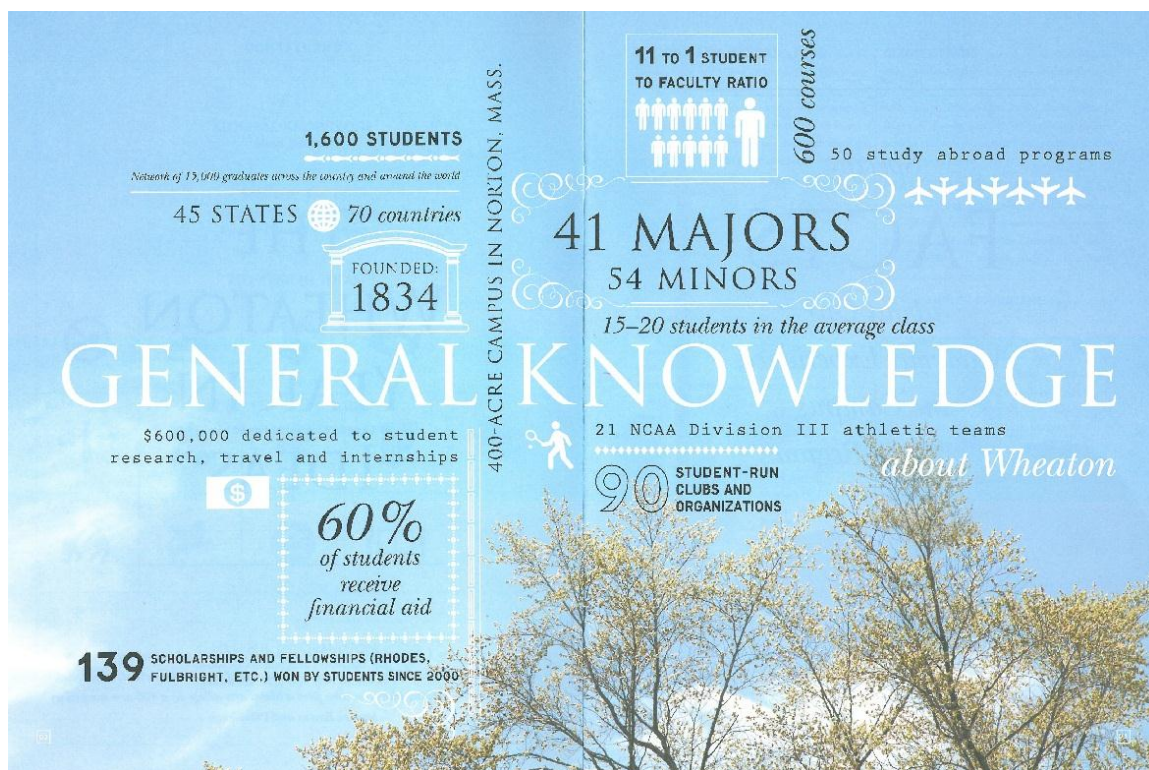


Figure 2: Wheaton College Viewbook General Knowledge Page (p.2-3)

experiment. Are you game?" and links appear as you scroll over the text to highlight courses where experiments and games serve as a Connection. The Connections element of the curriculum was also a highlight of both the tour and admission information session. Students in both shared their personal experience of the Connection that they chose to make. Both spoke with passion about its importance and impact. The admission professional in the information session declared that this was "one of the things that distinguishes Wheaton's curriculum."

Without a doubt, study abroad is an important component of the Wheaton experience. As the viewbook states, more than 65 percent of Wheaton students study abroad. Despite the numerical evidence that study abroad is important, the College does not widely highlight study abroad in its marketing messages to prospective students. The

viewbook emphasizes that the College provides its students access to more than 50 programs and discusses a few international internship opportunities students have had. There also is a short reference to the Center for Global Education and the College's program in Bhutan as well as short-term programs. Otherwise, there is little mention of study abroad. Surprisingly, the viewbook does not contain a single photo of students in one of these abroad settings. There is no mention of study abroad during the study period on either the College's Twitter or Facebook accounts. The tour and admission information session only provided brief highlights of the students' personal experiences with study abroad.

When it comes to service learning, Wheaton is nearly silent. There is a brief mention of service projects (not necessarily service learning, but service none-the-less) on the final two pages of the viewbook. There is also a video on the College's YouTube channel that highlights students' participation in service nationally. Otherwise, the College does not mention service learning in its messages to prospective students.

While most liberal arts colleges do not have honors programs, such as the ones found at much larger institutions, they often do have programs to highlight the exceptional work of students. These can take a variety of forms, such as the ability to graduate with honors by completing extra requirements and programs designed to help students apply for prestigious fellowships and awards. Wheaton spends considerable effort highlighting its outstanding award winners. The homepage of the College's website prominently features the Fulbright logo and highlights that "Wheaton ranks among (the) nation's top liberal arts colleges for Fulbright scholars." The College also highlighted this distinction through posts on Twitter and Facebook. The admission

information session contained a personal anecdote from the admission professional about a young woman who recently won the Rhodes scholarship. Perhaps the most visible representation of the effort that the College puts into helping its students achieve these great accolades is a wall in the student center that lists each distinguished award and the recipients of each. The tour highlighted the wall, which was very striking and attention grabbing. Overall, Wheaton students have won 139 scholarships and fellowships since 2000, which the viewbook notes prominently (p. 2) and the admission office highlights in a display.

As one might expect at a liberal arts college, Wheaton sends consistent, repeated messages about the intimate learning environment created on campus; however, the verbal messages during the tour and admission information session were not as strong as one might expect. Instead, the College tried to illustrate these relationships rather than just suggesting they existed. For example, return to the story of the Rhodes Scholar. The admission professional spoke about her as if she had personally witnessed every moment of the young woman's extraordinary career at Wheaton. A conversation on the College's Facebook account illustrates another example of the personal attention students receive. The College noted the arrival of fall weather in a posting, to which a student replied, "Please turn on the heat." The College then replied with a number for the student to call, noting that the heat had been on for two weeks, and that they would have building services check with the student. Within an hour, the student replied, "All set now...calle (sic) building services and they turned it on. Thanks."

These relationships go beyond just staff, however. The College takes time to note the relationships that students have with professors. The viewbook graphically and

textually represents the 11 to 1 student to faculty ratio, as well discusses the average class size. Pictorially, this relationship is displayed with a group of eight students all seated around a professor at her desk. Without a description of the picture, one could look at it and easily assume that all classes take place within the intimacy of the professor's office.

Going against the convention of discussing the intimate relationships at the institution, there was no mention of the President during my visit to Wheaton. A brief video on the College's YouTube channel showed the President participating in a dunk tank at the College's spring weekend; however, the video itself and the captioning for the video emphasize that it was an incentive for the senior class to get more than 70% participation in the Senior Campaign. Additionally, the classroom used for the admission information session was much larger than for 20 students. It went against the idea of a small learning environment.

Research at the undergraduate level is an important message from Wheaton. The viewbook mentions student research multiple times. In one area, it highlights the diversity of research opportunities, and in another, it discusses an academic festival the College hosts each spring in order to highlight student research through presentations. The viewbook also tells the success stories of students and highlights the research they have done and its impact on their education. Take, for example, the story of Raffi Sweet. Wheaton would have us believe that his story is typical for a Wheaton student. He took a first-year seminar, which led to conducting research with an education professor. This research project peaked his interest in psychology, and now he is a psychology major with intent to earn a master's degree in integrated marketing communications. The campus tour and admission information session convey similar stories.

The College also highlights the research of faculty. The College posted on Facebook a link to their YouTube channel, which featured a recording of a campus seminar on voting theories and the professor's research into fair and unfair voting. The Facebook account also highlights faculty participation in academic conferences, as well as the College hosting an academic conference on campus.

Wheaton does not offer any graduate programs. Accordingly, there were no messages communicated about graduate education.

Infrastructure

Wheaton sends two distinct messages about its facilities: historic and modern. Much of Wheaton's campus, particularly upper campus, harkens back to its founding 175 years ago. The campus tour highlights these images by taking you into the historic section of the library, discussing the activities of the historic chapel, and discussing the varied activities that took place in many of the buildings that were built in the 1800s. While these buildings are historic, they do not feel out of date or appear not well maintained. In fact, many of the buildings feel very modern inside, with a reference to their historic features. Emerson Dining Hall still contains its four original fireplaces and the walls are oak paneling. Indeed, these historic facilities convey a sense of the history and significance of the campus. These historic images are frequently in the background of photos contained in the viewbook. One historic facility is also included as the profile picture for the College's Facebook page.

While there are many historic structures, there are a number of more modern facilities, particularly those located on lower campus. The exterior architectural features of these facilities easily identified them as products of the 1960s and 1970s; however,

once inside, the facilities appear extremely modern with all of the latest technology. Perhaps the most modern facility is the new Mars Center for Science Technology. Its unique architecture does not match the more historic buildings around it, but one step inside this massive complex conveys that Wheaton has the latest in science facilities. The tour spends extensive time in this complex, detailing the latest in equipment, design features, and environmental friendliness. The College also emphasizes this newest building on its YouTube channel by posting a time lapsed video of the construction of the facility and an interview with the faculty liaison to the facility construction explaining the important features of the building.

The infrastructure of the athletics program is often an important way to convey prestige. Wheaton does not shy away from showing prospective students their facilities when they are on campus. The campus tour goes into the Haas Athletic Center where participants can see the natatorium, field house, and gymnasium. The tour references other facilities, but due to distance, these are not visited. That said, there is practically no reference to these facilities in social media or the viewbook.

The last item related to campus infrastructure is landscaping and beautification. Wheaton certainly excels in this area. The grounds are beautiful with manicured lawns and perfectly pruned shrubbery and trees. Artwork is strategically located. The campus green, known as the “The Dimple,” is perfect for relaxing under a tree or playing Frisbee. In fact, during my tour, students were playing a creative form of tag on The Dimple. Additionally, lower campus has beautiful Peacock Pond, where the Head of the Peacock Regatta, an annual event where students race their self-designed boats, takes place (see figure 3). The viewbook conveys, perhaps misleadingly, images of the beautiful campus

grounds. It contains not a single picture of the campus in fall or winter, perhaps the two longest seasons that students will experience on this northeastern campus. By the images portrayed in the viewbook, one is led to believe that Wheaton is always in bloom. The only reference to the grounds in Twitter and Facebook was a picture posted of snow on campus during October, a rarity even for Norton, Massachusetts.



Figure 3: Wheaton College Viewbook Pages on the Peacock Regatta (p.26-27)

Faculty Recruitment, Roles, and Rewards

Wheaton sends subtle messages about the roles of faculty at the College. The viewbook highlights the story of Dana Polanichka, a history professor who serves potato tacos, lemon bars, and chocolate chip cookies either in class or at her home when she

invites students over. The feature implies that she uses food to build relationships and to recruit students to help her with her research and publish a book (p. 24). The tour and information session also emphasized these roles. When asked about what made Wheaton different from all other liberal arts colleges, the tour guide stated, “I think it’s really relationships, our relationships with the faculty.” The admission professional in the information session echoes this theme, stating that the faculty at Wheaton “are excellent teachers who do top-notch research.”

Diversity

Some campuses openly talk about diversity on campus. Others suggest it through pictures and references. Wheaton uses more of the latter approach, which it accomplishes mostly via the viewbook. The viewbook mentions students coming from “45 states and 70 countries,” and mentions the Marshall Center for Intercultural Learning, but there is little mention of diversity elsewhere. The pictures do suggest a diverse population. There are professors and students of different racial backgrounds displayed. These pictures could be intentional on part of the institution, due to a lower diverse population. This is supported by the lack of diversity in the larger group shots. Especially revealing is the page of viewbook discussing the Head of the Peacock Regatta where it is difficult to identify anyone of a minority race in the large group shot, but the insert picture prominently features a minority student (see Figure 3).

Athletics

Athletics are an area that Wheaton seemed to emphasize in almost every medium. The viewbook highlights the 21 NCAA Division III teams and their championships in their conferences and nationally. The College also highlights its “student initiated,

student run” club sports program, as well as intramural sports, suggesting that all students have an opportunity to be an active participant in the athletic offerings of Wheaton (p. 7). Although the viewbook mentions athletics frequently, with the exception of a graphic of a man kicking a soccer ball, it contains no images connected to athletics. The College ties the soccer program to international travel by highlighting the women’s soccer team’s recent travel to Barcelona. The viewbook also highlights that one of the most recent Rhodes Scholarship recipients was a midfielder on the women’s soccer team.

Twitter and Facebook both highlight the athletics program by discussing the success of their student-athletes and alumni who were student-athletes. The College’s athletic director often posts through his Twitter account successes of the athletic program and tags the College’s Twitter account in his post. The campus tour included discussion about athletics and students’ strong support of the campus teams. The admission information session, however, was predominantly academic focused and did not discuss athletics.

Student Recruitment & Retention

Communicating messages to prospective students about recruitment and retention might not immediately come to mind when one thinks about messages communicated to prospective students, but as Wheaton’s case illustrates, it is important. The viewbook spends a page highlighting the admission and financial aid process, encouraging students to visit the campus and explaining need-based and merit-based aid. The admission website has a blog from the Dean of Admission who emphasizes visiting and deadlines. There are multiple pages regarding financial aid, with an emphasis on the fact that 100% of those students with demonstrated need receive some aid. The Facebook and Twitter

pages also highlight days set aside for prospective students to visit and observe a class, as well as speak with current students.

There were practically no examples of messaging regarding retention. The institution highlighted no programs traditionally known for increasing retention, except for the mandatory first-year seminar, which received little attention in any of the communication mediums.

External Relations

While it may be subtle, the College sends signals about its external relations. Perhaps most noted is the reference to its development efforts. On the campus tour, it was difficult to miss the banner in various places on campus highlighting the Go Beyond campaign in which the College is currently engaged. The institution's homepage also had space dedicated to the campaign. Multiple videos on the College's YouTube channel focused on development. Two videos inspired alumni to think about what Wheaton made possible for them and then asked them to consider a gift to the annual fund in order to support more possibilities for current students. Another showed the President of Wheaton in a dunk tank during Spring Weekend as a reward to the senior class for more than 70% of the class participating in the Senior Campaign.

Another message that subtly referenced the College's resources was the viewbook stating, "60% of students receive financial aid" as well as "\$600,000 dedicated to student research, travel, and internships" (p. 2). This funding, although not directly communicated, likely comes from endowment earnings or other funding from development efforts. Surprisingly, there was little brand identity at Wheaton with the exception of the Go Beyond campaign, which had a strong graphical and textual identity.

The College used this identity not only on campus and in print but also incorporated it into a number of videos posted on its YouTube channel. As stated earlier, the Connections program has elements of a brand. There was no mention of external relations topics on Facebook or Twitter.

Comparison to other institutions

Wheaton does not spend a great deal of time comparing itself to other institutions. The most notable area is the emphasis on fellowships and awards that Wheaton students receive. As noted before, various mediums highlight this, such as the viewbook noting the number of awards and the campus tour walking by the display wall in the student center. There are numerous mentions of the fact that the College ranks in the top 10 of all liberal arts colleges for the number of Fulbright Award recipients produced annually. The viewbook also mentions a recent Rhodes recipient, and the admission information session featured her story prominently. The College is certainly striving to communicate that despite its size, a number of students go on to receive these significant recognitions.

There are other comparisons to colleges and universities. The viewbook provides a list of recent graduate school placements. With names such as Cambridge, Oxford, Dartmouth, Harvard, Yale, and the London School of Economics, the listing might suggest that all Wheaton students experience this type of success when applying to graduate school. The viewbook also speaks of exchange and cross-enrollment programs with colleges such as Brown, Amherst, Bowdoin, Wellesley, Wesleyan, and Williams. The other area where the College is able to provide comparison to other institutions is its athletic conference, the New England Women's and Men's Athletic Conference (NEWMAC). During the campus tour, prospective students enter the gymnasium where

banners hang for each member of the conference, including such prominent institutions as Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), Smith, and Wellesley.

Alumni Success

As one might expect, Wheaton did not shy away from speaking of the success of its alumni. The viewbook lists prominent alumni and contains vignettes of young alumni success. The admission information session spent a great deal of time speaking about prominent alumni and the success of recent graduates. The Twitter account highlights the accomplishment of an alumnus who is a major league baseball player, and Facebook highlighted the upcoming visit of an alumna who is a memoirist. Perhaps one of the most convincing ways of speaking of alumni success was the story of the alumna who is connected to the Mars Candy family. Seeing that name on the new science facility and receiving Wheaton M&Ms truly demonstrates that Wheaton graduates are successful.

Resource Allocation Decisions

When O'Meara (2007) describes prestige generators, she specifically mentions resource allocation decisions. In many ways, resources connect to anything that a college might communicate, so the entire conversation in this analysis ties to resource allocation decisions. The decision to build new facilities, the decision to provide teachers smaller course loads in order to have time to advise and develop relationships with students, even the decision to have certain athletic teams, all communicate some form of resource allocation decision. The College does highlight a few spending priorities in its communications to students. During the tour and the admission information session, on the website, and in one of the videos on YouTube, when discussing the Mars Center, its \$40 million price tag was mentioned. The faculty liaison to the construction of the

facility mentioned in his YouTube interview and the website also mentions that this is the largest capital project in the College's history. The viewbook also highlights that "\$600,000 (is) dedicated to student research, travel, and internships" (p. 2).

Location

Every college and university will try to paint a positive story about its location. If they are in the city, they emphasize the proximity to internships and the excitement of urban living. If they are in a rural area, they focus on the relationships built in quaint towns and the slower pace of life in a rural setting. Wheaton tries to have it all. Both the website and viewbook discuss Norton, Massachusetts's close proximity to Providence, Rhode Island (20 miles) and Boston (35 miles). The viewbook speaks of the access to Fenway Park, Quincy Market, and the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and the campus tour discusses the various transportation methods (car, train, bus) that can get you to these various venues and events in the city. The campus tour left the impression that students frequently travel to Providence and often go to Boston, as well. At the same time, the tour guide discussed never having to worry about traffic in Norton and that you would have the opportunity to visit your faculty members' homes. The College's messaging leaves you with the impression that you have the best of all possible worlds by living in Norton, Massachusetts.

Institutional History

Despite the College's founding in 1834, there is little mention of the history of the College. The campus tour provided little more than the founding date and that the College was founded originally as a woman's college, transitioning to coeducation in 1988, besides historical reference to buildings. The historic nature of the campus,

however, is not lost when taking the tour. As you walk through north campus, it is easy to tell that this campus has been around for more than 100 years. The viewbook mentions the College's founding, but really provides no other historic perspective. There was little to no mention of the College's history on its Twitter and Facebook accounts. The website has a thorough accounting of the College's history, but it is not easily accessed from the home page or admission page.

Student Life

While not noted in prestige literature, a consistent message delivered by Wheaton is one about a positive student life experience. The viewbook states that there are 90 clubs and student organizations (p. 3). It conveys happy students living in themed-housing, sharing a meal, and making music together. There are pictures of students enjoying the regatta on Peacock Pond as well. The tour gives you the best glimpse of student life. From references of concerts in the student center to the joy of living in the residence halls to the fun of the various clubs and organizations on campus, the tour guide stated that Wheaton "just feels like home."

The Environment and Sustainability

Wheaton embraced messaging about being environmentally conscious and sustainability efforts. The viewbook discusses a local farmers market that students initiated on campus in order to support locally grown products. The tour actually passed the market and talked about its growing importance on campus. The viewbook also heavily emphasized that the new Mars Center for Science and Technology is LEED certified, prominently incorporating the LEED certification logo into its layout. The tour

also emphasized the “green” components of the building, explaining certain construction techniques used that are more environmentally friendly.

Legitimizing or Differentiating

So does Wheaton College try to legitimize itself by sending messages that are similar to those of its more successful peers, or does it try to differentiate itself from its competitors? Certainly, the institution tries to do both. As mentioned earlier, when asked about what made Wheaton different from all other liberal arts colleges, the tour guide stated, “I think it’s really relationships, our relationships with the faculty.” This message is not new in higher education. In fact, it is one of the points most liberal arts colleges contend make them better choices for higher education than larger, research institutions. Thus, it is not truly a differentiating message. There might be some components of how relationships are built at Wheaton that are differentiating, but nothing observed during the data collection would indicate that.

In fact, a common theme amongst the messages that Wheaton delivers is that they are not differentiating. Outstanding faculty, amazing study abroad opportunities, internships that will prepare you for your career—all of these are messages that a prospective student should expect to hear. Not hearing these messages would likely cause a prospective student to pause and ask, “Why is this institution so different?” Straying away from messages of its peers could cause someone to question its legitimacy.

Wheaton’s messages are very similar to those of institutions that are higher up the proverbial higher education food chain, and thus, many of the messages communicated by Wheaton are legitimizing. Take for example the fact that Wheaton is not allowing itself to be outpaced when it comes to facilities. Constant upgrades are being

implemented and new facilities being added. This allows the College to be more competitive when recruiting outstanding faculty, staff, and students.

Are there any differentiating messages at Wheaton? Indeed, there are a few ideas that have some distinction from other programs. When asked what makes Wheaton different from other liberal arts Colleges, the admission representative in the information session stated “our unique curriculum.” In some ways, the admission officer may be correct. While a liberal arts core is not a differentiating feature, the approach the institution uses is one that is not widely found. The Connections program, in particular, is an idea that only a few other institutions have similarly instituted, and perhaps none, in this exact way.

CHAPTER V

THE CASE OF TRINITY COLLEGE

Overview

Located in Hartford, Connecticut, Trinity College is a residential, liberal arts college of more than 2,100 undergraduates and total enrollment of 2,300. Founded in 1823 as Washington College, the institution changed its name to Trinity College in 1845. Although always located in Hartford, the College moved to its current site in 1878. In 1969, it would admit women for the first time. The College charter requires that it remain religiously independent. The College offers over 900 courses through 38 majors, including one of the few ABET-accredited engineering programs at a selective liberal arts college, and 26 interdisciplinary minors.⁷ With 172 full-time faculty members, the College is able to maintain a 10 to 1 student to faculty ratio. Students at Trinity come from 45 different states and 45 different countries. The comprehensive fee to attend Trinity for the 2011-2012 academic year is \$55,450, with tuition being \$41,980 (*Trinity College*, 2011; Trinity College website, 2011).

Trinity's curriculum focuses on developing a broad knowledge base and interdisciplinary study. Students are required to complete at least one course in each of five broad academic areas: arts, humanities, natural sciences, numerical and symbolical reasoning, and social science. Additionally, students must demonstrate competency in or fulfill requirements for writing, quantitative literacy, global engagement, and a second-

⁷ ABET, formerly known as the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology, is an engineering professional body involved in the education, accreditation, regulation, and professional development of engineering professionals and students in the United States.

language. The College also has a first-year experience program, consisting of a writing intensive seminar of 14-15 students, where the faculty member also serves as their advisor until they declare a major. Upperclassmen mentors also assist with the seminars and help students with academic resources on campus. These first-year seminars live together in the same residence hall. The College also offers four gateway programs for new students: InterArts, Interdisciplinary Science, Guided Studies, and Cities. These one-to-two year programs are invitation-only programs for highly motivated students. The curriculum usually affords students the opportunity to develop personal relationships with students in the program, as well as the faculty involved.

The Trinity College campus is over 100 acres. Much of the campus maintains Gothic style architecture. In fact, the College claims that the Long Walk, the focal point of the campus, is the oldest example of Collegiate Gothic architecture in the country. The farther away buildings are from the core of campus, the more modern and less true to consistent architecture they become (*Trinity College*, 2011; Trinity College website, 2011).

Methods of Delivery

Viewbook

Trinity's viewbook, *Trinity College* (2011), is 52 pages in length. The viewbook is classic in its delivery, using pages to give basic overviews, highlight unique programs and offerings, and providing perspectives from those in the Trinity community. The College provides a balance between text and graphics (see figure 4). The College uses two word phrases in an attempt to guide the reader through the viewbook: "Start Here (Table of Contents), Find Out (Academics at Trinity), Go There (Learning Beyond the

WORKING WITH FACULTY

Trinity's faculty is made up of accomplished, respected scholars, but their first commitment is to help you learn. They will work alongside you, challenge and question you, share your triumphs, and encourage you to do still better. Over four years, your professors will become your mentors and friends. This perspective makes them well equipped to provide advice and recommendations for fellowships, jobs, and graduate school admissions.

Trinity is structured to foster close ties between faculty and students. We have a low student to faculty ratio of 9 to 1. Classes are small — 66 percent have fewer than 20 students, and 94 percent have fewer than 40. There are no graduate assistants, so professors teach introductory as well as advanced courses, and they are the people you turn to for help with an assignment. Our faculty members conduct ongoing research and writing. They often involve students in their research, and they guide students who undertake independent research projects.

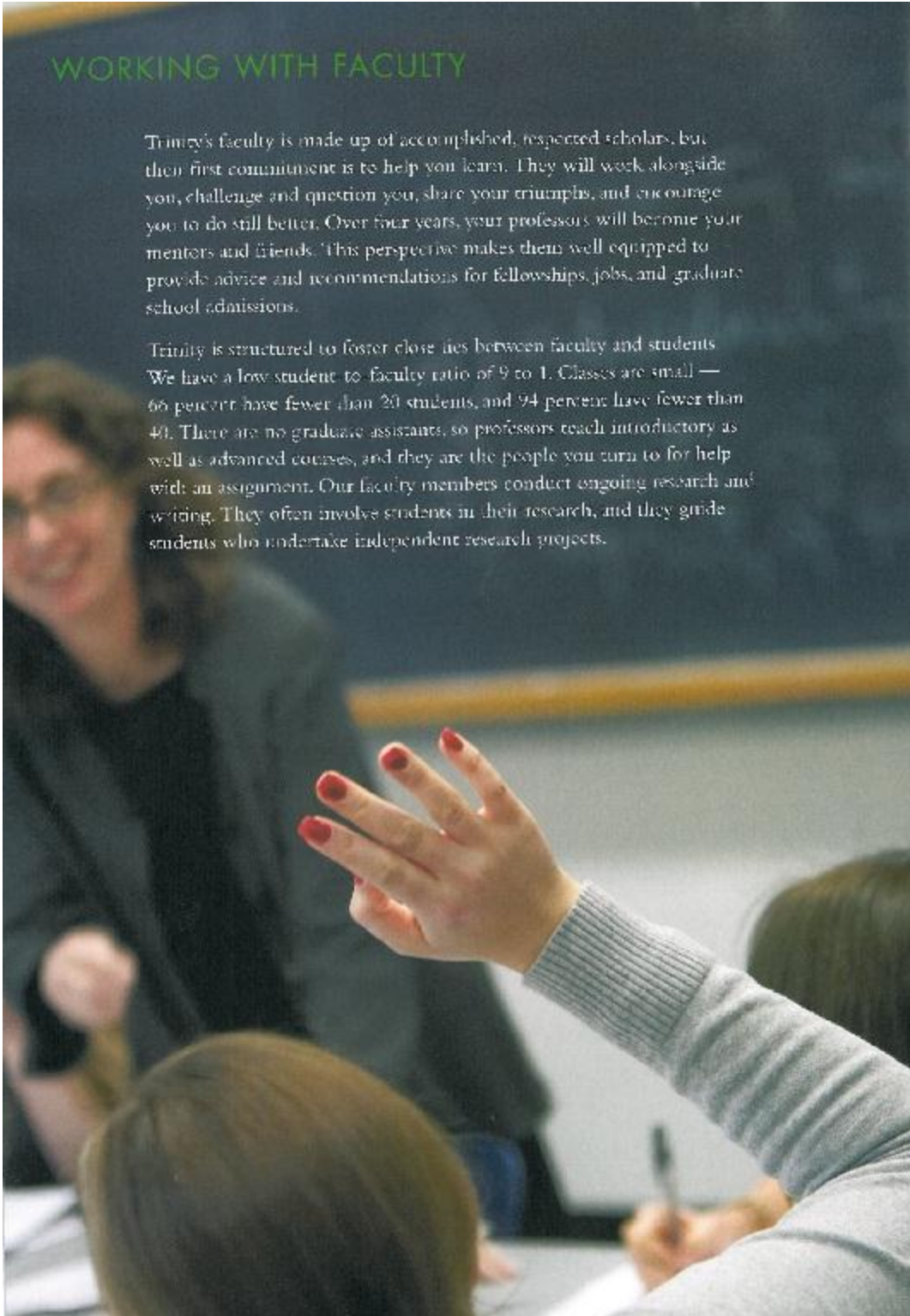


Figure 4: Sample Trinity College Viewbook Page (p. 8)

Classroom), Join In (Campus Life), Be Yourself (Student Profiles), Go Far (After Trinity), Apply Now (How to Do It), and Visit Us (We Want to Meet You)” are the headings used in the table of contents (p. 1). All of the pages are on glossy paper with four-color imprint.

Twitter

Trinity College’s use of Twitter is the most quite frequent, with multiple posts daily on average. Unfortunately, the audience receiving those messages is small, with the account (www.twitter.com/trincolladmiss) having fewer than 300 followers. The College does not interact much with other Twitter users, with only one other person directly tagging its account in a tweet, and that person is a staff member. The College does frequently retweet other tweets that are relevant to its prospective students. The account also uses hashtags to connect to conversation threads and microsites to drive users to further content. Overall, the College uses a variety of types of messages in its tweets, including more strategic messages and messages directly related to recruiting students.

Facebook

Trinity is more complex in its use of Facebook. The College has multiple Facebook accounts that prospective students might follow. The first is the College’s primary page (www.facebook.com/trinitycollege), which has over 7,000 followers, and targets a broad constituency such as current students, faculty, staff, alumni, parents, and prospective students. A secondary account, which is not as robust, is the Trinity College Admission Office (www.facebook.com/trincoll). The admission site has less than 1,000 followers but targets prospective students and allows conversation about issues pertinent

to prospective students. The admission site has two personalized tabs, one with hyperlinks to other related Trinity sites, the other with a form to request more information. The College's main page does not share other Trinity related pages and links. Both pages post a variety of photos and a few videos. Between the two accounts, the pages send a variety of messages, with the admission page conveying direct information about student recruitment. Friends of the College frequently post on both the College's page and the admission page, and the College actively responds to these posts, especially on the admission page.

YouTube

Trinity also uses multiple YouTube pages. The College has a main account (www.youtube.com/user/trinitycolleget) which communicates to the same broad audience as the main account for the College on Facebook. The second account (www.youtube.com/user/trincoll), like with Facebook, is only for admission purposes. Both accounts are active with the College main site having 34 videos uploaded and the admission page having 15 videos. The videos between the two sites range from highlights of a commencement ceremony to a virtual campus tour.

Website

The College's homepage (www.trincoll.edu) and admission website (www.trincoll.edu/admission) provide easy to find links to information important to prospective students. From the homepage, there are links to only a few of the College's social media sites. The link to Facebook from the homepage is to the College's main Facebook account, and interestingly, the Twitter link is to the athletics department

account, not an admission or an overall College account. The admission site provides links to each of its own social media sites.

Campus Tour

The campus visit experience at Trinity often emphasizes the College's location in an urban environment, but it also spends significant time rebutting the negatives associated with an urban environment, such as safety. As you drive onto campus, you leave a blighted area of Hartford, a stark contrast to the beautiful Trinity campus. Visitors can park conveniently in front of the admission office, after having driven by the beautiful President's House. They enter a very modern building with a double-sided fireplace. The welcome area has a few Trinity brochures and books by Trinity authors, but there is little that suggests you are in the lobby of the admission office of Trinity College. Instead, you look out through picturesque windows onto part of the Trinity campus.

One female student led the tour and began by introducing herself and asking participants to introduce themselves, as well. The tour took place not long after a winter storm had wreaked havoc on the area, and thus, numerous trees were down and branches and leaves were everywhere. The tour left the admission office and entered the historic chapel before making its way along the Long Walk buildings, the most historic and famous of the campus buildings. The tour entered one of these buildings and descended into the basement of the Student Center to see a coffee shop and the bookstore. The tour then passed through another quad and by the performing arts center before entering the library. The tour next proceeded past two athletic fields before entering a residence hall, and finally ending back at the admission office. The tour lasted approximately 45

minutes, despite its one-hour allotment. The tour did not visit much of the outer portions of the campus.

Admission Information Session

The College conducted the admission information session in the same building as the admission office. The large conference room seemed to dwarf the small group in attendance. The room had the large picturesque windows on three sides and was bright due to the natural sunlight. Two students, known as admission fellows, led the information session. While there were no audio-visuals used, each student had a large three-ringed binder that contained a script and extensive data to reference in the event of questions. Despite having this data, the students often were unable to answer questions or provided conflicting information with what the tour guide had given earlier. The information session lasted approximately an hour, with time for audience questions at the end. For the most part, the information session was one-dimensional with the presenters talking at the participants.

Messaging

Academic Programs

While other institutions may try to sell their academic program as unique, Trinity emphasizes its programs as trendsetters. Trinity is particularly proud of its First-Year program, which the website describes as “one of the earliest in the nation” (“About Trinity”, 2011). The program receives a two-page spread in the College’s viewbook. It highlights the small seminar class where the instructor continues as those students’ advisor for the next two years. It references a student mentor who provides support and

advice. The viewbook highlights that mentors live in the same residence hall and attend field trips and activities together.

A second innovative program where Trinity believes it serves as a pacesetter is its community learning program, a service-learning type experience. The viewbook describes this program as “a model for other colleges” (p. 20). These experiential learning experiences afford students the sense of pride that comes from helping create solutions for the community. While not truly service learning, but more community service, both the tour and admission information session highlighted that the College sponsors “Do It Day” where members of the Trinity community go out into the Hartford area to give back.

A third program touted heavily by the College is its Center for Urban and Global Studies. This Center strives to connect a liberal arts curriculum with issues facing urban environments locally and globally. The viewbook dedicates a page to the Center and is listed on the admission website as one of the “distinctively Trinity” elements.

The viewbook also allocates a page to highlight the Human Rights Program, a fourth area of innovative academic programming. The College has a major and interdisciplinary minor in Human Rights. Additionally, the College has established partnerships with major human rights organizations so students can serve as summer fellows interning in their offices. While these internships are unpaid by the granting organizations, such as Amnesty International, the College provides stipends “so that our fellows can devote themselves full-time to human rights work” (p. 19).

Finally, while not innovative at most places, Trinity suggests that its accredited engineering degree is truly distinctive for a selective, liberal arts college. The College emphasizes this message even on the first page of the viewbook.

Trinity is proud of its Study Abroad and Study Away options. That is easily evidenced through its emphasis in the College's viewbook, where four dedicated pages describe the experiences students can have in these programs. Additionally, the cover of the viewbook is nothing more than the words "Trinity College" with a navy blue background and the "O" of college replaced with a picture of Earth from space. This is a sign of the emphasis that Trinity places on global studies, including study abroad. Differing messages were communicated about the percentage of students who study abroad, with the admission information session stating over 60% and the viewbook stating over 50%.

The viewbook tells a compelling story of study abroad through use of pictures, including those of a river in China, the Arc de Triomphe in Paris, and masks created in Trinidad, among others. The messages highlight the College's own campus in Rome and its programs in Barcelona, Buenos Aires, Cape Town, Paris, Port of Spain (Trinidad), Vienna, and beginning in the fall of 2012, Shanghai (see Figure 5). In these programs, students study with both Trinity and other university professors. If these programs do not match a student's interest, Trinity also affords students the opportunity to participate in 75 other pre-approved programs. Students can also study away domestically, such as studying government in Washington, D.C., theatre in New York, maritime studies at Mystic-Seaport, or at one of the twelve colleges within their exchange program. The website emphasized these opportunities through pictures such as performers on stage.



Figure 5: Trinity College Viewbook Pages Highlighting Study Abroad (p.16-17)

The admission office YouTube page highlighted students interning overseas through a video of students volunteering to help the women of Tanzania obtain access to safe, secure healthcare. The admission Twitter account and the College’s Facebook account, while not sending many messages related to study abroad, did highlight a local newspaper article about two Trinity female soccer players studying in Cape Town and interning in a program to help young people, especially women, get involved in athletics there.

While the College does not have an honors program per se, the viewbook highlights the College’s Gateway Programs, which are open by invitation to outstanding

first-year students with specific interests and experiences. These programs afford students unique academic, creative, and research opportunities not open to all students. The website notes that recent graduates include Fulbright and Watson Scholars and McArthur Fellows. The viewbook subtly weaves into its text the stories of both an Udall Scholar and a Fulbright Scholar.

“Trinity is structured to foster close ties between faculty and students” (“Trinity College”, p. 8, 2011). Throughout its messaging, the College attempts to convey that Trinity is a place where students will participate in an intimate learning environment. In fact, when asked what makes Trinity unique, one of the admission presenters stated faculty and staff relationships with students as number one. An alumnus in the viewbook described his program as a “personalized approach to engineering,” with similar messages delivered throughout the document (p. 43).

The viewbook highlights the numerical facts: a 9 to 1 student ratio, 66% of classes with fewer than 20 students, and 94% percent with fewer than 40 students (numbers that conflicted with the website and tour), and also noted that there were no graduate assistants. This message also slightly conflicted with messages sent in the tour and admission information session. Both the tour and admission information session discussed teaching assistants. Their role was not clear, especially when it was mentioned that they help with breakout sessions. Breakout sessions do not seem to convey small, intimate learning environments.

The tour emphasized the intimate learning environment by discussing the relationships students at Trinity have with the President. After introductions, one of the first messages delivered in the tour was about the President and the fact that students can

walk up to his door, knock, and ask to take his dogs for a walk. Later, in discussing the College's athletic programs and the support they receive, the tour guide explained that students should expect to see the President at the games, with his dogs in tow. She stated simply, "He is everywhere." In fact, the admission information session discussed the Quest program, which is a pre-orientation program for incoming students, where you can go camping for a week, led by the President of the College. The admission office YouTube channel also includes videos highlighting student relationships with the President. In one student produced film, a student breezes into the President's office to hang out with the President, and in the virtual tour of Trinity, the President is seen eating cake with a student.

Trinity College does not emphasize undergraduate research as part of its messaging. Instead, it implies that research is inherently a component of the undergraduate experience. Various mediums communicate this subtly. Take for instance two different alumni featured in the viewbook who discuss "design(ing) and build(ing) an innovative sailing catamaran" as part of their senior project or "conduct(ing) public health research in Ecuador" (p. 43). Elsewhere, when describing the faculty and their research, the viewbook states that they "often involve students in their research, and they guide students who undertake independent research projects." The viewbook allocates an entire page to tell the story of a student who did research with a faculty member after her first year at Trinity, which sparked a major research project for her senior thesis.

While the College offers graduate programs in American Studies, English, and Public Policy, the College sends few messages about these programs. Neither the viewbook nor any social media outlet mentions them. There is a link on the admission

site to graduate programs, which discusses the programs in detail. Thus, the College appears not to use its graduate programs in order to develop prestige.

Infrastructure

The tour sent discrepant views of the infrastructure on campus. The Admission Office was modern and appealing. The chapel was historic and beautiful. The Long Walk buildings looked magnificent from its exterior. Then, we entered one of these buildings and went deep into the basement to get to the student center. This path showed an older building with pipes exposed—what you might expect of a basement, but not the image you might expect of one of the nation’s finest liberal arts colleges. The library, which is touted in the viewbook as “one of the leading small-college library facilities in the nation,” appeared out of date and cramped (p. 11). Curiously, the tour avoided a number of buildings. In particular, it did not go near a number of residence halls and athletic facilities, all of which are older.

The viewbook dedicates a page to discussing the various facilities that are considered “Resources for Learning” (p. 11). This page highlights the library and information technology center, life sciences center, chemistry building, an off-campus environmental teaching and research site, performing and visual arts facilities, and centers for writing and rhetoric and quantitative literacy. The viewbook contains numerous pictures that convey the sense of history in the facilities, while also conveying that there is a modern feel inside of those historic buildings.

Many of the videos on the admission office’s YouTube channel highlight the beautiful buildings and grounds of the College. The videos show students strolling The

Long Walk or lounging on the well-manicured lawn. Shots of the chapel with its iconic image are often included.

Lastly, when discussing infrastructure, one should also highlight landscaping and campus beautification. The campus visit did not provide a true sense of what this is like on a normal day at Trinity, due to the storm that had just devastated the region. That said, there were certainly signs that the College pays a great deal of attention to campus aesthetics. The lawns were beautiful, even with downed trees on them. I could easily envision students playing on the lawns or studying beneath a shade of the trees. Some forethought went into the design of the lawns. The trees in the quad by The Long Walk buildings create a “T” for Trinity. The sidewalks were cement, and there was only one statue on the tour. No water features were visible. The viewbook contains beautiful images of campus. There are elegant shots of the campus in fall with the trees just at the peak of foliage season. There are also pictures of students lounging on the lawn during a spring day.

Again, despite it being a significant season in the northeast, there is not a single photo of the campus during the winter. The images conveyed in the viewbook convey that Trinity has the perfect climate and weather. There are, however, shots of a snow covered campus in the virtual tour of campus on the admission office’s YouTube channel. Perhaps Trinity is concerned about prospective students’ and their families’ view that it is always cold and snowy in Connecticut. In fact, the College tweeted on October 29, “message to prospective families from outside New England: snow in October is NOT normal.” A video on the admission office’s YouTube channel actually

shows scenes from a record snow fall, claiming that “this is a little different than what we are used to” (Winter 2011 and Wishful Thinking, 2011).

Faculty Recruitment, Roles, and Rewards

Trinity sends clear messages about the roles that faculty play on campus. From describing the faculty as scholars whose “first commitment is to help you learn” to calling them “mentors and friends,” the viewbook aims to convey that faculty are primarily teachers and advisors. The viewbook describes the role that faculty play in supporting academic performance with each athletic team through team faculty liaisons. Perhaps current student Rebecca Cohn describes it best in her quote in the viewbook, “it’s also fun to play pick up ball with professors. Afterward, we hang out on the bench and talk about what we’re reading or politics or life in general” (p. 40). In other words, the role of faculty at Trinity is to be teaching students both in and out of the classroom.

Diversity

Trinity wants to demonstrate that it has a commitment to diversity. The admission site has a direct link to a page about diversity. There, one can learn about the various support mechanisms in place for students of diverse backgrounds. The College has a senior-staff level Dean of Multicultural Affairs who oversees a multicultural center, cultural and themed housing, a queer student center, a women’s and gender center, a chaplaincy program, and an office to assist international students. The College's viewbook conveys this message more subtly. The “Be Yourself” section states, “you engage with others who have different interests, background, and points of view” (p. 34). This is demonstrated through pictures with a number of diverse racial makeups, a listing of tour guides from as far away as Nepal, Illinois, and California, and the description of

the student body as from 45 states and 47 countries (again, a different statistic than provided on the College's website).

The College used its Twitter account to retweet posts made by the Trinity Hillel. These retweets help tell the story of cultural diversity on campus and could demonstrate to Jewish prospective students that they will feel at home on campus. The College also tweeted about its virtual chat session for international students. This not only provides an outlet for international students to learn about the College, but also conveys to prospective students the message that international students are important to Trinity. Additionally, the College's YouTube channel features the College's step team. This tradition, often found in the African-American community, is another signal of the diversity on campus.

Athletics

“More than 40 percent of Trinity students compete on our 29 men's and women's varsity teams and dynamic roster of club sports,” and thus begins a four page discussion of athletics at Trinity in the viewbook (p. 30). The viewbook has little text, besides a list of the sports offered and a small section emphasizing the NCAA Division III nature of its program and its participation in the prestigious NESCAC (New England Small College Athletic Conference), as well as a section discussing the faculty liaison program. Otherwise, vivid pictures display student athletes hard at work and the College's facilities.

The tour highlighted the success of the athletic teams, noting that it plays in one of the most competitive conferences in NCAA Division III. Most notable were the accomplishments of the Men's Squash Team. The tour guide explained that the team has

the longest winning streak in the history of intercollegiate varsity sports, with 244 victories in a row. Currently, the team has 13 straight perfect records and 13 straight national championship titles. The tour guide also mentioned that the baseball team had won a national championship as recently as 2008.

The Twitter account frequently retweeted posts by the athletic department's Twitter account. These shared messages of the success of a number of athletic teams. There were also links provided so that prospective students could log online to watch games live. The Twitter account also would share announcements about recognitions in the athletics department, such as coach of the year honors.

One of the most memorable messages regarding athletics comes from the College's YouTube channel. Posted on the channel is a video of a special commencement ceremony hosted for five of the College's baseball players who missed their actual commencement in order to play in the world series of the NCAA Division III tournament. The team won the tournament with the longest undefeated streak (44 games) in NCAA Division III history. The ceremony displays the importance of athletics to the College, the success of the athletic teams, and the personal touch of the president and other administrators.

Student Recruitment and Retention

Trinity's website describe the College as "among the nation's most selective colleges" ("Facts+Figures," 2011). In addition to being highly selective, the viewbook and website both talk about the College's commitment to meeting the full, calculated need of all accepted students. Despite this commitment, only 40% of students receive need-based aid, suggesting that the student body has a high social-economic status.

The viewbook dedicates five pages to discussing the application process for admission and financial aid, as well as a section on visiting the Trinity campus. Additionally, the admission website provides even more extensive information about these same topics. A Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) page discusses characteristics the College seeks in its admitted students. The admission information session extensively discussed this topic, as well. The two presenters discussed everything from how test scores count to the qualities that the College seeks in applicants.

The College's Twitter account and the admission office's Facebook account frequently sent messages regarding student recruitment. For example, the admission office's Facebook page would often include a post about what schools or towns admission counselors were visiting in the near future. The Twitter account also drives messages the office wants others to see. For example, the College tweeted a link to its virtual tour, in order to show off its impressive campus.

Trinity also uses YouTube to send messages about student recruitment. Perhaps the most notable entry on the admission YouTube channel is the video virtual tour of campus. In just a brief video, two students attempt to show a glimpse of Trinity, just enough to entice prospective students to want to come see campus in person.

Trinity spends two pages discussing the programs it has for first-year students. These programs, while not directly mentioned as retention tools, are just that. The programs highlighted include first-year seminars, seminar participants living in the same residence hall, an upperclassman student mentor, and advising from the same professor who leads your first-year seminar. The viewbook highlights that these first-year programs provide a small-group seminar style class that will help students transition to

college coursework and learning. Additionally, the viewbook highlights the Quest Program and the Gateway Programs as first-year programs. The admission website, the campus tour, and information session supported these messages, although to a lesser extent.

External Relations

Trinity sends few messages about external relations. There is not a recognizable brand, nor is there much discussion about development activities or the endowment. Perhaps the most significant message was a student-produced video posted on the College's YouTube channel thanking donors who help fund student scholarships. This message demonstrates the importance that development programs have on Trinity's students' opportunity to attend the institution.

One small message on the institution's home page was a discussion about the Cesare Barbieri Endowment for Italian Culture, which funds programs to stimulate scholarly interest in Italian culture. Additionally, the viewbook states that the College "commit(s) more than \$30 million of our own funds annually to financial aid" (p. 47). The Twitter account did welcome alumni back for homecoming festivities.

Comparison to other institutions

Trinity aims to communicate that it is a leader amongst liberal arts colleges. In the viewbook alone, the College claims to be "consistently listed among the nation's best colleges" (p. 52), to have "one of the leading small college library facilities in the nation" (p. 11), to have developed the first center for urban and global studies at an American liberal arts college, to be a model for community learning programs, and to be "a leader

in making the study and practice of human rights a dynamic part of its curriculum” (p. 19).

The College also uses graduate schools that its alumni attend as a comparison point. The College lists in its viewbook such noted institutions as Brown, Columbia, Harvard, and New York University as places where recent alumni have attended graduate school. Interestingly, a footnote explains that these are for the classes of 1998-2008, meaning that some of the institutions might not have had a representative in 13 years. The Twitter account frequently retweeted tweets from the athletic department’s Twitter account. These posts often included reference to other prestigious teams in Trinity’s athletic conference, such as Amherst College.

Alumni Success

The success of alumni is a prominent message delivered by Trinity. The first page of the viewbook states, “The success of our alumni is proof that a Trinity education is the starting point for a future of purpose and accomplishment” (p. 1). The “Go Far” section of the viewbook dedicates four pages to talking about life after Trinity and the success of its alumni. It boasts of 60% of alumni pursuing a graduate degree within 5 years of graduation and 75% pursuing a graduate degree within 10 years of graduation. The viewbook also lists a number of representative employers from classes that graduated from 1998-2008. Such noted companies as Bain & Company, Goldman Sachs, and Standards and Poor are listed, as are non-profit and government organizations such as the United Nations and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The College uses its Twitter account to highlight alumni success, as well. For example, the College tweeted about

alumnus Stephen Gyllenhaal returning to campus for a special screening of one of his movies.

Resource Allocation Decisions

There are few messages that communicate resource allocation decisions. The College only specifically mentions spending priorities once in its viewbook when it notes that in an effort to provide over 40% of the institution's students need-based financial aid, it spends more than \$30 million annually.

Location

Perhaps most consistently, the College emphasizes its location. Location in an urban environment made Trinity appealing to all three students encountered during the campus tour and admission information session. In fact, those in the admission information session stated that it was one of the three things that made Trinity unique. This message was consistent with the College's viewbook and website. Whether it is talking about the Center for Urban and Global Studies, the community learning program, or internships, the College's viewbook discussed the important role that being in Hartford plays to help students academically and socially.

The admission website also offers students the opportunity to learn more about Hartford. It emphasizes that Hartford is the state capitol, and students are able to take advantage of all that being located in the seat of government affords, especially when it comes to internships. The page also emphasizes 18 points of interest within five miles of campus, such as the Comcast Theatre, Hartford Stage, Hartford Symphony Orchestra, the State Capitol, and the Wadsworth Athenaeum Museum of Art. Despite all that Hartford has to offer, the College touts its proximity to Boston and New York City, both of which

are within a two-hour drive. The message being that if Hartford does not have what you are looking for, two of the nation's largest cities are in your backyard.

The College also uses social media to highlight what students can experience in Hartford. The College tweeted a link to the admission page on Hartford in order to suggest the multiple opportunities for learning and engagement in the Hartford area. It also retweeted a tweet of a local theatre about a production of Jersey Boys opening soon.

Institutional History

Despite being an old institution, there were actually few messages about history at Trinity. The College emphasizes in both the viewbook and website that its founding date makes it one of the oldest colleges and universities in America. The viewbook and website also note that the College has the eighth oldest chapter of Phi Beta Kappa in the nation. The campus tour did note the historical nature of some of the buildings on campus, particularly the chapel and The Long Walk buildings. While there is a brief history section of the website, it requires a user to navigate through three pages from either the College's homepage or admission site to access it.

Student Life

The viewbook contains a section entitled "Join In," which for 10 pages examines student life at Trinity. It highlights residential life, an important part of life at Trinity for the 90% of the student population that lives on campus. The campus tour included a visit to a first-year residence hall, where assignments are made to ensure that first-year students from the same seminar live in the same building. The residence hall on the tour appeared spacious and contained keyless entry systems on each door, but a look at other residence halls on campus did not show the same upkeep and amenities.

The viewbook also mentions the over 100 clubs in which students can become involved on the Trinity campus. Vivid pictures show a variety of different clubs that students might join, such as a robotics league or an a cappella choir. The Admission Office's YouTube channel compliments this through a video of the activities fair, when students learn about the various clubs on campus. The video has snippets of interviews with leaders of various student organizations and lists the organizations that participated in the fair to show how many different activities are available for students on the Trinity College campus.

The College's YouTube channel has a number of videos that highlight student life on Trinity's campus. A video discusses the annual hip-hop festival, while another highlights the samba festival sponsored by the College. Perhaps most of all, there are videos featuring the College's Dancing with the TrinStars, a satire of the *Dancing with the Stars* reality television show.

Student life is not a focal point of the admission site. With the exception of the overall navigational bar at the top of the page, there is not a direct link to information regarding student life. The College's Twitter account occasionally referenced events taking place on campus, or, as was the case on November 4, "far too many events going on tonight at Trinity to list in a tweet. Check them all out on our mobile site."

The Environment and Sustainability

Trinity has few messages associated with the environment and sustainability. The viewbook tells the story of a student who is collaborating with a faculty member on water quality research. The College's Facebook page discusses the composting research that students at the magnet school affiliated with the College are conducting with Trinity

biology professors. Otherwise, there are relatively no messages discussing the environment or sustainability.

Legitimizing or Differentiating

Trinity College, too, aims to send messages that both legitimize it while also differentiating it from its competitors. The College sends more legitimizing messages than messages that are truly differentiating. In fact, even when the admission site quotes certain characteristics as “Distinctly Trinity,” such as the first-year programs, the Center for Urban and Global Studies, internships, and study abroad, most of these programs are not truly differentiating. Many of the messages the College sends are messages that one would expect from a prestigious liberal arts college. It is not surprising to hear the College boast of its study abroad opportunities, first-year experience programs, or historic buildings. These are messages that most outstanding colleges will attempt to send.

The admission information session stated that there were three things the College wanted to emphasize during the discussion: faculty/staff relationships, location, and the flexibility of the academic program. None of these messages is inherently differentiating. As was discussed earlier, many institutions share the idea that there is an intimate learning environment built upon outstanding relationships between students and faculty/staff. Secondly, the flexibility of the academic program is also not distinct. Many colleges allow students to design their own programs, one of the points emphasized during the information session. In addition, a number of institutions have a less restrictive general education program, as Trinity claims.

All three students cited the third point, the one of location, as the distinguishing feature of Trinity. It is true that many liberal arts colleges are located in settings that are more rural. Yet, there are a number of prestigious liberal arts colleges in and around major metropolitan areas, such as Macalester in St. Paul, MN; Barnard College in New York City; and a host of schools just outside of Los Angeles. Therefore, while not unique, many other institutions cannot claim this factor.

Again, we are left with the question, are there any differentiating messages at Trinity? While not completely unique, some academic programs certainly help Trinity stand apart from its peers. In particular, the Center for Urban and Global Studies provides a unique way of connecting a liberal arts curriculum with issues facing urban environments locally and globally. Certainly, there are other programs that look at urban or global issues, but doing so together through the liberal arts is an innovative combination. Additionally, the College's Gateway Programs are innovative and perhaps not offered in exactly the same way at any other liberal arts college. Having programs that are unique from a curriculum perspective that also double as first-year to sophomore year experience programs is certainly a differentiating approach. Finally, the Human Rights Program is not a common major on liberal arts campuses, and the unique opportunities within the program make it a distinguishing program.

CHAPTER VI

THE CASE OF WILLIAMS COLLEGE

Overview

Located in the Berkshire Mountains in Northwestern Massachusetts, Williams College is a private, liberal arts college serving over 2,000 students. The College is located in Williamstown, Massachusetts, a town of barely more than 7,000 citizens, named for Col. Ephraim Williams, also the College's namesake. Williamstown is located approximately 3 hours from both New York City and Boston and is about an hour away from Albany, New York. The College was founded in 1793 via a bequest from Col. Williams. It became coeducational with the admission of women in 1970. The College has 2,188 undergraduate students, and 58 students participate in the graduate programs in the history of art and in development economics. The College has 304 voting members of the faculty, 72% of which are tenured. This large faculty allows the College to have a student to faculty ratio of 7 to 1 and a median class size of 13. The College's over 28,000 alumni are some of the most loyal in the nation, giving back at over 60% annually. The student body comes from approximately 47 states and 61 countries. Tuition at Williams in 2011-2012 is \$43,900 with a comprehensive fee of \$54,560 (*Williams Prospectus 2011-2012*, 2011; Williams College website, 2011).

The academic curriculum at Williams strives to be rigorous and flexible. Students are required to take three courses in each of the three academic divisions: languages and arts, social sciences, and science and mathematics. Additionally, students are required to

take a course in cultural pluralism, two writing intensive courses, one formal reasoning course, four quarters of physical education, and the passing of a swim test. Students may choose a major from one of 36 majors offered or develop their own contract major.

While there are no minors at Williams, students may choose to develop a concentration in one of 12 interdisciplinary areas or take courses from one of six cluster areas.

Compared to most liberal arts colleges, the Williams campus is not small. The College contains 450 acres on the main campus, plus an additional 2,500 in the outlying areas, such as the Hopkins Memorial Forest. The campus contains 112 buildings with a variety of architectural styles. There are facilities that harken back to the College's historic moments, while others are beautiful, towering new facilities whose architectural style might be found in a more urban setting (*Williams Prospectus 2011-2012*, 2011; Williams College website, 2011).

Methods of Delivery

Viewbook

The Williams viewbook, *Williams Prospectus 2011-2012 (2011)*, takes a unique approach. The viewbook is printed on two different types of paper, one is a glossy four-color stock, and the other is a thinner cream paper, which only has black and purple imprint. The cream pages often are entirely text. There are not quite enough four-color pages to alternate between primarily pictures and text, so there is predominantly more text than photos. The text is broken down into two sections: statistics and narrative. The statistics are short blurbs in black print with a number below in a larger, purple font, usually found along the sides of the page (see Figure 6). The viewbook is broken down

Today, the men and women of Williams include about 2,000 students who occupy the center of a remarkably far-flung community. Their learning is directed and their lives are shaped by a faculty totally dedicated to undergraduate teaching and by an administration and staff committed to providing the best possible environment for their study. Their expectations for their lives are informed by the accomplishments of Williams alumni who have gone on to make vital contributions to their own professions and communities, who have left their imprints there, and who remain an essential part of Williams.

Marked by intelligence and high energy, the Williams community is a lively one, always in ferment. It is a place where people are eager to learn from one another—through shared experience, through intellectual engagement, and through their enjoyment of life together in a decidedly noncompetitive environment. It is a place that relies on self-governance—from the community impact of the Honor Code to the active role students play in shaping campus life (they hold voting seats on 16 of the 27 major campus committees).

The natural and cultural resources of Williams and the village of Williamstown draw talented people from all over the world. For generations, the landscape and the people of this region have inspired writers, musicians, artists, and leaders—from Henry David Thoreau, Herman Melville, Edith Wharton, Thomas Pynchon, W. E. B. DuBois, and Nathaniel Hawthorne to song stylist Cole Porter, singer-songwriters Arlo Guthrie and James Taylor, women’s movement leader Susan B. Anthony, former Massachusetts governor Jane Swift, and sculptor Daniel Chester French, creator of the Minuteman and the Lincoln Memorial. Today, the people who come here gladly share their talents and knowledge: in a typical academic year, Williams hosts more than 200 guest lecturers and about 75 guest performances.

Percent of Williams first-years who frequently felt bored in class in their senior year of high school

39

Number of first-years for whom Williams is more than 500 miles from their home

240

Percent of Williams first-years for whom English is a second language

16

Number of religious traditions represented on campus

38

Number of campus cultural organizations

25

Percent of students who report watching less than one hour of TV each week

49

Percent who played a musical instrument in high school

55

Percent who did volunteer work in high school

91

**STUDENT DIVERSITY,
CLASS OF 2014**

Caucasian	60%
Asian	12%
Black	11%
Latino	9%
Non-U.S. Citizen	7%
Native American	<1%

**GEOGRAPHIC DIVERSITY,
CLASS OF 2014**

West, Alaska, Hawaii	18%
Southwest	4%
Midwest	9%
Southeast, Puerto Rico	9%
Mid-Atlantic	28%
New England	25%
Overseas	7%

p17

Figure 6: Sample Williams College Viewbook Page (p.7)

into sections based on the questions: Who, What, Where, Why, and How. Perhaps as an indication of resources, the viewbook is wire bound.

Twitter

Williams' Twitter account (www.twitter.com/williamscollege) is moderately used, but does not sense a wide range of messages. The number of accounts linking to Williams' is small, but the College does retweet posts occasionally. The College rarely uses hashtags in its posts, but does use microsites to direct its followers to more information. Additionally, the College interacts with those who either tweet or retweet about the College. The posts are largely driven around discussions of athletics at the College, the success of alumni, and the history of the College, thanks to a series of posts referring to "this day in Williams history." The account has over 3,000 followers.

Facebook

Williams' Facebook page (www.facebook.com/williamscollege) is more developed than its Twitter account and is approaching 7,000 followers. The College has included some photos, but has added tabs to its page which link to its Twitter and YouTube accounts. There are more frequent posts on the College's Facebook page than its Twitter account. A larger number of followers comment on the College's Facebook posts, but the College rarely responds. The College uses links to stories and provides updates about campus happenings through its page.

YouTube

Williams College has a robust YouTube channel (www.youtube.com/williamscollege). With over 200 videos posted, Williams is the most active of the institutions in this study in posting video content. The page, however, is

limited in the types of videos uploaded. The page consists of videos about academic interests, events on campus such as commencement and symposia, and celebrating the successes of alumni. There are no videos related to athletics, student life, or student recruitment.

Website

Williams has a thorough homepage (www.williams.edu) and admission website (<http://admission.williams.edu/>). The Williams homepage is not eye-catching. It, like the viewbook, is more text than images. Much of the page consists of a news section with headlines and quick teases of stories. There are also easy to locate navigational buttons that lead you easily to other parts of the website. The admission site is thorough and easy to navigate. It has a different look from the College's main site. The site is broken into five main areas: The Williams Difference, The Big Picture, The Visit, Apply, and Financial Aid. The Williams Difference is the dominant message. It describes six areas that make Williams different: tutorials, experiential learning, science and mathematics research, first year living, winter study, and the Purple Valley. The Big Picture includes Academic Life, Student Life, and Facts and Figures. The Visit section explores the aspects of visiting campus such as information sessions, interviews, tours, overnighting, and attending classes or campus events, as well as discussing how to plan a visit and taking a virtual tour even if you cannot visit. The Apply section discusses high school preparation and the difference between first-year, transfer, and international applicants. Finally, the Financial Aid section provides an overview of the process at Williams, sample awards, information about applying for financial aid, and a section about the College's partnership with Questbridge.

Campus Tour

The campus visit experience begins at the Office of Admission, which is located on the far side of campus with plenty of parking. Inside the office, there is a reception area and a large waiting room. The building itself is historic, and the Office of Admission provides plenty to keep you engaged besides just exploring the building. There are books by Williams authors. There are brochures and pamphlets about Williams' programs. There is one of the NCAA Division III Director's Cups on display (Williams has won the award 14 of the past 15 years). There are photos on the walls of students and tour guides. There is a true immersion into the Williams culture just by sitting in a waiting room.

The tour itself leaves the admission office and wanders its way through much of the central portion of campus. Because the campus is so large, the tour does not enter many buildings, nor does it hit every part of campus. The tour progresses down Main Street and then into the Paresky Center (student center) before going into a first-year residence hall. The tour then passes the construction site for the new library and briefly through Shapiro Hall before entering Goodrich Hall (a mini-student center). Finally, the tour passes the Museum of Art and the Gymnasium before ending in the Science Center.

One male student, who began by introducing himself and then asked each participant to introduce him or herself individually to the group, led the tour. The tour guide appeared to have some latitude over which buildings to include, because he kept changing the buildings in which he wanted to go. The tour lasted approximately an hour and 15 minutes.

Admission Information Session

A veteran admission staff member and one student delivered the admission information session. There were no audio-visuals used, nor script. The presentation room was in what was described by the admission professional as “the largest classroom on campus,” which appeared to be a large science lecture hall. The audience was extremely large, with over 30 different prospective students and their families in the audience.

The information session lasted approximately an hour and was unique in its approach. The admission officer asked prospective students to introduce themselves by providing their name, high school, and hometown along with 1-2 academic interests; 1-2 extracurricular interests; a myth, fact, legend, or question about Williams; and to answer what do you want from your college experience. The presenters, with the admission professional directing the conversation, then related information about Williams based on the prospective students’ responses. This approach gave the indication that Williams was meeting the needs of prospective students and was more concerned about their experience than giving the standard admission talk. It also still allowed the presenters to discuss the points they aimed to convey.

Messaging

Academic Programs

According to its viewbook, Williams strives to live by a quote from Mark Hopkins, an alumnus and president of the College for 36 years. “We are to regard the mind...as a flame that is to be fed, as an active being that must be strengthened to think and feel” (p. 19). The viewbook goes on to say that this is operationalized through

teaching, small class sizes, and living arrangements that provide support for first-year students, among other things.

As one might expect of an institution so highly regarded by the rankings, it contains a number of innovative programs. Modeled after Oxford University's style of education, Williams offers courses between two students and one professor, known as a Tutorial. Each week a student makes a presentation drawn from their independent work, which the other student and professor question and critique. The message of the Tutorial is loud and strong. The viewbook highlights it repeatedly. The tour and admission information session went into significant detail about how the system worked and how it benefits students. The admission website has an entire page dedicated to the program.

Williams does not follow the traditional two-semester academic calendar. Instead, the College has a Winter Study, making their calendar a 4-1-4 system, four classes in the fall, one during Winter Study, and four classes in the spring. The Winter Study is a four-week course that is not in the traditional curriculum. Professors often teach courses outside their usual academic discipline. Students can opt to take one of these courses or pursue an internship, study abroad, or conduct research. Again, this message is prominent. It was mentioned multiple times during the information session and is prominently featured on the admission website. Due to the timing of the study, it was not surprising not to see many messages about this on Twitter or Facebook.

Williams boasts about having the largest science and mathematics research program for undergraduates in the country. The program, which receives significant attention in both the viewbook and admission website, serves approximately 175 students during the summer and approximately 65 students during the academic year. The

information session and tour touched upon this program briefly, but it did not receive the same attention that it does in the viewbook and website.

The Williams admission website highlights experiential learning as an important aspect of the Williams experience. One aspect of that is study abroad. Perhaps the admission professional in the information session said it best when she stated, “the sun never sets on a Williams student.” The viewbook states that approximately 50% of Williams students will study away at one of the 250 study away options (including domestic sites) in 70 different countries. The College only sponsors two abroad programs itself. The first, the Williams-Oxford Programme, offers students the opportunity to study at one of the world’s great universities in tutorial settings. The second, the Williams in Cape Town Program, allows students to study South African politics, society, and development. The College has its Williams-Mystic Program in American Maritime Studies located in Connecticut through which many other colleges choose to partner.

Again, Williams emphasizes experiential learning, of which service learning is certainly an important component. The viewbook does not go into detail about service learning, and only in small ways mentions service at all. The website is more thorough, discussing both course-based learning and community-based learning. For the most part, the message sent by Williams is that service opportunities abound; however, the messages do not emphasize service learning.

Williams has a formal honors program, which the College's viewbook highlights. Students may graduate with honors or highest honors by formally submitting a proposal to the faculty of their department. The proposal must include taking two or three courses

demonstrating a clearly interrelated pattern of study and the production of a thesis, with a thesis advisor. Approximately one-quarter of the Williams student body attempt this process.

Williams publicizes the success of its highest caliber students. The viewbook discusses that in the past four years, Williams students have won three Rhodes Scholarships, a total of 37 in the College's history. The accolades do not stop there. The viewbook also points to recent Williams students who have won the Fulbright Fellowship, Mellon Fellowship, Truman Scholarship, Gates St. Andrew's Scholarship, Thomas J. Watson Fellowship, Marshall Fellowship, and the Herschel-Smith Fellowship.

Intimate learning is at the core of what Williams College is. This message is a constant in the various methods of communicating to prospective students. Take for example the cover of the viewbook. It is a picture of a tutorial in progress: two students and one professor in the professor's office. This image conveys that learning takes place on a personalized basis. The viewbook shares a quote from U.S. President James A. Garfield (alumnus from the class of 1856) who stated, "The ideal college is Mark Hopkins on one end of a log and a student on the other" (p. 20). The viewbook describes this quote about the former Williams president as "positioning (students) at the center of their educational experience" (p. 20).

The viewbook conveys this relationship with faculty and administrators multiple times. In photos, students are interacting with a faculty member and her baby. In text, faculty and students are described as getting together for a chili fest/review session for a calculus exam. The campus tour and admission presentation are no different. The tour guide conveyed the story of the President inviting each student to dinner at his home

before they graduate. The student in the information session used the words “friend” and “mentor” to describe his relationships with faculty. The admission website describes faculty as wanting to know their students on a personal basis.

Of course, the numbers support all of this, which Williams is certain to highlight. The viewbook points out the 7 to 1 student to faculty ratio, that 2 to 4 first-year students are assigned to each faculty member as advisees, and that 86% of classes have fewer than 29 students in them. Despite being a larger liberal arts college, Williams strives to convey that it has the resources to provide an intimate learning experience.

Perhaps the information session provided the most realistic examples of how this intimate environment works. The presentation asked each prospective student to tell about him or herself and then the presenters responded to their interests, a tangible example of the personalized approach at the College. As the presenters discussed the academic programs in which the prospective students had expressed interest, they spoke about individual faculty members as if they were best friends with them. It demonstrated that relationships are important on the Williams campus. The College's YouTube channel supports this through an interview of a recent alumna of the College. She stated that she transferred from another top liberal arts college who would not allow her to miss an exam in order to attend her grandmother's funeral. Her senior year at Williams, her other grandmother died. She contacted her advisor to let him know she needed to be away from campus for the funeral, which happened to fall during the deadline for her to apply to graduate with honors. Not only did her advisor understand her absence, he filed the necessary paperwork for her to graduate with honors.

Whether it is the viewbook or the admission website or even social media, it is hard to miss the messages the College is sending about research funding and undergraduate research at Williams. Truth be told, Williams could be described as a research college. Faculty are expected to be scholars, as the viewbook points out. A significant amount of research takes place at Williams. The viewbook highlights that Williams ranks first of all national liberal arts colleges in the number of current National Science Foundation Grants held by faculty. The admission information session also noted that of all the papers published by Williams faculty, 40% have student co-authors.

The viewbook also focuses on the role that undergraduates play in this research. It trumpets the fact that out of all U.S. colleges and universities, Williams ranked first for the percentage of undergraduates participating in paid summer science research. A YouTube video, which is hidden to those who visit the College's channel but can be accessed through the admission site, has students talking about the importance of their research. The College even tweets about the research of Williams professors and their students.

While Williams does have two graduate programs, they do not receive much emphasis in the College's messaging. In fact, there are no direct links from the College's homepage to information about the programs. The admission website also does not discuss those programs, nor does the viewbook. There is no mention of either program in the various social media outlets. The information session mentioned these programs only briefly and as a matter of fact.

While not related to specific subsets of the academic program identified as prestige generators, most of the College's YouTube channel focuses on academic

lectures. The topics are wide-ranging, but focus on the core of the Williams enterprise, the academic program. The lectures range from professors, visiting lecturers, and even some students.

Infrastructure

The infrastructure at Williams is certain to inspire and encourage prospective students to apply and choose Williams. Williams does not hesitate to communicate messages about this infrastructure. The viewbook describes Williams as having “university quality equipment” (p. 18). Obviously, the campus tour can send a strong message about infrastructure. As you tour, you notice either historic facilities or ultramodern ones. You see the progress on the new library. You visit two different student center spaces and get a sense of where some social activities take place. You tour residence halls and see how personal and spacious the rooms are. In fact, the viewbook reminds you that 60% of first-year rooms and 77% of upper-class rooms are singles. The information session also discusses the role that these living spaces play in creating support programs for new-students.

Yet, the tour did not completely capitalize on emphasizing the quality of facilities. It explored little of the academic space. The tour did not enter the existing library. It also spent little time showcasing the athletic facilities. The tour did not enter a dining hall.

The viewbook uses pictures to display the infrastructure. The images are of both historic buildings and ones that are more modern. Pictures show students using science equipment, which the admission website describes as sophisticated instruments that can rarely be found outside of major research intuitions. The College also tweets and posts on Facebook about its infrastructure, sending out links to the progress of its new library.

Faculty Recruitment, Roles, and Rewards

Early in the viewbook, Williams describes the faculty as “totally dedicated to undergraduate teaching” (p. 7). They serve as “teachers, role models, advisors, and advocates” (p. 11). The message of faculty as teacher-scholars is an important one for Williams, and one that is repeated over and over again throughout the College’s viewbook. Williams seeks scholars “who cherish teaching as their primary calling and responsibility” (p. 11). That is not to limit their role, however, to only classroom based teaching. “Research can double as a mode of instruction” (p. 12).

The viewbook suggests that faculty interact with students outside the classroom as well. It notes that 40 faculty and administrators play intramural sports. It discusses faculty dining and sitting down for coffee with students. It even mentions faculty walking their dogs through campus. The message is clear: Williams is a living-learning environment, and faculty are expected to be engaged with students and colleagues in and out of the classroom.

Diversity

Diversity is easily apparent at Williams, and the College sends many messages about that diversity. The opening narrative in the viewbook states that “multicultural, ecumenical, worldly, and world-renowned, the College includes students from a myriad of ethnic, economic, racial and cultural backgrounds—each an unquantifiable individual, each exceptional in his or her own way” (p. 4). The history section of the viewbook goes on to note when the institution became coeducational and that since the 1960s, students of color from the U.S. have comprised at least one-third of the student body. Another 10% come from overseas.

The admission website suggests that Williams students hail from every state and many countries, as well as from various backgrounds. The viewbook supports this assertion by mentioning specifically that Williams students come from all 50 states, 60 countries, and 38 different religious traditions, and that 25 different campus cultural organizations are represented on campus. Additionally, a post on the College's Facebook page links to an interactive map that shows which U.S. states Williams students have come from over the previous 16 years. The imagery the College uses supports these numbers. The students and faculty showcased in the viewbook appear to be from various backgrounds. Even in the College's Facebook series "On This Day in Williams History," the College highlights the dedication of the Williams Jewish Religious Center twenty years earlier.

The viewbook also suggests that there are not cultural or themed housing, including fraternities and sororities, in order to develop interactions of people of different backgrounds. The College states that it works. According to the viewbook, 93% of students report substantial interactions with students of a different socio-economic background.

Athletics

Is it possible for both athletics and academics to reign at the same institution? Williams seems to think so. The Director's Cup on display at the beginning of the campus tour reminds prospective students that this school, known for its academics, has been number one in overall points from championships 14 out of the past 15 years in NCAA Division III athletics. The admission website and the viewbook emphasize that same statistic.

The campus tour and information session emphasized the College's commitment to athletics (as well as other extracurricular activities) by discussing the establishment of Division of the Day. A College-wide committee voted to implement Division of the Day in order to preserve time for academics, athletics, and other extracurricular activities. Thus, academic work is done from 8 am to 4 p.m., with athletic practices running between 4 p.m. and 8 p.m., and performances and other activities following.

The athletic facilities at Williams are not only significant but numerous. While the tour did not go into the athletic facilities nor did it have time to visit the fields and golf course on the outer ring of campus, the tour guide did discuss the facilities and pointed out those on the tour route as the tour passed.

The College's Twitter and Facebook accounts spend extensive time sending messages about athletics. For example, there are numerous tweets regarding the College's participation in "The Little Three" athletic league and its rivalry with Amherst. The Facebook page also highlights how athletics and academics work in tandem at Williams, including the football coach curating an art exhibition at the Williams College Museum of Art. Finally, the College's homepage also includes a prominent news story about the homecoming activities.

Student Recruitment & Retention

The viewbook dedicates eight pages to discussing the student recruitment process: applying, visiting, admission, and financing. The admission website also dedicates a section to this process. Williams provides many details about students applying to the College. It discusses the high selectivity and high cost. It shares the preparation expected and test scores of current students. For example, the admission website has

pages dedicated to academic course work students should take in high school, expectations for standardized testing and advanced placement courses, and the importance of non-academic achievements in the selection process.

The financial aid section in both the viewbook and website are important. While the cost of Williams is over \$50,000, the viewbook and website state that the College will meet 100% of the demonstrated need of those students admitted. This produces, according to the viewbook, an average financial aid packaged of over \$42,000.

Williams sends multiple messages about retention, mostly through the College's viewbook and campus tour. Foremost, Williams talks extensively about the entry system. The campus tour mentioned this program overtly as a retention tool, with the tour guide stating that 98% of first-year students return for their second year, a statistic echoed in the viewbook. The viewbook also mentions that 61% of first-years participate in the Williams Outdoor Orientation for Living as First-Years (WOOLF). The program, as described during the campus tour, brings first-year students together before the formal orientation process. Due to its remote location, students are without cell phone coverage and cannot call home to mom and dad. According to the tour guide, "it's as much an orientation to parents about life without frequent calls from their kids as it is an orientation for the students." Jokes aside, the tour guide did emphasize the relationship building that occurs and helps students develop established relationships before they even set foot on campus for orientation.

External Relations

Williams spends a fair amount of time discussing its development activities, and with good reason, as it has an extremely large endowment. In fact, the viewbook states

that it has one of the largest per student endowments of any college or university in the country. According to the viewbook, what once began as a bequest to found the college of a little over \$9,000 has grown to an endowment of more than \$1.5 billion. The viewbook boasts of two recently received grants to pursue scientific research and teaching that total more than \$1.4 million. It highlights the Williams Alumni Internship Fund, supported by a \$3 million endowment, and it notes that the College awards 400 grants annually to support summer projects for students. The College also has posted on its YouTube channel a video of the Board of Trustees chair discussing the economic downturn and how this difficult period has affected the College's development activities and endowment. In it, he recognizes the strong performance of the endowment and giving to the college despite the challenging circumstances.

The College does not have a clear institutional brand. That said, there are some consistencies that help move the institution towards a brand identity. The most significant of these is the use of the color purple. The College is located in the Purple Valley and its mascot is the Purple Cow. The website, the publications, and certain signs on campus contained the same color of purple, allowing the audience to identify it with the College. On the other hand, there was not a clear graphic identity.

Comparison to Other Institutions

Williams does not shy away from comparing itself to other institutions. During the tour, the tour guide alluded to the College being the second higher education institution founded in the state of Massachusetts, second only to a college in Cambridge (easily identified as Harvard). The viewbook references that by 1906 the College had more students from outside New England than any other college in the region.

In its statistical section of the viewbook, which is repeated in parts on the admission website, the College frequently names other institutions. For example, the College lists the “rank of Harvard, Michigan, Yale, and Stanford among institutions where Williams professors earned PhDs: 1, 2, 3, 4” (p. 11). It is also lists the “rank of Yale, Harvard, Stanford, MIT, and UC Berkley as graduate schools most recently attended by Williams alumni earning doctorates: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5” (p. 43).

The viewbook and Twitter accounts also highlight awards and accolades won by faculty and students, and at times, the viewbook compares the number Williams has won to the number won by other institutions. When discussing alumni in the viewbook, the College includes where they earned graduate degrees. These institutions, along with the list of where most alumni attended graduate school, are impressive, highly selective institutions, Harvard University, Georgetown University, New York University, University of Michigan, University of Pennsylvania, and Northwestern University. The viewbook even highlights that many of the best graduate programs recruit on campus.

Alumni success

Williams spends considerable time communicating the message of their alumni’s success. Williams suggests that alumni are an equal part of their community by stating in the viewbook that alumni “who have left their imprint there, and who remain an essential part of Williams,” continue to affect the lives of current students (p. 7). The College allocates eight pages in the viewbook to discussing how alumni have succeeded. There are alumni profiles, including one of Erin Burnett, formerly of CNBC and now a host on CNN. The list of famous alumni in the viewbook is astonishing: President James A.

Garfield, composer Stephen Sondheim, Senator Mark Udall, New York Yankees owner George Steinbrenner, and Nobel Prize winner Robert Engle, just to name a few.

The College also highlights the current success of alumni through its Twitter and Facebook accounts. The College tweeted about an alumnus's article in *Sports Illustrated*, an alumna's appearance on C-Span, and an off-Broadway show featuring a number of Williams' alumni. The College's homepage also celebrates the success of alumni through news articles. The College's YouTube channel highlights alumni, as well. A series, known as the Gaudino Dialogues, features interviews with successful alumni, such as Janet Brown, one of the first female graduates of the College and the executive director of the Commission on Presidential Debates.

Resource Allocation Decisions

Williams discusses its resource allocation decisions moderately, which might be easier for an institution with so many resources to do. The viewbook, through its statistics emphasis, shares tidbits about how Williams allocates funds. There is \$75,000 for faculty to host informal dinners and gatherings or to eat meals with students in the dining hall. The College puts forth almost \$650,000 towards the salaries of summer undergraduate researchers in the science and mathematics. The College funds over \$300,000 for summer internships. Perhaps the largest number thrown out, and an important one in recruiting students, is \$41.5 million in need-based scholarships and grants per year.

Location

While some institutions in the northeast run away from their wintery locations, Williams does not. Four photos in the viewbook show snow on the ground. The

viewbook describes Williams as a place of “four distinct seasons and mountains to go with them,” highlighting the 100+ miles of hiking and cross country ski trails in the area (p. 2, see Figure 7). In fact, the viewbook reminds readers that it was Henry David Thoreau who wrote about Williams, “It would be no small advantage if every small college were located at the base of a mountain” (p. 30).

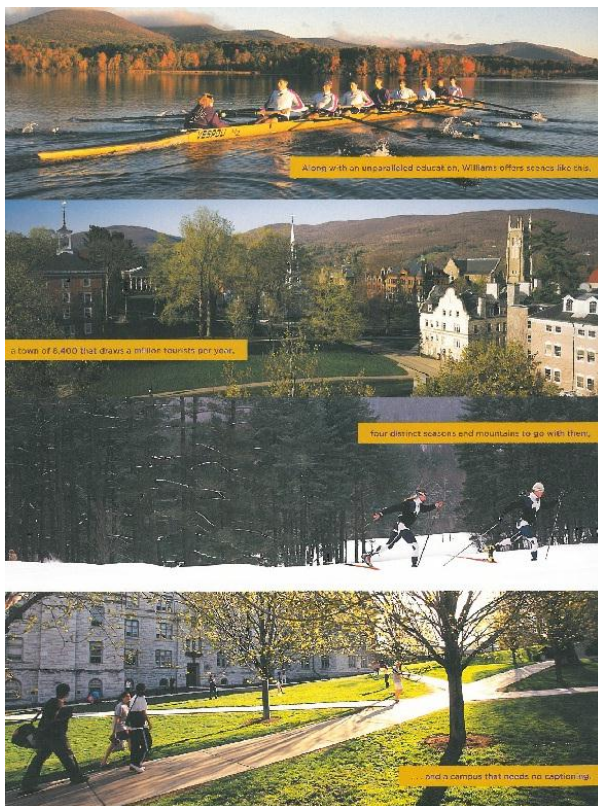


Figure 7: Williams College Viewbook Page Highlighting Four Seasons (inside cover)

While some institutions might shy away from claiming its location in a small town, Williams embraces it. Despite being located in a small town, the College attempts to communicate a message of big time experiences. The viewbook conveys the story of the Tony Award winning Williamstown Theatre, highlighting that students have spotted

David Schwimmer, Stephen Collins, and Scott Wolfe eating in downtown Williamstown multiple times in the past two years while in town for the event. Students, the viewbook states, make up 50% of the Williamstown Symphony Orchestra. The College's Twitter account spotlights a live music event taking place in Williamstown, and its Facebook page features the Williamstown Film Festival. The viewbook even highlights the number of bookstores (14) and pizza shops (8) in the local area.

While Williams embraces its small town location, it does not miss the opportunity to mention its close proximity to major cities. The viewbook notes that the College is located one hour from Albany, New York's seat of government. Similarly, the viewbook notes that the College is within three hours of New York City and Boston.

Institutional History

Williams embraces its history. The campus tour takes you through a campus that shows signs of history. It highlights the fact that the College was the second college in Massachusetts, second only behind "that university in Cambridge." It discusses its former presidents and their influence on campus to their achievements, such as Mark Hopkins and Morton Shapiro. The viewbook reinforces these messages about the history of the College. There is an account of how the College came to be in 1793, and quotes from the likes of Mark Hopkins and James A. Garfield.

The historical perspective is not lost on digital or social media. The College's Twitter and Facebook accounts have a number of tweets about this day in Williams history. One tweet in this series announced the arrival of telegraphic communication to East Hall in 1871. Another talked about the College's role in training over 1,000 Navy officers. A Facebook post conveys the story of how "The Walk" became a post-game

tradition for the Williams football team. The College's admission website also provides a timeline of important dates in the College's history.

Student Life

The viewbook provides great detail about student life at Williams. The viewbook lists the more than 160 student organizations with which students may become involved. It highlights the percentage of students who participate in service organizations, performance groups, and athletics. It emphasizes that all social events are open to everyone on campus, not just certain groups.

The strongest message Williams sends about student life is about First-Year entries. The viewbook spends a paragraph highlighting this concept, as does an entire page on the admission website. Entries are groups of 20-25 students designed to be a microcosm of the student body at large who live together in residence halls. Two juniors live on the floor, without compensation, with these students serving as informal advisors and mentors. Does the process work? Williams thinks so. According to the viewbook, this concept has been in place since 1925 and now contributes to a 98% first-year retention rate.

The second strongest message might be programs connected with the College's location. The viewbook points to the fact that students pay \$10 annually to participate in any of the activities that the outdoors club hosts. There are pictures in the viewbook of students hiking, skiing, and rowing.

The College's Twitter account also sends messages about student life. It tweeted numerous times about events and concerts being held on campus, which sparked interaction from followers. The College's Facebook page intentionally tries to spark

interaction from fans of the page by asking them to comment on their weekend plans. The YouTube channel provides little insight into current student life, with the exception of a small collection of videos of musical ensemble performances.

As much as Williams boasts of what it offers, it is clear about what it does not offer. The college trumpets the lack of fraternities and sororities in the viewbook, and in fact, the admission official in the information session stated that “if you are interested in Greek life, don’t come to Williams.” The viewbook also notes that there is no special-interest housing.

The Environment and Sustainability

This is an issue important to the Williams community. In a section of the viewbook emphasizing how students participate in governance of the College, it states,

“Working with faculty and administration, student members of the Climate Action Committee recently engaged in an exhaustive review of the College’s role in confronting climate change. The committee affirmed that sustainability is a principle with an importance on par with accessibility and diversity and recommended that Williams professors incorporate sustainability issues into their courses, that an office for sustainability be developed, and that the College commit to reducing its greenhouse gas emissions to 10 percent below its 1990-1991 levels by the year 2020” (p. 15).

The viewbook also touts RecycleMania, a competition that Williams enters into with other colleges and universities to see who can recycle the most during a 10-week period. While this message receives prominence in the viewbook, it receives little to no attention elsewhere. The College’s YouTube channel does contain a video of alumni talking about sustainability issues and how they relate to Williams College. There also was discussion during the campus tour of the effort to make new buildings and expansions/renovations to existing buildings LEED certified.

Legitimizing or Differentiating

Williams has a number of messages it sends through various mediums, but are these various messages legitimizing or differentiating? In many ways, and certainly via the *U.S. News and World Report* rankings, Williams is one of the finest institutions of higher education in the country. Thus, one might assume that they have less legitimization to do, and spend more time differentiating.

The College has something known as the Williams Difference, and in each method of delivery where the Williams Difference is used, it is slightly altered. The admission website credits six issues that are a part of the Williams Difference: tutorials, experiential learning, science and mathematics research, first-year living, Winter Study, and the Purple Valley. The viewbook pairs these down to four and includes three mentioned above: tutorials, science and mathematics research, and Winter Study, while adding thesis as the fourth area. The admission professional in the information session described Winter Study, the tutorials, and first-year living as what makes Williams different.

Tutorials are fairly unique in higher education, and especially in the U.S. Williams admits that it adopted the concept from Oxford University, arguably a more successful peer. Thus, in some ways, the tutorials do differentiate Williams, but not entirely, from other institutions. Experiential learning, which includes study away, course-based learning, and community-based learning, is not new to higher education. There also is little evidence that Williams does it in different ways from other institutions. Take, for example, study away. Williams offers only two foreign travel

destinations and only 50% of students study overseas. This is not distinguishing for the College.

Winter Study is a common element at many liberal arts colleges, and again, what Williams offers during that term is not necessarily differentiating. Providing a capstone of the four-year experience with a thesis is also a concept that is not new or unique in academe.

Williams, like many liberal arts colleges, communicates messages about the importance of student research. Williams' message may be differentiating in that it claims to conduct larger amounts of science and mathematics research for undergraduates than most other institutions. Unlike some of these other institutions, Williams provides numbers to support their claim. The viewbook states that there is \$4.3 million dollars in support of faculty and student research at Williams and that the College ranks first among other U.S. colleges and universities in percentage of undergraduate students participating in paid summer science research.

The first-year living program, known as entries, in broad concept is not unique. A number of institutions attempt to create smaller learning environments among first-years in order to help ease their transition to college and develop a support network. There are elements of the Entry system that are more unique and when combined together, create a more differentiating experience. First, take into account the attempt to create microcosms of the entire student population with each entry. Secondly, there are the unpaid junior advisors, who do not serve as policy enforcers, but rather as resources for the first-year students. The activities they choose to conduct with the entry, such as the weekly "snacks" as described in the admission tour, where the junior advisors and members of

the entry come together in their own common space each week, provide a more unique experience.

Finally, the College suggests that its location in the Purple Valley is a differentiator. Certainly, there are aspects of this that are true. The opportunities for outdoor activities, including those in the winter, are not available at many institutions. There are also the unique theatrical offerings located in Williamstown. It is not often that students can walk to a Tony-award winning theatre. Then there are the visual arts. With an art museum on campus and an art institute in town, students find themselves exposed to some of the world's best artists.

Perhaps what differentiates Williams more than anything else are its resources. Few institutions have the ability to send messages about its resources like Williams can. These resources ultimately allow students to have experiences that are life-enhancing, that many other institutions cannot afford to offer or must offer at a reduced level.

CHAPTER VII

CROSS CASE ANALYSIS

Overview

The previous three chapters considered the cases of Wheaton College, Trinity College, and Williams College individually. This chapter focuses on analyzing the data across the three cases to see what similarities and differences may arise. First, the chapter examines various methods of delivery of messages. Next, I analyze the content of those messages. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the messages to see if they are legitimizing or differentiating.

Methods of Delivery

Each institution in the study used each of the methods of delivery examined, some to a much larger extent than others. It appears that institutions remain comfortable in the communication methods in which they are most familiar: the viewbook, the website, and the campus tour. The institutions did not use social media with as much frequency, with the same intensity, or across the various methods of delivery, compared to the viewbook, website, and campus tour. In particular, the institutions did not embrace the opportunity to incorporate two-way communication (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Grunig & Grunig, 1992) via social media. Currently, the institutions mostly use social media for the same one-way communication that viewbooks and websites achieve.

Viewbook

Viewbooks have long been a primary form of communicating to prospective students, and each of the three institutions in this study took different approaches to their viewbooks' composition and presentation. Interestingly, the lowest ranked institution by *U.S. News and World Report*, Wheaton, opted to have fewest pages in its viewbook and used more graphics than text in those few pages. The higher ranked institutions had more pages in the viewbook, and the highest ranked institution, Williams, used more text than the other two institutions.

Another area to examine is the type of binding and paper quality the institutions used. Wheaton simply stapled its viewbook in the middle and used non-glossy paper. Trinity had a glued binding with a glossier, lightweight paper. Williams chose to wire-bind its viewbook and used a combination of heavyweight, glossy stock and medium-weight, and thick Manila paper.

Twitter

The institutions' Twitter accounts were simpler and less strategic in messaging, as they were often used to provide updates on campus events. Trinity was more advanced in some of its uses of Twitter. Trinity uses various functions within Twitter, such as retweeting and the hashtag, to help emphasize certain messages. Unfortunately, Trinity has so few followers of its Twitter account these messages are not widely seen. Wheaton's use of Twitter was very limited and overall, its messages were perfunctory. Wheaton also did not use the various features of Twitter to the maximum use. Williams used Twitter more often as an outlet for two-way communication than the other two institutions (Grunig & Hunt, 1984).

Facebook

All of the institutions were more sophisticated in their use of Facebook than they were Twitter. The posts on their Facebook pages were more varied in content, and the posts were more frequent. Trinity College was more advanced in its targeted use of Facebook. It had two Facebook pages, one for the College overall and another for the admission office, with more clearly defined messaging strategies. Wheaton used its Facebook page to direct users to more information about Wheaton, than Trinity. Wheaton and Williams were less responsive to the two-way communication methods proposed by Grunig and Hunt (1984).

YouTube

Wheaton and Trinity shared similar approaches to their YouTube channels, with student-focused videos, albeit many fewer videos posted than Williams did. Trinity's use of two different channels, one general channel and one for the admission office, allowed it to focus which messages it sends to prospective students more than the other institutions. Williams had hundreds of videos posted and took an academic approach to its YouTube channel, mostly featuring excerpts of campus speakers or events. The channel appeared less focused on student recruitment and more on chronicling events at the College.

Websites

From a messaging standpoint, Trinity and Wheaton have more message driven homepages. Each homepage allows visitors to interpret easily their distinct messages. Williams, on the other hand, has a page that serves more as a landing page to direct users to other areas of the site than as a major messaging platform.

From an admission website perspective, however, Williams and Trinity lead the way. The links provided on each of these pages send a distinct signal about what are the important messages of each college. In particular, the Williams site features the program it considers the “Williams Difference,” trying from the outset to set it apart from other institutions. Similarly, the Trinity site features an area known as “Distinctly Trinity.” Wheaton’s admission site is less clear on its messaging.

Campus Tour

The campus tours also took different approaches. Wheaton College focused heavily on the internal facilities. The tour entered at least eight different facilities and spent substantial time in each, with the tour guide explaining what takes place in each building and the virtues of the facility. Williams had much less emphasis on the interior of their facilities, with the tour only entering five buildings and little time spent in each. There was also little explanation of the building itself. Trinity went into the same number of facilities as Williams, but spent more time explaining the purpose of each facility and its strengths.

For the most part, the tours focused more on the experience of students than merely recitation of facts about the College. Wheaton emphasized this more than the other two institutions, even at times referring certain questions about facts to the admission staff while relaying anecdotal tales. Williams provided the least information about the student experience. Additionally, Wheaton appealed to all of the senses to help make its tour stand out, as evidenced through taste via the M&Ms distributed at the conclusion of the tour.

Admission Information Session

The information sessions in each case also varied. Trinity was the only institution that did not opt to have an admission professional involved in the presentation. Trinity also had a scripted presentation outline, with the session conducted in a formal presentation room. Wheaton was more relaxed, with the admission professional directing the flow of the conversation. The Williams information session appeared to be the least scripted, as there was no outline for the presenters to follow. Instead, the flow of conversation was completely in response to the interests and questions provided by the prospective students in their introductions.

Messaging

The study compliments the work of O'Meara (2007) and Toma (2008, 2012) by revealing that the institutions in the study communicate messages about the prestige generators they identify, signifying that these messages are important to the institution. The elements that Breneman (1994) defines as core to a liberal arts college continue to be important to the institutions in this study. Messages about residential life, small intimate learning environments, and cross-disciplinary programs focused on educating undergraduates are important in his definition, as well as to the messaging of the three institutions in the study.

This study supports the research of Hartley and Morphew (2008) by confirming the broad types of messages institutions are communicating via the viewbook. It expands their work to look at messages communicated via different mediums. In general, the messages are similar via these varied delivery methods, with sometimes different emphasis.

Perhaps most of all, this study demonstrated clearly the attempts by these institutions to both legitimize and differentiate. The messaging, for the most part, was relatively generic. In fact, if these institutions had not been identified and the broad concepts such as small class size, residential campuses, study abroad, and outstanding alumni success had been shared, it would have been virtually impossible to determine which liberal arts colleges were being described. Yet, each institution tried to alter its programs in just a way that would make them, at the very least, appear more unique. In this way, both institutional theorists (such as Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) and competitive strategy theorists (such as Porter, 1985; Ghemawat & Rivkin, 1999) could find supporting arguments that their theories were at play in this study. Further research would be necessary to see which tactic is more successful, but this study suggests that there are many more legitimizing messages being communicated than messages of differentiation.

The remainder of this section explores the types of messaging delivered by the three different institutions, exploring those identified as prestige-seeking messages as well as the other types of messages that emerged during the analysis. Table 2 provides an overview of the emphasis each institution placed on the various types of messages. I determined these levels of emphasis (high, moderate, and low) based on three factors: (1) the intensity of the message, (2) the number of occurrences of the message, and (3) the use of the message across methods. Intensity of the message accounts for how strong the message is that is being sent. For example, Wheaton's viewbook shows a stick figure kicking a ball. The intensity of that image would be much less than a picture of an actual Wheaton student playing soccer because the image would not resonate as well. The

Table 2-The Emphasis of Message Type by Institution

Type of Message	Wheaton	Trinity	Williams
Academic Programs ⁸	High	High	High
Infrastructure ⁸	High	Moderate	High
Faculty Recruitment, Roles, and Rewards ⁸	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
Diversity ⁸	Moderate	High	High
Athletics ⁸	Moderate	Moderate	High
Student Recruitment & Retention ⁸	Moderate	Moderate	Moderate
External Relations ⁸	Moderate	Low	Moderate
Comparison to other Institutions ⁸	Moderate	Low	Moderate
Alumni Success	High	High	High
Resource Allocation Decisions ⁸	Low	Low	Moderate
Institutional History	Low	Low	Moderate
Location	Moderate	High	High
Student Life	Moderate	High	High
Environment and Sustainability	Moderate	Low	Moderate

number of occurrences accounts for the number of times a message is communicated.

The final factor takes into account how many different methods of delivery communicate that type of message.

In order to understand more about the findings in Table 2, the following sections provide an in-depth analysis of the results in the table. First, the findings are examined

⁸ These types of messages were identified as prestige-seeking by either Toma (2008, 2012) or O’Meara (2007)

by column (by institution). Then, the results are explored across each row (by message type).

Wheaton

Wheaton spent less time emphasizing certain areas over others, and instead gave general information about a high number of message types. As with the other two campuses, Wheaton sent a number of messages with high intensity and across various methods of delivery about academic programs. The other two areas of emphasis were infrastructure and alumni success. Wheaton sent very low levels of messaging about resource allocation decisions and institutional history.

Trinity

Trinity emphasized more areas than Wheaton. In addition, and not surprisingly, the College emphasized highly its location. Other areas of significant emphasis included diversity, alumni success, and student life. Compared to the other two institutions, Trinity did not emphasize as highly comparison to other institutions, the environment and sustainability, or external relations. Like Wheaton, Trinity chose not to emphasize institutional history and resource allocation decisions.

Williams

Overall, Williams provided more messages with more intensity. Like the other two campuses, Williams chose to emphasize highly academic programs and alumni success. Williams shared with Trinity an emphasis on diversity, location, and student life. Like Wheaton, Williams also provided high levels of emphasis on infrastructure. It was the only institution to emphasize highly athletics. As Table 2 shows, no type of message had a low emphasis.

While the previous sections explored which messages were being emphasized at each institution, this is only one way to examine the data. The following sections explore the data via type of message.

Academic Programs

Perhaps the most encouraging news to those concerned about higher education institutions' priorities is that there were considerably more messages related to the academic endeavors of the institutions in the study than any other topic, by far. All three institutions had academic messages as their predominant messages. The viewbook featured academic related messages in early pages, and academic messages were in more prominent positions on the websites. This suggests these colleges believe that the academic programs of an institution are important to the decision making process of prospective students, even in an age of the increasing arms race in higher education for non-academic priorities.

Each of the institutions in the study developed academic programs that they believe to be innovative and important to prospective students. The difference in audience for each of these programs is interesting. Wheaton, for example, emphasizes its unique general education curriculum, which would apply to all students, and mainly first and second-year students. Trinity, too, emphasizes a general education program that targets first-year students: the first-year seminar and advisory system. Yet, Trinity also emphasizes programs that target smaller population groups, in particular, high achieving students, such as those who participate in the Gateway Programs or in the Center for Urban and Global Studies. Williams mostly highlights academic programs for upperclassmen and high achieving ones at that. For example, there was consistent

messaging from Williams about its tutorial program and science and mathematics undergraduate research, as well as to a lesser extent, the thesis-based honors program.

Without fail, each institution emphasized study abroad and study away options. Certainly, each case demonstrates that commitment through their percentage of students who study abroad, with the lowest being at 50%. Interestingly, the institution with the highest percentage, Wheaton College at 65%, ranked the lowest of the three institutions. One might reason that institutional leaders at Wheaton believe that study abroad is one way to distinguish itself from its more successful peers; however, if that is the case, the amount of time spent communicating that message does not provide clear evidence of this as a strategy. Of the three institutions in the study, Trinity sent the strongest and most numerous messages about study abroad.

Service learning does not receive as much attention, comparatively, to other types of messages, nor did it receive equal attention from each institution. Wheaton, for example, barely mentions service programs at all, not to mention service-learning oriented experiences. Williams includes service learning under its experiential education label, one of the six elements on the admission website described as the Williams Difference. From a messaging standpoint, Williams says little more than service opportunities abound. Trinity takes the lead in emphasizing service learning programs through its community learning courses, which it believes serve as a model for other community learning programs around the country.

Liberal arts colleges often do not feel a need to have formal honors programs to provide unique opportunities for high achieving students. Small, intimate learning environments, more personalized advising, and more intense course offerings, which

many honors programs offer, are a part of the core business of liberal arts colleges. Despite this fact, the three institutions in the study do try to provide ways to highlight the work of its most promising students. All three institutions strove to provide recognition of prominent fellowship and award winners, although Trinity did so to a much lesser extent.

Another way to highlight the work of promising students is to develop unique programs tailored to their needs. Trinity does this early on in students' careers through the Gateway programs, while Williams does this at the end of their collegiate career through their thesis-based honors program. Wheaton did not indicate such a program in its messaging.

One of the most consistent messages across all three institutions, as one might expect from liberal arts colleges, is that they offer an intimate learning environment. While in different ways, this was a predominant theme on each campus. In fact, when asked what differentiates your institution from others, students on two campuses provided answers alluding to this intimate learning environment.

Wheaton, with the largest student to faculty ratio, was more contradictory to the intended message of an intimate learning environment, particularly by the students involved in the campus presentation and the information session. Wheaton's imagery in the viewbook contained larger groups of students in academic settings than those used by Trinity and Williams. Similarly, Trinity had messages that ran counter to the notion of an intimate learning environment. In particular, Trinity's tour guide and information session presenters' frequent discussion of the use of teaching assistants made their institution's intimate learning environment messaging less convincing.

Williams and Trinity students conveyed real examples of their close relationships with faculty, while Wheaton did so to a much lesser extent. In a similar vein, the Trinity campus tour contained multiple messages about relationships with the President. The tour guide relayed compelling stories about the President, such as students knocking on his door to walk his dogs, and him attending a weeklong pre-orientation program with students, known as Quest. The message at Trinity is that you will receive a personalized education by the faculty and staff of the college--at all levels.

Williams uses its tutorial program to suggest that learning is as intimate as two students and a professor. In fact, there are pictures in the viewbook and admission website to support this message. These images harken back to the story of Mark Hopkins on one end of a log and a student on the other. This message was conflicted, however, by the information session being held in a lecture hall suited to hold hundreds.

Williams delivered the strongest messages about research, both by faculty and undergraduates. It was clear that this was an important priority for the College, as the College listed it as part of the Williams Difference. The College also emphasized, particularly through the viewbook, the resources it puts behind its research agenda. Williams incorporated the importance of research across delivery methods, with YouTube videos and social media postings highlighting the research on campus. Wheaton, too, provided many instances of academic research highlighted across multiple platforms. Trinity, however, did not talk about research as overtly. Instead, its messaging about undergraduate research is that it was inherently a part of the experience at Trinity.

One area of tension between the work of O'Meara (2007) and Toma (2008, 2012) and the findings of this study is in messaging about graduate programs. Both authors present a case that prestige-seeking institutions put an increased emphasis on graduate programs. Breneman (1994) argues that liberal arts colleges, by their very nature, do not focus on graduate programs. Based on these three cases, liberal arts colleges agree with Breneman. Only two of the institutions in the study had graduate programs, and as might be expected at a liberal arts college, they were small in number. There were little to no messages about these programs. In fact, it was hard to find any information about the programs at Williams, with the exception of the number of graduate students enrolled. Perhaps the message of graduate programs detracts from the core message of a liberal arts institution's focus on undergraduate learning and the mission of these institutions.

Infrastructure

While academic messages may have been predominant, they were by no means the only prominently featured messages. In particular, Wheaton and Williams emphasized highly their campuses' infrastructure. Institutions send messages about their facilities, both subtly and not so subtly. All three campuses spoke about major construction projects that are underway or were recently completed. Each displayed photos of historic facilities in their viewbooks or online. Surprisingly, Trinity opted not to take the tour inside of its recently renovated Long Walk buildings. Wheaton, on the other hand, walked tours through multiple levels of its new science center. Williams did little to discuss thoroughly the buildings visited. Nevertheless, the ongoing construction demonstrates the arms race for campus facilities that Toma (2012) describes.

All three institutions had well-manicured lawns and campus greens, as well as attractive landscaping. These areas' designs lend themselves well to student interaction. Pictures depicting students conversing, studying on a lawn, or playing Frisbee highlighted this interaction. Surprisingly, there were not many of the other attractions of a College campus such as redbrick pathways or water features. In fact, the only water feature presented during the messaging was Peacock Pond at Wheaton and a picture of Williams' crew team.

Faculty Recruitment, Roles, and Rewards

While the three institutions in the study spoke about the roles of faculty extensively, there were less messages about faculty recruitment and rewards. Accordingly, all three institutions emphasized messages about faculty recruitment, roles, and rewards only moderately. The three cases demonstrate the primary goal of faculty at these institutions: teaching undergraduates. There is an expectation of interaction with students not only within the classroom but also outside the classroom. From the personal stories of the students delivering the campus tour and admission presentations to viewbook stories of faculty inviting students over for dinner and pictures of students interacting with children of faculty, there were many messages from these institutions about the importance of faculty actively engaging in the life of the college and its students outside the classroom.

Williams was more pronounced than the other two institutions in stating that faculty are also expected to be scholars. In its viewbook, it emphasizes that its faculty's primary responsibility is teaching; however, it later states, "research can double as a mode of instruction," hinting at the expectation of scholarly output by the faculty (p. 12).

Trinity also describes its faculty as scholars, but there is less emphasis on the importance of their scholarly output in the College's messaging. Wheaton does not use language that would suggest that its faculty must be active researchers.

Diversity

There was no shortage of messages of diversity in the three cases, which might be even more important for institutions like Williams and Wheaton, which are located in rural areas. Highly emphasizing diversity messages, Trinity sends the most messages about diversity, even locating a diversity tab on its admission website. Williams, also highly emphasizing diversity messages, is not far behind, with discussion about the historical moments of adding women and people of color to the student body in both the viewbook and on their website. Wheaton sends similar messages about adding students of color and becoming coeducational, although with much less emphasis. Trinity was particularly strong at incorporating messages of diversity across social media. All three institutions attempted to display diversity through pictures in the viewbook and on the website by featuring students of color.

Athletics

Messages about athletics were numerous at all three institutions. Nearly every institution communicated messages about athletics via each medium. While all three institutions tried to convey information about athletics, it is no surprise that Williams included more messages since it has had such success with its athletic programs. Williams sends strong messages about the balance between athletics and academics, and did so with such intensity that athletics was highly emphasized. In particular, the

Division of the Day was a strong message sent in both the tour and information session and a clear example of this commitment to balance.

Athletics is one type of message that social media was more active in delivering. While some types of messaging were relatively avoided on social media, all three institutions used Facebook and Twitter to highlight athletics, such as providing score updates and generating interest in upcoming athletic events. Additionally, there was little use of YouTube to convey messages about athletics.

Student Recruitment & Retention

The three institutions in the study sent many messages regarding student recruitment to prospective students. These messages most often were found in the viewbooks and on websites. The communication included discussion of visiting campuses, how to apply, and the financial aid process.

Surprisingly, institutions sent fewer of these messages via social media, and thus all three institutions only moderately emphasized this type of message. Williams did not include recruitment or retention messages in its social media efforts. Wheaton was more active in doing so, particularly using Facebook and Twitter to promote admission events. Trinity used social media the most broadly in student recruitment, with the office of admission sending various types of messages, and incorporating staff member's personal accounts to contribute to the conversation. These messages created two-way communication with prospective students and allowed the admission office the opportunity to engage prospective students using a medium frequently used by students in this generation.

The three institutions all sent messages about retention, mostly subtly through first-year programs. Emphasis on these programs varied by campus, with the most prominent messages coming from Trinity and Williams. Williams was the most overt about stating that the first-year programs, and especially its first-year entries, were designed to help retention. According to Williams, it works: the first-year to second-year retention rate at Williams is 98%. Primarily, viewbooks, campus tours, and the websites delivered these messages. Interestingly, nearly every student who spoke about these programs did so very positively, a good indication that first-year students might receive them well.

External Relations

Surprisingly, no institution seemed to have a clear brand identity. In fact, for Williams and Trinity, no graphic identity could be discerned. Wheaton did use the Go Beyond brand developed for its current capital campaign, and the incorporation of this brand helped Wheaton to emphasize external relations moderately. The College incorporated images and messages from that brand into physical banners hanging on the library, on the homepage, as well as into some videos on the College's YouTube channel. The institutions do often have elements of a brand. Some use consistent fonts and colors. Others have terminology, such as "Connections" at Wheaton or "Williams Difference" but none has a coherent brand identity that combines a graphic identity, slogan, etc. The lack of clear institution brands ran counter to what would have been expected.

As far as communicating messages of external relations in regards to development and endowment, Williams stood above the rest, perhaps because of its vast resources and leadership in alumni giving. In fact, the Williams viewbook contained a section in its

“Fast Facts” dedicated to “Resources.” The College highlights the number of volumes in its library, pieces in its art museum, amount spent on recent building renovations, and annual operating expenditures. Also contained in the “Fast Facts” section is a section on “Financing,” which discussed the value of the endowment, the amount of endowment per student, and the amount of financial aid dollars given to students.

Trinity, and to an even lesser extent, Wheaton, had considerably fewer messages related to external relations than Williams did, which emphasized this type of message moderately. From a pure academic perspective, this is not bad news. Increased resources do not necessarily equate to an increased quality education or a better fit for a prospective student. From the standpoint of Williams, however, increased resources provide a larger variety of quality educational experiences.

Comparison to other institutions

Again, these institutions took varying approaches in how to compare themselves to other institutions. The most surprising finding was that none of the colleges in the study highlighted the major national rankings or guidebooks. Despite the influence that rankings such as *U.S. News and World Report*, *Forbes*, and the *Princeton Review* have on prospective students, no college in the study directly referenced these accolades. This finding contradicts the expectation from O’Meara (2007) and Toma (2008, 2012) that institutions are focused on these rankings. The question this study does not reveal, however, is whether or not these institutions focus on those rankings but choose to not provide support for the rankings by discussing it with prospective students.

Instead, the institutions relied on pure statistical rankings, such as Wheaton’s assertion that it is in the top ten of Fulbright producers among liberal arts colleges and

Williams' claim that it is the number one institution of all colleges and universities in the nation in terms of undergraduate research in science and mathematics. Additionally, the institutions note the number of prestigious award and fellowship winners who are among their alumni. This is a subtle way of saying that our students are more qualified than other institutions.

In another approach, all three colleges boasted about where their alumni recently attended graduate school. These lists look eerily familiar to one another, as each institution asserts that its alumni attend some of the nation's top graduate schools. Of course, this list does not tell us whether there was one alumnus or alumna who attended these prestigious institutions or whether it is common for the school's alumni to attend. Williams distinguishes itself, however, by including lists of the most attended graduate schools among recent alumni. In the case of Wheaton and Williams, the institutions do not define how recent "recent" is, and Trinity, who does define it, uses a definition that includes someone who could have graduated 13 years ago.

One final approach, used more predominantly by Wheaton and Trinity, but used by Williams to a lesser extent, was to compare itself to institutions from its athletic league. Wheaton boasted of rivaling MIT and Smith in the NEWMAC, while Trinity touted its competition with Amherst and Williams in the NESCAC. Williams makes little mention of its participation in the NESCAC, but does highlight its rivalries in "The Little Three" unofficial league.

Alumni Success

Higher education is an intangible good. There is no product, except a piece of paper you receive at the end to show that you have completed a degree. Thus, institutions

must have ways to suggest that what they are doing truly matters. Communicating messages about the success of their alumni is one way of doing just that. This messaging might be even more important for liberal arts colleges, which by their very nature are not directly career oriented.

The three institutions in this study communicated a large number of messages through a variety of mediums about alumni success, and thus all three emphasized this message type highly. The viewbooks spent considerable time providing anecdotes about successful alumni from the famous (William's Erin Burnett of TV journalism fame) to the young alumnus in a top-rated graduate program (Wheaton's Melissa Gillooly pursuing a master's degree from the Harvard Kennedy School of Government). They provided examples of alumni pursuing careers, graduate study, or even non-profit work before entering the work force. Wheaton and Williams even provided lists of some of their most notable alumni.

The unified story from each of these institutions is that our alumni accomplish amazing things. Williams even goes so far as to suggest in its viewbook that if you attend Williams "you'll do well, financially and otherwise" (p. 39). By the amount of messages that each of these institutions dedicates to highlighting the accomplishments of its alumni, it is easy to discern that this is one of the most important messages to a college.

Resource Allocation Decisions

Initially, I expected little to no messaging in the area of resource allocation decisions. Those decisions are typically more management oriented and not something anticipated to extensively help recruit prospective students. These three cases proved this

logic incorrect in some ways in that each of the institutions in the study mentioned some resource allocation decisions in its messaging, albeit not with the same intensity, number of occurrences, or across all methods of delivery as some of the other message types. Williams was far and away the leader in use of this type of messaging, and yet, only emphasized it moderately. Wheaton highlighted the cost of the new science and technology center and the dollars spent, and Trinity trumpeted the over \$30 million it allocates to financial aid. These decisions can help tell the story of what is important to a college. For example, take the story of Williams. Through resource allocation decision messages, one can learn that the institution values high quality facilities, student-faculty interaction, undergraduate research, and financial aid for those in need.

Institutional History

For institutions as old as these, I expected many messages related to their historical background. Williams, the oldest institution in the study, sends the most messages about its history, across the most methods of delivery, yet still only emphasized this type of message moderately. Williams weaves, in various forms, the story of the College's founding and its popular president Mark Hopkins. Through these messages, the College is able to convey the importance of an intimate education and alumni success (since it was an alumnus, U.S. President James Garfield, who provided the infamous quote about Hopkins and the log).

Williams and Wheaton both use their history to point to significant changes in their student populations. Both discuss decisions to become coeducational and to admit students of diverse backgrounds. Trinity's messaging, by comparison, had much less emphasis on its history.

Facilities are also a way to convey an institution's history. All three institutions noted their more historic buildings. Historic facilities updated with modern features demonstrate to visitors that an institution has a historic past from which it has built itself but is still able to stay ahead of the curve in the modern day era, as well.

Location

Based on the messaging provided by the institutions, a college campus can be all things to all people. Wheaton is perhaps the best at telling this story. It is located in a rural town, and yet, by the description in the viewbook and on the web, combined with stories from students during the campus visit, you would think it was located immediately adjacent to the downtown of a major city. The story these students were conveying is that they had access to the amenities of a major city, because some are close by. Despite this compelling narrative, this type of messaging received less attention from Wheaton than it did at the other two types of institutions, receiving only moderate emphasis.

Interesting, both Trinity and Williams emphasize their location highly, but they emphasize the opposite values of their location. Williams notes that it is located in close proximity to big towns. New York and Boston are three hours away, and Albany is just an hour away. Yet, Williams embraces its location in the small town of Williamstown and in the Purple Valley. It highlights the access to big city amenities such as a Tony Award-winning theatre and a first-class art museum and all the positives of being located at the base of a mountain. The College emphasizes the active lifestyle of its students, with access to great hiking and skiing. Trinity is the opposite. It embraces its location in the urban area, and the cultural and educational opportunities that comes with urban

living. In the opinion of those at Trinity, it sets them apart from other liberal arts colleges.

Another note about location is weather. Trinity and Wheaton seem to run away from the wintery weather of New England. There were no images of snow on the ground in either viewbook. Williams, on the other hand, embraces that identity by displaying multiple pictures of students enjoying the wintery weather and talking about activities in which those students can engage when snow is on the ground.

Student Life

Student life is central to any college experience, but especially to that of a liberal arts college, which is supposed to be a living-learning environment. Thus, student life is an important component of the messages sent by the institutions in this study. The level of detail, however, is varying, with Wheaton being notably less descriptive than Williams and Trinity, and thus, only moderately emphasizing this type of message. Student life messages are also conveyed through various mediums, with social media being more active than with other types of messages.

All three institutions highlight messages in regards to housing. Trinity discusses students from the same first-year seminars living together in the same residence halls. Williams emphasizes its entry program. Wheaton focused more on themed living and special housing options. During the campus tours, Wheaton and Williams spent more time inside of residence halls, showing community space, as well as private rooms, while Trinity quickly moved the tour into a residence hall to showcase a room before exiting quickly.

Williams, interestingly, did not use its YouTube channel to broadcast messages about student life, whereas Trinity and Wheaton both showcased fun events through video. All three institutions found ways to use Facebook and Twitter to highlight events that students could attend.

In written form, Williams highlighted the opportunity for engagement with the outdoors club to take advantage of the College's setting. Similarly, Trinity highlighted students taking advantage of the social opportunities in Hartford. Wheaton featured its spring festival located on Peacock Pond.

All three institutions discussed the various student organizations on campus, either in the viewbook, on the tour, or via a YouTube video. Each highlighted certain unique clubs and organizations and quoted the number of groups currently on campus. Each also discussed the opportunity for students to create new organizations based on their own interests.

The Environment and Sustainability

What appears to be an emerging message is one of focus on preserving the environment and sustainability. Each institution sent various messages about their commitment to this effort. None was as strong as the Williams viewbook, which recounted the movement by students to get the College to place sustainability equal to diversity and accessibility in the College's guiding principles. A Williams YouTube video of alumni discussing environmental issues and a student competition to recycle and reuse support this message.

Wheaton put a great deal of emphasis on sustainability. There is a feature in the viewbook on the student initiated farmers market, which is held on campus on Fridays

and is highlighted during the campus tour. Wheaton also featured their new science center in print, on the web, on YouTube, and on the tour as an example of an environmentally conscious facility. Trinity, who has low emphasis on this message type, had the fewest messages regarding sustainability.

Legitimizing or Differentiating

Despite suggestions to the contrary, the vast majority of the messages conveyed by the institutions in the study are legitimizing. Each has a beautiful physical plant with historic buildings and modern amenities. Each has a faculty dedicated to teaching who believe that learning does not stop when a student walks out of the classroom. Each provides opportunities for undergraduate research and artistic expression. Even when there are distinct differences between campuses, somehow the message is the same. Each campus has the perfect location, no matter if it is urban, rural, or somewhere in between.

Of course, according to Toma (2012), we should expect all of this. If these institutions had not talked about the success of its alumni, its diverse student body, or its outstanding athletic programs, we would have questioned the institution. Why would an institution not communicate about the outstanding graduate schools its alumni attend? Does this mean their alumni are not accepted to the nation's great graduate schools? Prospective students, whether they realize or not, expect these legitimizing messages.

Even the more specialized messages are not truly unique. Williams, in particular, goes to great lengths to explain what is different about the experience at Williams and those at other institutions, even labeling it the Williams Difference. Take the Winter Study concept as an example. Ranking rival Middlebury College does it, as does Colby College, as does Centre College, and the list could go on. The same is true for the

tutorial system. Williams borrowed the idea from Oxford University. Cambridge University has a similar program, and even other U.S. institutions have tried it, such as Ohio University in its honors program.

Then how do institutional leaders get prospective students to select their institution over all the others when the messages being sent to prospective students seem the same? The study reveals that the institutions did not develop differentiated overall messages, yet they found ways to differentiate slightly within an overall message. Study abroad is a great example. Toma (2012) suggests that we should expect the institutions to speak about study abroad initiatives. As expected, each institution conveyed a number of messages about study abroad. It is an important part of institutional life, since more than 50% of students at each of these institutions choose to study abroad. Thus, communicating a message of study abroad is not differentiating. The lack of a significant study abroad program could actually draw some criticisms about the legitimacy of a college.

Trinity attempts to differentiate itself in the study abroad messaging by talking about the programs it runs. Trinity has established its own campus in Rome, as well as global learning sites in seven other cities. Thus, Trinity's message is that you can study abroad and still receive the same high-quality education by participating in a Trinity-run program. In this program, you will still interact with other Trinity students and faculty, but you will be doing so at one of eight sites across the globe. In this small way, Trinity differentiates itself.

This same process happens repeatedly. With regard to retention programs, each institution appears to have various techniques to maximize retention, but each has its own

unique approach. When you look at student research programs, each institution tailors their program in a slightly different way or emphasizes something just a little bit differently. Within each area, institutions try to develop a niche that just slightly distinguishes them from their peers.

There is one final way to discover differentiation between these institutions in the study, which extends the work of Toma (2012). The differentiation comes not in the individual techniques but instead in the combination of those techniques. In that sense, there is not one institution that is the same. In other words, it is not one individual program that will differentiate an institution from its peers. It is the combination of those various programs.

For example, it is conceivable that a fourth institution could have one or two of the programs from each of the institutions in this study and while those programs would not be differentiating, the combination of those programs could be. Could you envision a liberal arts college located in an urban environment (similar to Trinity) with a curriculum emphasizing that connection and that offers incoming students the opportunity to participate in Trinity's Gateway Programs, the Connections general education curriculum from Wheaton, and the Entry, first-year housing program from Williams? This institution, while sharing common characteristics with the three institutions in the study would be differentiating itself by saying that it offers this unique combination of programs. If this is the case, then perhaps the mythical "fit" that students often cite as a reason for why they choose an institution is merely a statement that their institution was able to differentiate itself through its unique combination of programs.

The similar messages at play in this study suggest that indeed the isomorphism that institutional theorists (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) would predict is occurring. What cannot be determined through this study, however, is whether this isomorphic behavior is occurring because institutional leaders believe it will help them increase prestige, as Toma (2008, 2012) suggests. It might occur because of other reasons, such as these messages are simply the best way to recruit students. A deeper study into why institutional leaders choose to communicate the messages they do is in order to determine the isomorphic behaviors relation to prestige-seeking behavior.

This study also suggests that institutions are attempting to differentiate themselves, as competitive strategy theorists argue (Porter, 1979; Ghemawat and Rivkin, 1999). The institutions in the study attempt to draw clear distinction between themselves and other campuses, such as the Williams Difference. In the end, however, these institutions struggled to find true differentiation beyond the notion presented above that the differentiation lies in a suite of programs and offerings, not just one program or offering.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

This final chapter provides a brief review of the study, reports seven key findings as result of the both the single and cross-case analyses, and offers implications for further research, as well as implications for practitioners.

Review of the Study

The purpose of this dissertation has been to explore how three liberal arts colleges of varying prestige levels communicate with prospective students. The study was rooted in the prestige literature (O'Meara, 2007; Toma, 2007; Toma, 2012) and was guided by institutional theory (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983), as well as competitive strategy theory (Porter, 1985; Ghemawat & Rivkin, 1999). The multiple-case study compared three liberal arts colleges and how they communicate messages of prestige to prospective students. The study analyzed the messages and determined if these messages were, as institutional theory would suggest, legitimizing, or as comparative strategy theory suggests, differentiating.

A number of factors contributed to the selection of this dissertation topic. First, colleges and universities are continually striving to climb the prestige ladder. Second, these rankings are influencing student college choice. Third, while there is a growing body of research that focuses on the efforts of officials at some institutions to increase their schools' prestige, most of this research is focused on research universities, not on liberal arts colleges. Fourth, while there is some research about messages sent through

viewbooks to prospective students, there is little research looking at messages communicated to prospective students across different delivery methods. Fifth, there is little to no research looking at whether these messages are legitimizing or differentiating. This study aims to fill these voids in the research.

Relying upon data gathered from analyzing viewbooks, institutional and admission websites, Facebook pages, Twitter accounts, and YouTube channels, along with observations taken from campus tours and admission information sessions, Chapters IV, V, and VI present case studies of three liberal arts colleges. These cases detail the messages communicated to prospective students, broken down by content areas (detailed in Table 2) and later analyzed to see if the messages are legitimizing or differentiating. Chapter VII continues the analysis by looking across the three cases to see common trends or differences between the cases. Finally, this chapter reports the key findings that emerge from the analysis and proposes implications for research and practitioners.

Findings

The analysis of the messages communicated by the three liberal arts colleges developed seven findings:

1. The primary message communicated to prospective students is about their academic programs. In an era of concern that the focus of higher education has moved beyond an emphasis on the academic affairs of an institution, this study reveals that these colleges focused their messages primarily on academics. There were more messages about academic programs than any other type of message. These messages were more prominently featured and used across a wide variety

of mediums, although room for improvement exists for incorporating academic messages into social media.

2. In addition to the messages related to prestige-generation as identified by O'Meara (2007) and Toma, (2007, 2012), six other areas of messages (intimate learning—a subcategory under academic programs, institutional history, location, student life, alumni success, and the environment and sustainability) emerged as major areas of emphasis in the communication between colleges and prospective students. Intimate learning, location, student life, and alumni success were prominent messages. Institutional history messages and messages regarding the environment and sustainability were less prominent.
3. Institutions communicated to prospective students each area of prestige generation, although at varying levels for each type of message and for each institution. The two areas with the fewest messages were external relations and resource allocation decisions, but even those areas had some messages, and at one institution, received prominent attention. Not surprisingly, messages about infrastructure, athletics, and student recruitment and retention were prominent, as was the role of faculty at a liberal arts college. The institutions in the study included messages about diversity and comparison to other institutions moderately.
4. Institutions communicated different types of messages more often via certain types of delivery methods. Messages about athletics were prominently featured in social media efforts. Academic programs, with the exception of YouTube, were not as often used in social media, which is concerning, since social media

provides an opportunity for two-way communication; however, the admission information sessions, another form of two-way communication, were predominantly focused on academic measures.

5. The majority of messages are legitimizing. The messages sent by these institutions were similar. All three institutions suggested there are outstanding opportunities to learn in intimate learning environments, participate in undergraduate research, and study abroad. These institutions suggested that by attending, you are more likely to attend outstanding graduate schools and have outstanding careers and success.
6. Institutions attempt to differentiate their message but often the message is not truly differentiating. While institutions strove to differentiate themselves by slightly altering programs so that there are unique aspects, overall, the messages communicated by these institutions are very similar. Even when institutions said that certain aspects were “unique” or “differentiating,” those programs were not particularly differentiating.
7. Differentiation primarily occurs through an institution’s “suite of programs.” Little differentiation exists between the broad messages these institutions communicate. The slight differences are not truly differentiating. One way in which the institutions do differentiate themselves is through the uniqueness of the collection of programs they offer. Alone, the programs these institutions offer are similar to programs offered by different institutions. Collectively, no other institutions share this unique collection of programs.

Liberal Arts Colleges

This study suggests that liberal arts colleges are communicating many messages about the elements that define them as liberal arts colleges according to Breneman (1994). The lack of messages about graduate education (when it was even available) demonstrated the focus on undergraduate education. Institutions paid great attention to the fact that they create intimate learning environments and are residential in nature. The messages sent also support the fact that faculty at liberal arts colleges have expectations and rewards systems that focus on teaching.

The study suggests that these institutions share similar messages, and there is difficulty for these institutions to differentiate themselves from each other. Simply talking about intimate learning environments, a common response when asked what are the institution's differentiating traits, is not unique. Rather, it is a trait that distinguishes liberal arts colleges from other types of institutions. Perhaps liberal arts colleges should unite to make a case for the liberal arts environment, and then turn to differentiating themselves among the pack. The study also reveals, that at least for these three institutions, there is room for significant growth in the use of social media in order to effectively market to prospective students.

Research Implications

There are a number of streams of research that emerge as important for further research based on this study, opening the door for a robust research agenda for the future. The following is a case for researchers to explore more thoroughly a few of those streams.

Foremost, researchers should expand this study to include other types of institutions. This was a study of only three institutions, and there is a need for replication on a much larger scale. To understand more broadly how higher education institutions communicate to prospective students, future studies would need to be replicated at other types of institutions beyond private liberal arts colleges, such as community colleges, comprehensive colleges and universities, research universities, public institutions, as well as for-profit institutions.

This study is limited to messages sent to prospective students. To further understand how an institution communicates messages of prestige, future studies would need to include other areas such as presidential communication, alumni and donor communication, communication to parents of current students, and even internal communication. Types of approaches and use of the varying methods of delivery are likely to change with these different constituencies. Cross-case analysis across all of these constituencies might provide interesting findings that might assist communications professionals on college and university campuses. For example, such a study might reveal that communication to alumni and donors emphasizes certain types of messages over another or does not use a balance of methods of delivery to communicate its messages effectively.

This study only considered *what* messages were being communicated to prospective students. It did not look at *why* these messages were communicated. A study inquiring into the rationale by message makers for including certain messages in communications targeting prospective student could help discern if institutions send messages in order to communicate prestige. This would involve collecting different data,

likely through interviews of key message makers at colleges and universities. Again, the results of such a study could be very useful to communication professionals at colleges and universities as they aim to increase enrollment or selectivity of the student body. Along these same lines, it would be interesting to learn *who* is determining which messages are being sent: the admission office, the communication office, a third-party consultant, or other participants in the communication strategy for the institution.

This study revealed that institutions are sending strong messages about prestige to prospective students. The next logical question is: do these messages work? Does the communication of messages of prestige to prospective students actually influence the student's or his or her parents' perception of the prestige of an institution? This is an important question, particularly for institutions who want to affect the perception of prestige amongst prospective students. Researchers could obtain data through a variety of techniques. One might interview prospective students and their families, or one might administer surveys to students who received viewbooks, recently took a campus tour, or participated in an information session. One could also employ focus groups with both prospective students and their families in order to test different messages and gauge immediate reaction from these two constituencies. Such a study might reveal that the students' perception of prestige is much different from that of the institutions' perception.

This study contributes to the under-developed literature base regarding what messages institutions communicate, particularly outside any mechanism other than the viewbook. Findings from this study suggest a need for further examination of two-way communication methods. While there is some information in the literature regarding admission tours, and to a lesser extent, admission presentations, the amount of scholarly

literature is still lacking. Moreover, social media's relatively recent entree into the student recruitment scene has not allowed a significant research base to emerge around these delivery methods. These not only include the three forms included in this study (Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube), but should also be expanded to include other forms such as blogs or photo sharing sites such as Flickr. Additionally, social media sites have been created solely with higher education, and particularly student recruitment, in mind. Scholarly inquiry into these sites, such as Capex, College Confidential, and Zinch, to name only a few, is needed.

This study revealed six areas of messaging that are not related to the prestige-seeking behavior identified by O'Meara (2007) and Toma (2008, 2011). Is there prestige-seeking behavior in messaging related to intimate learning, institutional history, location, student life, alumni success, and the environment and sustainability? Further research is needed to understand if any of these message themes has a tie to prestige-seeking behaviors that was not identified in previous research.

Finally, there is a need to know what institutions are doing that is truly unique. Successful innovations in higher education, if institutional theory is correct, will not remain innovative for long; however, it would be interesting to know how long an innovation takes to be adopted by other institutions. Historians may prove useful in this effort. An idea recently adopted by a number of institutions, for example, the addition of resource centers for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgendered students in order to help with campus diversity, could be traced back to its historical roots. The study would explore which institutions originally developed the idea and how long it took other institutions to replicate the innovation.

Implications for Practitioners

Practitioners may gain considerable insights from this study and from the future studies suggested above. First, the study illuminates what types of messages are being sent by other liberal arts colleges. It also suggests what messages these institutions believe are important when recruiting students. Practitioners could look at these findings and compare them to their own institution's communication strategy and use the study to inform their decision making for future communication.

For example, what is the next big messaging strategy at colleges and universities? This study provides data to support the idea that it could revolve around the environment and sustainability. Prospective students find themselves growing up in a world focused on improving their communities and the environment. Colleges have already embraced the notion of serving the community through various service and service-learning related initiatives. Now, as these three institutions demonstrate, colleges and universities are implementing strategies that are also beneficial to the environment. This surely appeals to a generation of students who have grown up recycling and studying about global warming.

The study illuminates the differences in the types of messages sent via different communication methods. Practitioners should take this message and look at their own work to see if they are sending the types of messages they intend via all the various delivery methods they chose to use. Similarly, the study notes the missed opportunities that the institutions in this study have in relation to developing two-way communication between prospective students using social media.

Practitioners should begin to embrace social media, as Rath (2009) suggests, and use it not just as a method to convey events and short updates about their institution, but truly to engage prospective students. Take this as an example: what if an institution announced a competition on its Facebook page for the best video created by a prospective student explaining why they are applying to the college. Videos would be submitted by posting on the college's Facebook page. This would tell the admission office who was truly interested in the institution, as it is not likely that a student not interested in attending the institution would take the time and effort to make such a video. Additionally, as the videos are posted, other prospective students will see the reasons why their fellow future classmates like the institution, a much better sales pitch than something crafted by a paid staff member. Admission representatives, and others, should start to post responses to these videos in order to create a dialogue about the positive aspects of the institution. This creates a natural two-way communication process that will likely keep prospective students coming back to the website. This is just one example of the power of social media to engage prospective students and their family in two-way communication via social media.

A variety of methods on social media can facilitate two-way communication, and practitioners should embrace these methods. A first technique is simple: post questions. Practitioners can post questions to Facebook or Twitter and likely will receive a response if the topic is of interest to the audience. So, perhaps, an admission officer might post on the College's Facebook account a question asking, "What is your favorite memory of winter at the College?" Students, faculty, staff, and alumni are likely to respond.

Facebook and Twitter also allow enhanced communication and engagement by tagging others in posts, liking posts, or sharing posts (for Facebook) or mentions, replies, retweets, and hastags (for Twitter). These techniques either engage other users directly or help broaden the audience of a message. Increased use of these methods will make these social media sites of the institutions more active and engaging.

Institutions should be more thorough in their use of social media across topics and interests. Williams has a YouTube channel that conveys the academic environment and success of its alumni, but it lacks an appeal to student life. Institutions should use Twitter and Facebook for more than athletic announcements. On the other hand, the excitement generated in athletics provides a number of made for TV type of moments, which institutions could easily turn into YouTube videos.

Institutions can also learn from this study the importance of targeting messages to different constituencies. Trinity College was the only institution in the study to have social media accounts targeted specifically to prospective students, and they did so for Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube. This allows a more concentrated approach to what messages prospective students might receive, rather than using an institution's main account, which might be sending messages to the College's broad constituency of students, faculty, staff, alumni, and community members, to only name a few.

Additionally, this study illuminated the difficulty of finding some institutions social media sites. First, institutions should provide links in various places to the college's various social media sites. In addition, Williams College took an approach that others should emulate. Williams used the same handle, or account name, for each of its social media sites: Williams College. Thus, no matter what site a prospective student

visits, he or she can type Williams College and find Williams (for example, www.facebook.com/williamscollege). Wheaton and Trinity both use various handles for the various sites. This is particularly problematic for these two institutions, since other institutions share similar names to theirs. Institutions would be wise to be consistent and use the same handle in order to assist prospective students in not only finding the college's social media sites, but finding the correct sites.

This study also reveals that the campus visit experience, especially the tour, are moving away from pure data and are increasingly becoming a way of conveying the story of the student experience. The institutions in this study relied on the viewbook and website to convey the hard data about the institution, while the tour and to a lesser extent the information session, is about talking about what life as a student is like on that campus. Practitioners should note this trend and consider emulating it. With prospective students as technologically savvy as they are, many will come to campus already having found this information online, and it would appear not to be the best use of time to repeat that information.

Practitioners should note the other messaging themes in this study that are not tied directly to prestige-seeking behavior (intimate learning, institutional history, location, student life, alumni success, and the environment and sustainability). Despite the fact that they are not connected to the prestige literature, there was consistent use of these themes across the three cases, indicating that practitioners at these institutions must believe that these topics resonate with prospective students and/or their families in significant ways.

Another significant conclusion that practitioners can take from this study is the importance of differentiation. The messages that these three institutions send are quite similar, and for a prospective student trying to wade through a sea of messages about colleges and universities, truly innovative and differentiating institutions and/or programs are likely to be refreshing.

Conclusion

This study further accents the challenge before higher education institutions when trying to make a successful case that they should be the institution of choice of a prospective student. Institutions are drawn into the struggle of trying to legitimize themselves by appearing like their more successful peers, while at the same time differentiating just enough to not appear too extreme, but instead, come across as uniquely different from the other institutions so that the prospective students choose it. These conflicting objectives are hard to achieve. This study suggests that even at the most prestigious institutions, there is a challenge to differentiate truly.

Ideally, this study serves as a catalyst for further research into the way institutions communicate and how they attempt to achieve prestige. As higher education rankings become more and more prominent and abundant (at least two new rankings have been developed between the time this project began and concluded), it will be important for institutions to know more about how their peers are communicating prestige.

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