

## “Through the Looking Glass”

### The Promotional University 2.0

*Alison Hearn*

In 2006, a group of students at Cornell University formed an “image committee.” Spurred by the lack of “cool hats [and] hoodies” at a Cornell–Yale football game, the committee’s goal was to exert pressure on administrators to increase the university’s branding efforts and raise its standing in the *U.S. News and World Report* rankings. Founder Peter Cohl expressed the committee’s sentiment clearly: if the university’s reputation and ranking drop, his “value as a human being feels like it’s dropping” (Finder 2006). Meanwhile, north of the border in Canada, students at Trent University were aggressively demonstrating against the implementation of a new, expensive marketing campaign with the unfortunate slogan, “The world belongs to those who understand it”; not only was the slogan presumptuous and condescending, argued the students, but the campaign wasted precious university resources at a time when tuition fees were rising rapidly (Swerdlyk 2005). These examples illustrate two very different responses to the now firmly entrenched processes of university promotion, marketing, and branding around the globe.

It was a scant 19 years ago, in 1991, that Andrew Wernick published his groundbreaking volume, *Promotional Culture: Advertising, Ideology and Symbolic Expression*, which included a chapter on the rise of what he named “the promotional university.” In this chapter, Wernick (a professor of cultural studies at Trent University as it happens) noted the ways in which North American universities were increasingly “entrepreneurial, public relations oriented, and engrossed in the search for funds” (Wernick 1991: 156). Certainly, Wernick was not alone in noting these developments, but he was singularly prescient in recognizing the centrality of branding and promo-

tion, not only to the university's struggle for continued cultural relevance and financial survival but to the development of postindustrial capitalism itself. This chapter updates and builds upon Wernick's exploration of the promotional university. It will provide a brief historical overview of the paradoxical, yet generative, mission of the university in the West, and will examine the ways in which the contemporary context of advanced post-Fordist, neoliberal, "branded" capitalism has intensified the processes of promotionalism within universities identified by Wernick almost two decades ago.

The two examples described above illustrate that promotional activities and practices, even as they are central features of post-Fordist capitalist culture, can never completely contain or predict their effects; as they have come to profoundly condition self-conception and cultural understanding in some, they produce active and inventive resistance in others. This resistance can, but does not always, feed back into promotional representations. Indeed, this dynamic duality of containment and resistance resonates deeply with the paradoxical mission of the university itself. The university has historically been both a source of socially useful training and research in tune to the outside forces of government and industry and a site for the production of responsible, moral citizens, and social critique, which requires critical distance from those same forces. There can be no doubt, however, that over the last decade, one side of this dualism has become dominant while the other has struggled for survival. What happens to this centuries-old dual, and often paradoxical, mission of the university in an increasingly mediated, technologized, and globalized world, where aggregated reputation, generated by branding and promotion online and off, threatens to displace all other forms of value?

### **A (Very) Brief History of the Paradoxical University**

The university has always been a contradictory, radically heterogeneous site, deeply conflicted at its core, continually in the process of interrogating its various responsibilities. Society requires the university to serve it, but this service requires the university's detachment and freedom from external social determinations. The university enacts this paradox, asking for authorization from outside social agents (government, industry) in order to reflect upon, criticize, or challenge them (Derrida 1983: 19). Jacques Derrida invokes the metaphor of "mochlos" or lever to describe this contradiction: the

quest for academic freedom and the need for an outside source to authorize that quest push against each other, functioning as a generative and productive lever propelling the university forward through history. The contradiction, or conflict, between the university's need for authorization from external interests and its internally generated need for autonomy from those interests has been expressed and performed in myriad ways throughout the institution's long history.

### **The Earliest Universities**

In its earliest incarnations, during the Middle Ages in Bologna and Paris, the university embodied conflict between external interests—church, state, commerce—and internal radical opposition to them. This tension existed between the *studia generalia*—the free association of students and teachers that made up the earliest universities—and both the sites and contexts of their associations (towns and businesses) and the content of their study (vocational orientations such as law, medicine, and theology, which required external authorization). The first *universitas* of students organized as a group in order to protect themselves from the price-gouging activities of the townspeople. These unions of students, once incorporated, found themselves able to make other kinds of demands, most notably of their teachers. Contrary to popular belief, then, the term “universitas” does not refer to a universality of knowledge but rather to “the totality of a group, whether of barbers, carpenters, or students” (Haskins 1957: 9), which “manages its own affairs and conducts business for itself” (Kane 1999: 3).

The model of the southern university emerged as the result of struggles between students, teachers, merchants, and city officials. In Northern Europe, however, the universities emerged out of struggles between teaching masters and the Church. Northern universities, such as the University of Paris, had their start as cathedral schools and were initially controlled by the bishop's secretary, the chancellor, who hired masters to teach and controlled who and what was taught. The newly formed College of the Masters of Paris eventually contested the power of the chancellor after a period of student riots and unrest. Some of these riots were precipitated by the radical teachings of scholars such as Peter Abelard, who dared to subject Church dogma to the formal structures of Greek reasoning. Teachers took to the streets, teaching in “ramshackle houses on the Petit-Pont that linked the island with the Left Bank of the Seine” (Kane 1999: 8). Students turned away from the

chancellor's university and "made up a student city in the middle of the city" (Kane 1999: 9). Eventually, the contestation of the power of the Church by the masters of Paris ended in a royal charter and Papal Bull allowing the masters to incorporate the university as an independent body with the power to elect its own proctor to represent them to the king and the Church (Kane 1999; Haskins 1957). In its earliest incarnations, then, the university was the site of conflict and expressed its conflicted origins plainly. While it was subject to external determining agents for its curriculum and its context (after all, these universities had no buildings but were dependent on private halls, churches, and the street), it insisted at the same time on its independence in terms of internal arrangements and curricular decisions.

### **The Conflict of the Faculties**

This paradox of the university, expressed as a tension between academic freedom and instrumental or administered knowledge, appears again in 1798, famously, in Immanuel Kant's *The Conflict of the Faculties*. In this essay, Kant dutifully and repeatedly recognizes the university's indebtedness to its political context and makes a case for the university as a site for social and government training and public service. At the same time, however, he argues for the university as a site for freedom of thought and inquiry. Kant attempts to defend both the academic freedom embodied by the lower faculty of philosophy, and the "usefulness" of knowledge imparted by the higher faculties—law, medicine, and theology. The higher faculties have the job of caring for men's civil, physical, and spiritual well-being and are necessarily under the influence and sway of the government. The lower faculty of philosophy has the job of policing truth and illuminating reason and requires autonomy from outside influence.

With this model, Kant asserts a view of the academy as simultaneously inside and outside the direct influence of external political or economic forces. But, perhaps more importantly, he restates the paradox of the university through a discussion of the organization of the disciplines. His model admits to a necessary element of usefulness and instrumentality, at the same time as it advocates that thought and research be free from social and political pressures:

It is absolutely essential that the learned community at the university also contain a faculty that is independent of the government's command with regard to its teach-

ings, one that, having no commands to give, is free to evaluate everything and concerns itself with the interests of...truth; one in which reason is authorized to speak out publicly. For without a faculty of this kind the truth would not come to light (and this would be to the government's own detriment) (1979: 27–29).

This is Kant's “system of justification” (Derrida 1992: 6) for the university, one that might successfully navigate its internally generated mission of reason and its externally authorized mission of usefulness. This system is based on the regulatory ideal of reason as the final arbiter of action and thought. With Kant, reason is instituted as the “reason for” the university's necessary autonomy and its exemplary role and is structured in opposition to, or set apart from, the instrumental or technical ends of knowledge.

### The “Cresthomatic” University

The central tension between the usefulness of the university to its society on the one hand and its need for academic freedom from external interests on the other is in evidence again in the university reform movements of the nineteenth century. It is best exemplified in the establishment of the University of London in 1825 and in the reforms foisted upon Oxford and Cambridge a decade earlier. At this time, Oxford and Cambridge were taken to task, most notably by Adam Smith and the Reverend Sydney Smith, for their exclusion of men not affiliated with the Church of England, their apparently nonexistent teaching practices, and their curriculum, which came under attack for its dreamy pursuit of “truth” and useless study of the classics. The Reverend Smith put forward a particularly potent argument for useful knowledge made available to the bourgeois classes and in so doing instated a covert class politic into debates about higher education that continues to this day:

What other measure is there of dignity in intellectual Labour, but usefulness? And what ought the term University to mean, but a place where every science is taught which is liberal, and at the same time useful to mankind. Nothing would so much tend to bring classical literature within proper bounds, as a steady and invariable appeal to utility in our appreciation of all human knowledge (qtd. in Sanderson 1975: 35–36).

The dons at Oxford and Cambridge responded to these criticisms, arguing for the pursuit of useless knowledge. They linked the quest for high truth with spiritual practice and the Church and pitted the standard of “quality of mind” against a debased and vulgar notion of direct utility. Edward Copleston, provost of Oriel College, responded to Smith:

To make necessity the standard of what is praiseworthy or honourable [sic] is against the uniform judgment of mankind. There must be surely a cultivation of mind, which is itself, a good: a good of the highest order; without any immediate reference to bodily appetites, or wants of any kind (qtd. in Sanderson 1975: 37–38).

The founding of the University of London in 1826 broke the Church's monopoly on higher education and established what would become generally accepted arguments for socially useful education. The informing spirit of the University of London emanated from the work of Jeremy Bentham, especially his notion of "chrestomathia," meaning "conducive to useful learning" (Young 1992: 105), a theory of pedagogy based on the qualities of efficiency and discipline. The University of London, along with the reformed German and American universities, offered a comprehensive range of useful subjects—medicine, engineering, mathematics, political economy, law—and focused purposefully on the utility of research and knowledge for outside interests (Sanderson 1975). These universities embodied in concrete form a politicized alternative to the class-based practices of open inquiry and "useless" literary education offered at Oxford and Cambridge.

During this time of university reform in the mid-nineteenth century, the disciplinary structures of knowledge and teaching with which we are now familiar began to solidify. These structures were clearly conditioned by outside economic, cultural, and political interests. The rise of industrialization and technology, the growth of the natural and social sciences, and the rise of a professional bourgeois class, for example, not only helped to determine the structure and delineation of the disciplines but also permeated the administrative structures and ideologies of the university itself. New modes of inquiry such as psychiatry, evolutionary biology, and sociology articulated what Michel Foucault has termed the "dividing practices" demanded by the "useful" university (1982: 208). Faculties competed against each other for internal and external funding and recognition. Thus, they came to function in relative isolation from each other. Bentham's model of education as panopticon set into motion a practice of disciplinarity as a "distinct form of power which trains the body and soul, by systematically observing and distinguishing its subjects" (Messer-Davidow and Shumway 1991: 212).

We can see in the emergence of the "chrestomatic" university a concomitant movement toward social conformity and political docility. Although in its earliest expression the useful university was intended to democratize education and to contribute to an informed national citizenry, the structural formulas for disciplinary efficiency worked instead to generate useful and

productive social subjects. The discourses of university disciplinarity as we understand them today emerged at the same time as industrialization and the growth of market logic.

### **The Rise of Corporate U**

The tension between the university's utilitarian and cultural/critical pedagogical and research missions, and between its dependence upon, and desired autonomy from, government and outside interests, continued to drive universities forward during the first half of the twentieth century. Although, given the slow extension of higher education to the masses and the growth of industrialization and increased demand for white-collar workers, the balance slowly began to shift toward utilitarian concerns and active, explicit collaboration with government and industry. Indeed, universities began to be seen as central to a nation's economic prospects, providing “human capital” in the form of a credentialized workforce and, at the same time, ideologically reinforcing the hegemony and perceived inevitability of liberal-pluralist capitalism.

The latter half of the twentieth century saw the mass expansion of higher education throughout North America and Europe. Higher education participation rates grew from five percent in the early part of the twentieth century to 50 percent today (Wernick 2006b: 561). This expansionist push, which emerged culturally and politically in the late 1950s and 1960s, was originally motivated by liberal ideals of democratic access. In the 1970s, however, these liberal ideals were increasingly challenged, as university enrollment slowed, the service-oriented workforce and its attendant disciplinary demands became dominant, and fiscal pressures, including unemployment, grew (Axelrod 1982; Newson and Buchbinder 1988). At the same time, public faith in the need for universities as purveyors of culture and training ground for good citizens, tentative at best, began to wane. Canada, for example, saw a 40 percent decline in support for higher education funding between 1965 and 1971 (Axelrod 1982: 146). At this time, government officials began to demand increased fiscal accountability on the part of universities, or “more scholar for the dollar” (Axelrod 1982: 147).

This shift in public opinion and political priorities with regard to the university must be understood in the context of the post-Fordist mode of capitalist production and neoliberal governmental policies (Wernick 1991). Post-Fordism, which took root during the 1970s and was firmly established

by the 1980s, is marked by the rise of service and white-collar work, an emphasis on consumption over production, and the processes of “flexible accumulation,” which include strategies of permanent innovation, mobility and change, subcontracting, and just-in-time, decentralized production (Harvey 1990). Flexible accumulation is heavily dependent on communication networks, high technology, and lateral flows of information and production, as opposed to hierarchical ones, and tends to emphasize the production and consumption of knowledge and symbolic products—including packaging, image design, branding, and marketing—over concrete material production (Goldman and Papson 2006; Harvey 1990). Under post-Fordism, the practices of marketing and branding become increasingly central to processes of capital accumulation (Harvey 2005; Holt 2006).

Neoliberalism is the political economic theory and mode of governmentality that accompanies these economic developments. Simply put, neoliberalism “proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong property rights, free markets and free trade” (Harvey 2005: 2). The role of the state is to advance and protect these freedoms through deregulation, privatization, and reduced social welfare benefits. Individual responsibility and autonomy is stressed, while communitarian or state-run social or cultural initiatives are discouraged. Perhaps most importantly, under neoliberalism, market exchange is seen as “an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide to all human action, and substituting for all previously held ethical beliefs” (Harvey 2005: 3).

Against this backdrop of post-Fordist capitalism and neoliberalism in the 1980s and 1990s, universities have begun to redefine themselves, as the external influences of government and industry and the ubiquity of market discourses combine to seriously threaten the university’s orienting paradox. As governments attempt to cut costs, publicly funded universities are pushed into the arms of the private sector and external corporate sponsorship, while private universities, also hungry for funds, stake out strategic private partnerships of their own. Corporate presence is felt across campuses in the form of named buildings and stadiums, food courts and shopping malls, the imposition of restricted forms of technology and software, and the corporate sponsorship of university sports teams, to name only a handful of examples (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004). Sets of quantitative metrics drawn from industry emerge to measure university performance in the name of public accountability and efficiency. As external corporate influence grows,

the university shifts its research and pedagogical emphasis to those fields likely to produce the highest monetary yield—business, the sciences, computer technology, and engineering—and the humanities are left to wither. Through established granting programs and new initiatives, governments push industry-defined, “mission-oriented,” commercializable research. Interstitial organizations, such as patent and licensing offices, proliferate as well as broker relations between university researchers and private interests (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004). Meanwhile, academic labor and tenure are threatened, as university administrators hire larger and larger numbers of flexible, low paid, contract teachers to staff undergraduate service courses. Many students, influenced by the consumer culture around them, increasingly come to see the university as a service provider, and their education as a zero-sum game where they should “get what they pay for”; this, in turn, results in increased pressure on the professoriate to inflate grades in order to meet student/consumer demand (Coté and Allahar 2007; Newson 2004; Brulé 2004; Edmundson 1997). At the same time, top-down corporate models of governance come to replace the long-established systems of bi-cameral university governance across North America; with administrative staff and bureaucratic systems on the rise, faculty and students are increasingly marginalized in decision-making processes (Hearn 2006; Newson and Buchbinder 1988; Gould 2003; Bok 2003). Finally, as a result of the infiltration of market logic, universities begin to brand, market, and promote themselves in earnest.

### **1991: Promotional Culture and the Promotional University 1.0**

While forms of university advertising have been around since the eighteenth century, it was not until the early twentieth century that universities in the United States installed formal public relations offices. In response to this, and as early as 1903, conservative critics were bemoaning “the trend towards the commercialization of our institutions and learning” (Cutlip 1970: 23). By the 1970s, universities had actively begun to import marketing strategies from business in spite of vocal dissent amongst the professoriate (Fram 1973; Barton and Treadwell 1978). By the 1980s, university marketers had formed their own professional associations, consortiums, and conferences, and textbooks and an academic journal about marketing for higher education emerged (Carrocci 2009: 7). By 1991, the year in which Wernick

published *Promotional Culture*, the practices of marketing and promotion by universities were widely accepted.

In *Promotional Culture*, Wernick defines promotionalism as the dominant symbolic language and mode of expression of advanced post-Fordist capitalism and neoliberal modes of governmentality: it names the extension of market values and commodity relations into all areas of life. Breaking with traditional views of advertising, which see production and consumption as conceptually distinct areas of consumer culture, Wernick insists that the commodity form cannot be separated from its promotional form and that consumption activity is bound to the production of promotional meanings and brands. Echoing the work of other poststructuralist theorists, such as Jean Baudrillard, Wernick argues that a promotional message comprises a unique mode of communication; it is a “complex of significations which at once represents (moves in place of), advocates (moves on behalf of) and anticipates (moves ahead of) the circulating entity...to which it refers” (Wernick 1991: 182). Promotion entails a rearrangement of the relation between sign and referent. The sign comes to displace the material object to which it refers and, in this way, acquires a kind of agency: “In this integrated system of production/promotion, the commodity and its double—the commodity sign and the promotional sign—are deployed together in a mutually referring and self-confirming way” (Wernick 1991: 16). Goods come to be designed less for their direct usefulness and more for the meanings and myths they are able to mobilize and represent. As a result, consumers do not simply buy for utility but rather “buy into” access to cultural meaning and status.

For Wernick, promotion is a speech act and, as such, is performative—a “mode of communication, a species of rhetoric... defined not by what it says but by what it does” (Wernick 1991: 184). Promotionalism works to perpetually persuade and to represent determinate sets of interests; as a result, it is always-already political. A culture marked by the ubiquity of promotional discourse is a truly postmodern one, signaled by a lack of trust in language. Here what matters most is not “meaning” per se, or “truth” or “reason,” but “winning”—attention, emotional allegiance, and market share. Promotionalism, as a foundational component of commodity exchange and of most contemporary social discourse, is thoroughly instrumental, functioning to bring about some form of “self-advantaging exchange” (Wernick 1991: 181). Goods, services, corporations, people, and universities are all implicated in the logic of promotion.

The figure of the “brand” is the apotheosis and central representative figure of a promotional culture. Indeed, the finely calibrated practices of corporate branding express the self-advantaging values of capital most pointedly, inscribing these values directly into our experience. The communicative practices of promotionalism in the form of branding, then, comprise the deep commodification of culture, whereby our values and commonly used symbols are colonized by the market and put to work to sell. As a result, even though it might be semiotically complex, promotionalism is a homogenizing cultural force, which flattens distinctions between people, social relationships, and things, and delimits the terms within which to constitute our senses of self, community, relationships, and values. While marketers work to produce uniqueness and distinctiveness for individual commodities in and through branding and advertising, as the culturally dominant form of signification, these practices become the medium through which culture “impresses the same stamp on everything” (Adorno and Horkheimer 1999: 32).

In his chapter on the promotional university, Wernick examines the ways in which universities have been drawn into promotional logic, focusing specifically on student recruitment, accreditation, faculty career advancement, and academic publishing. Responding to the corporate influences described above, Wernick notes:

For universities, as for late capitalist society as a whole, penetration by the price-system has been accompanied (and anticipated) by the extension of competitive exchange in general...the markets in which the university has become involved are not only those mediated by money. Like promotional politics, the promotional university is a site which brings together the market for commodities in the ordinary sense with other forms of competition (for status, for example) of a more purely symbolic kind (Wernick 1991: 158).

In the era of growing corporate influence, universities perpetually strive to accumulate “promotional capital” in the form of reputation and rankings in magazines such as *U.S. News and World Report*. They do so to such an extent that often the pursuit of rank and reputation completely displaces any internally generated ideals regarding independent cultural critique and pedagogical rigor; indeed, in a clear case of the tail wagging the dog, most universities explicitly use the categories for university adjudication established by these external publications as blueprints for their future. For Wernick, universities in the thrall of corporate capital and promotional logic lose sight of the university’s dual and paradoxical mission, allowing themselves

to go “through the looking glass. Rather than just evolving, each university’s collective identity becomes a matter of obsessive definition, becoming in the end a wholly artificial construct” (Wernick 1991: 157).

### **The Promotional University 2.0**

The conditions of the corporate university have only intensified since Wernick wrote *Promotional Culture* in 1991. Recognizing that the university occupies a privileged place in relation to the knowledge economy and that knowledge is now a form of venture capital, universities have begun to situate themselves at the intersection of the state and the market, enthusiastic participants in the blurring of boundaries between public and private sectors. Indeed, universities are now “actors initiating academic capitalism, not just players being ‘corporatized’” (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004: 12). Their orienting contradiction seriously eroded, universities are now in the business of “doing” business. In Canada, there has been a push for “market-ready” industry-driven education in the form of specialized colleges, and, in the U.S., there has been a rise in for-profit universities. It is now possible “to find universities listed on stock exchanges as far flung as Johannesburg, Bombay, and New York” (Mount and Belanger 2004: 130). These developments have been accompanied by the solidification of post-Fordism and neoliberalism (no matter how crisis-ridden), and an increase in the degree to which image, reputation, and branding play a central role in the generation of capital. As the Internet and other forms of new communication technology have become commonplace, the drive for visibility and perpetual connectivity increases, and the generation of symbolic capital, via reputation building and image management, becomes a central concern for individuals and institutions (Hearn 2008). As Bill Readings presciently argued in 1996, the contemporary university no longer has a clear “regulatory ideal,” such as citizenship or serving the public good. Instead, it has become “derefere ntialized,” driven by empty rhetoric and marketing logic, with no other watchword than the empty signifier “excellence” (Readings 1996); the university has become thoroughly promotionalized and its orienting paradox severely crippled.

### **Brand U**

As noted above, branding is a core activity of promotional capitalism. The goal is to deploy established cultural images and symbols in order to ad-

vance the interests of a particular product or service. Branders “are addicted to borrowed equity” (Goldman and Papsen 2006: 329); they steal images, stories, and language to constitute brand identities. The goal of branding is not necessarily to accurately reflect the actual qualities of the particular product or service but simply to distinguish it, in a positive way, from its competitors. Branders trade in abstract, symbolic values in order to generate or enhance reputation. Branders also work to construct a community of loyal followers out of disparate interest groups and work to create a “virtual context” for consumption (Arvidsson 2005: 244).

Since the year 2000, the amount of money spent on marketing and communications by colleges and universities in the U.S. has risen more than 50 percent (Luettger 2008). As the market for students is likely to get more competitive due to projected reduced enrollment, much of this expense involves branding campaigns, designed to create a unique institutional identity that will help a university stand out from among its many competitors. This new brand image must be scrupulously maintained across all promotional material, with consistency in the deployment of logo, motto, tone, and look (Porter 2008). Branding campaigns are not simply designed to help universities compete for the top students but to raise their profile in the public consciousness, bring in corporate sponsorship, research dollars and endowment funds, and communicate effectively with local communities and governments. Branding campaigns are expensive and can take years to establish; universities may try out several new mottos and logos before one sticks. In universities across the West, “tired looking logos are being redesigned... courses are being shaped and reshaped to sell” (Rothblatt 2008: 29), and marketers from the private sector have been brought in to oversee these changes.

While competition between universities is nothing new and reputation has always been central to the university’s survival, what is new is “the self-consciousness with which a university’s corporate image has come to be managed, the administrative prominence this task assumes, and the objectification, and indeed monetization, of academic reputation itself as a brand” (Wernick 2006b: 566).

UCLA spent \$1.25 million on its last campaign, while the University of Maryland spent \$5.1 million (Miley 2009: 6). For universities with less established reputations or promotional capital, branding practices are needed to establish their identity. For well-established universities, branding is a simpler exercise, since they can simply convert their reputation into a capita-

lizable brand. Indeed, older, established universities, such as Harvard or Oxford, often convert their reputation and accumulated brand value into “rentable property”; a copyrighted school name can be licensed to any number of other business enterprises (Wernick 2006a; Grynbaum 2009). University branding campaigns now work across media platforms, from newspaper and television ads to promotional videos on YouTube and fan groups on Facebook (Miley 2009: 6). Recent university branding campaigns often replace traditional mottos with pithy slogans. Some of these include “A Legacy of Leading” (University of Idaho); “Redefine the Possible” (York University); “Inspiring Minds” (Dalhousie University); “Inspiring Innovation and Discovery” (McMaster University); “Open Minds, Creating Futures” (Ohio Dominican University); “Grasp the Forces Driving the Change” (Stanford University); “Knowledge to Go Places” (Colorado State University); “Investing in Knowledge” (University of Liverpool); and “Wisdom. Applied.” (Ryerson University).<sup>1</sup>

In these slogans we see the designated themes and branding ideas of the corporatized, post-Fordist university expressed over and over again: knowledge as currency, celebration of the future, and innovation. As these themes are also common features in the marketing campaigns of many transnational corporations, they are of a piece with the work of corporate branding in general, which is to produce highly aestheticized modes of justification for life under capitalism (Goldman and Papson 2006). Here, we clearly see the limiting, homogenizing, and flattening effects of promotional discourse described by Wernick. These branding practices work to abstract a heterogeneous and complex institution into an image, which is then deployed and exchanged as a commodity on the reputational marketplace in the form of rankings and other quantitative forms of measurement. “The end result,” as Chang and Osborn (2005) write, “is a spectacular economy of education, in which abstract rankings become images of educational institutions and the exchange values of these spectacular images replace the use values of the institutions themselves” (340).

The implications of the branded university are far-reaching. As Wernick insists, promotional discourse not only homogenizes, it heteronomizes, governing the day-to-day operations of the university from the outside by creating simplified abstractions of those operations; eventually, the “projected brand image feeds back into both product and its style of presentation” (Wernick 2006a: 566). As universities increasingly “fall through the looking glass,” falling in love with an image that has been crafted to gener-

ate market share only, faculty, staff, and students are incorporated into the brand’s promotional logic, often unwillingly. The centralization of a university’s communicative processes in marketing departments leads to the imposition of strict rules for all university communication. Boston University, for example, recently issued a 67-page manual specifying the “look, tone, and feel” of appropriate university communication (Porter 2008). These practices of “message discipline” seriously limit the autonomy of departments and individuals within the university, thereby infringing on their academic freedom. Within the promotional university, dissent and dialogue are “replaced with dissemination” (Berland and Hanke 2006: 5). In addition, the self-advantaging rhetoric of promotionalism “encourages participation in consumer culture, rather than reflection on it” and works to “integrate students into a particular version of higher education” (Carrocci 2009: 84), that of the post-Fordist promotional university.

### **“Major in Yourself”**

The corporate, promotional university also speaks in the neoliberal language of personal responsibility and the primacy of the individual. It occupies a privileged position in relation to the formation of selfhood, geared as it is towards young people poised on the verge of adulthood. Certainly, universities in the last several decades have occupied an “ambiguous position” as “youth corrals...and also as places of competitively driven (social and self) investment in ‘human capital’” (Wernick 2006b: 561). Students are simultaneously courted and exploited in the corporate, promotional university.

Students arrive on the scene already deeply steeped in the ontological insecurity and material instability of post-Fordist consumer capitalism. Anthony Giddens argues that, in the absence of more traditional and secure forms of sociality and community and larger frames of meaning, perpetual attention to the construction of “self” through the processes of consumption provides the only remaining continuity or through-line in our lives. Selfhood, under these conditions, becomes a “self-reflexive project,” a work in progress, a compelling, outer-directed narrative or biography, with consumption at the center. Here, “self-actualisation [is] packaged and distributed according to market criteria” (Giddens 1991: 198). As Wernick outlines, the self that emerges from these processes is a “persona produced for public consumption...which continually produces itself for competitive

circulation” (Wernick 1991: 192); a promotional, or branded, self (Hearn 2008).

Many students perceive a university education and credentials as ways to enhance individual reputation and, given their cultural context within consumer capitalism, tend to believe an education is something that can be easily purchased. The consumerist mentality on the part of students can be seen to be a major factor in the current ranking obsession now gripping higher education. Within this framework, the university becomes a service provider, and the pedagogical aim of cultivating communities of “knowers and learners” is replaced with the neoliberal configuration of the student as an “autonomous chooser” (Newson 2004: 229). As mentioned earlier, students increasingly perceive education as a zero-sum game, where they get (in the form of grades) what they pay for (in the form of capital). The student consumer sees little point in contributing to the community of the university itself; rather, “they are accountable primarily to themselves and proceed through educational institutions on the basis of individual achievement and demonstrations of mastery over whatever body of knowledge they ‘choose’ to learn” (Newson 2004: 230; Edmundson 1997).

But, while students may feel they are in control as customers to be served, universities under academic capitalism perceive students as captive markets to be leveraged for corporate resources and manipulated by admissions officers to maximize the university’s long-term yield. Students as built-in markets are the basis for universities’ lucrative deals with a variety of corporate interests, such as Coke or Starbucks, who pay top dollar for exclusivity rights to campuses. As more and more university space is colonized by private enterprises and covered in advertising for those same interests, students cannot escape their interpellation within consumer capitalism. For example, York University recently solicited corporations to place their logos on York’s online course sites for \$10,000 each, and “student IDs are now adorned with MasterCard and Visa logos, providing students who may have few assets with an instant line of credit and an identity as full-time consumers” (Giroux 2008: 149). In addition to selling students to corporate interests, universities increasingly focus on the actual “production” of student markets through the strategic use of financial aid. While tuition fees have increased exponentially over the past 30 years, only a small percentage of the money is spent on improving student services or on research; the majority goes back into financial aid and merit packages, designed to entice high functioning and potentially “high yield” students to the school. New

admissions policies are designed to “craft a class” who will pay “immediate and long term dividends to the prestige and revenue interests of the institution” (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004: 292–293). University financial aid officers no longer see student aid as a charitable operation but rather as a “strategic tool that (can) be used to manage both the quality of the class and the net revenue of the class” (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004: 294). As a result of this new “yield management strategy,” the university moves away from its stated mission of providing access to historically marginalized populations and towards a new mission, which speaks only to “narrow institutional aspirations and economic interests, and the interests of already relatively privileged students” (Slaughter and Rhoades 2004: 297).

In the corporate university, these “narrow institutional aspirations” are economic interests and are bolstered and reflected in the branding and marketing campaigns aimed at students. In these campaigns, students are “rhetorically positioned as the subjects of transformation” (Carrocci 2009: 93) and are sold the idea that university experiences and credentials will add to their potential as highly individuated, promotional selves. The university experience is configured as a lifestyle choice, where brochures brag of retail and food courts, great social and sports events, and plentiful student services, so students will not have to compromise their already well-established consumer lifestyles (Carrocci 2009: 100). Of course, the responsibility for the outcome of that choice is firmly placed at the feet of the student, as the university configures itself as mere service provider. Students are encouraged to be “architects of their own destiny” (Coté and Allahar 2007: 110); a branding campaign at the University of Western Ontario tells a potential student, “Major in yourself!” (Carrocci 2009: 108). Graduating students at Columbia University are offered seminars to help them “brand” themselves,<sup>2</sup> and a regular column in the widely circulated Canadian higher education journal *University Affairs* perkily advises the same (Steele 2009).

The promotional university’s embrace and perpetuation of the neoliberal student consumer can only be understood as evidence of cynical self-interest. Surely no real concern about pedagogical mission, critical reflexivity, or academic freedom is being expressed here. How is it possible to successfully teach students to think critically about their consumerist environment, for example, when they are sitting in a classroom named after a corporation? How can students learn to create a meaningful community of debate and respectful tolerance for difference when even the doors of their bathroom stalls are covered with homogenizing ads for beauty products and

condoms? As Janice Newson argues, “How is it possible to develop and activate a reflexive consciousness among students about the role they should play in their own learning, if they do not hold, embrace, or enact a meaningful *political* status within institutions where they present themselves as learners?” (Newson 2004: 230–231, emphasis in original).

As students are increasingly interpellated as autonomous consumers, their understanding of what constitutes education shifts profoundly. This has definite implications not only for the students who lose out on the possibility for a life-changing education but for professors as well. Students regularly “use consumerist arguments to contest curricular objectives and teaching practices...even to the extent of using such grounds to trump their obligation to practice academic honesty” (Newson 2004: 231). As a result, professors are perpetually on the defensive; afraid of deviating from the requirements expressed on their syllabi for fear of litigious students and constantly pressed to reassure students as to how the class will produce career-getting “deliverables,” professorial authority is regularly displaced by students’ assertion of their sovereignty as consumers.

### **Promotional Research**

Faculty research, the site of knowledge production, has also fallen prey to the logic of promotionalism and neoliberal individualism, and in ways that are potentially life-threatening. Faculty members are encouraged to see themselves as knowledge entrepreneurs; university licensing and technological transfer offices work to monetize their research as “venture capitalists scour colleges and universities in search of big profits to be made through licensing agreements, the control of intellectual property rights and investing in university spinoff companies” (Giroux 2008: 150). In Canada, a federally commissioned “expert panel” suggests that “innovation” be added to the traditional duties of the professoriate, alongside teaching, service, and research, and that a professor’s ability to commercialize and monetize their research should be considered in decisions about tenure (Carrocci 2009: 35). Professors are regularly pitted against each other for outside grants and private sponsorships, undermining collegiality, and tenured professors routinely ignore the exploitative conditions under which their junior colleagues are forced to labor. Academic “stars” are those who generate grant money, regularly commercialize their research, or publish work that receives widespread recognition and enhances the reputational capital of the university.

The conditions of entrepreneurial knowledge work have a deep impact on the kinds of knowledge that are produced. Private corporate interests who regularly fund university research retain control of the results of that research; there are many frightening stories of scholars who have been asked to suppress or ignore research results because releasing them might threaten the corporate bottom line. In most cases, administrators of the promotional university have not supported researchers' rights to academic freedom (Washburn 2005).

The research situation at the promotional university is far direr than simple corporate influence on research questions or results. In the case of psychopharmaceutical research, for example, independent marketing agencies are routinely hired by pharmaceutical companies to ghost write scientific “studies, review articles, abstracts, journal supplements, product monographs, expert commentaries, and textbook chapters” (Healy 2004: 62). These agencies claim to “deliver scientifically accurate information strategically developed for target audiences” (Healy 2004: 61). The articles produced have the names of prominent medical researchers and academics attached to them; these researchers, in turn, accumulate reputational capital without having to actually do the work. This form of promotional ghost writing happens in the most prestigious journals in medicine and makes up approximately 50 percent of articles on therapeutic drugs in major medical journals. As critic David Healy convincingly argues, “This is not a scientific literature aimed at addressing scientific questions. It is a set of infomercials that have the appearance of scientific articles” (Healy 2004: 65). Nonetheless, much of this literature functions to establish consensus in the field. While your psychiatrist claims to be reading the literature and making up her own mind about certain drugs, the “scientific studies” meant to inform her, which ostensibly emerge from free and unfettered academic inquiry, have already been heavily doctored. In a true case of promotional inversion, the pharmaceutical companies create the problem, design and implement its study, disseminate the findings, and offer and collect profit from the cure.<sup>3</sup> This example demonstrates the power of promotional interests and rhetoric to actively create and define academic research, shaping the very parameters of our culture.

## Conclusion

There can be no doubt that the corporate promotional university is a long, long way from the earliest days of the university in Bologna and Paris. Indeed, it is fair to argue that it no longer bears any resemblance whatsoever to the paradoxical institution Kant worked to explain and justify in the eighteenth century. One component of Derrida's "lever" appears to have been completely destroyed by the other; broken and branded, the remnants of the traditional ivory tower exist only in the glossy, ivy-covered viewbooks produced by marketing departments in contemporary universities. The university as a space free from external social pressures, where learning and thinking can happen in community, has become nothing more than a cynically deployed marketing tagline, pressed into the rhetorical service of academic capitalism. Those of us who still yearn for some regulatory ideal of the university beyond profit and accountability peer out longingly from the other side of the looking glass, trapped within the increasingly instrumentalized, promotional university.



Figure 9.1. "The World Belongs..." (Source: Ken Brown)

And yet, among the spaces of the "ruined" institution (Readings 1996), the university's paradox can still be glimpsed. In the actions of Trent students, who successfully scuttle their university's branding campaign by "writing over" it; in the work of students and alumni at Antioch College, who fight the college's closure and win<sup>4</sup>; or the students at Macalester College in Minneapolis, who establish their own alternative college based on a communitarian vision of social change,<sup>5</sup> we can see the power of collective

thinking and the unfettered pursuit of knowledge assert themselves again and again. In spite of the degree of external corporate pressure, students and faculty around the globe continue the long tradition of the university as a site for radical social critique by continuing to stage protests against corporatization and globalization on campus and in society at large.<sup>6</sup> In the face of the hypercommodified promotional university, one truth from the era of the earliest universities remains. While the university, as a formal, administrated social institution, has always served the interests of those in power, a “universitas” of thinkers is an idea, process, or experience, not founded but fluid (Derrida 1992). As such, the potential always exists for resistance to the foreclosure of the university meanings by outside interests; academic freedom may need to be re-imagined and rethought, but the power of imaginative thinking remains. In the end, no matter how deeply entrenched the forces of commodification and promotionalism, they can always be countered—by exercising a critical imagination, posing questions of the place, asking over and over again: “Whose university is it?”

## Notes

1. A variety of current university slogans can be found here: <http://www.textart.ru/advertising/slogans/education/university-slogans.html>.
2. The “Build Your Unique Brand Identity” seminar was advertised in the March 2009 alumni newsletter for Columbia University’s Fu Foundation School of Engineering and Applied Science. See <http://www.clean.cise.columbia.edu/news/seas-news/seas-news-march-2009>.
3. See Mary Ebeling’s chapter in this volume for further discussion of these issues.
4. Find the full story here: <http://recordonline.org/>.
5. See: <http://www.excotc.org/>.
6. For information about forms of student activism now occurring in Canada and the U.S. see: <http://www.campusactivism.org/>. For a history of student activism around the globe, see Boren (2001).

## References

- Adorno, Theodor, and Max Horkheimer. 1999. “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception.” Pp. 31–41 in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, ed. S. During. London: Routledge.
- Arvidsson, Adam. 2005. “Brands: A Critical Perspective.” *Journal of Consumer Culture* 5 (2): 235–258.
- Axelrod, Paul. 1982. *Scholars for Dollars: Politics, Economics and the Universities of Ontario 1945–1980*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

- Barton, David, and David Treadwell. 1978. "Marketing: A Synthesis of Institutional Soul-Searching and Aggressiveness." Pp. 77–84 in *Marketing Higher Education*, ed. D. Barton, Jr. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Berland, Jody, and Bob Hanke. 2006. "Against Profile Fetishization: University Marketing and Communication in the Age of Academic Capitalism." Paper presented at the Conference of the Union for Democratic Communication, May 18–21, in Boca Raton, Florida.
- Bok, Derek. 2003. *Universities in the Marketplace*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Boren, Mark E. 2001. *Student Resistance: A History of the Unruly Subject*. New York: Routledge.
- Brulé, Elizabeth. 2004. "Going to Market: Neoliberalism and the Social Construction of the University Student as an Autonomous Consumer." Pp. 247–264 in *Inside Corporate U: Women in the Academy Speak Out*, ed. Marilee Reimer. Toronto: Sumach Press.
- Carrocci, Lindsay. 2009. Representing the Promotional University: Undergraduate Student Recruitment Strategies in Ontario 1997–2007. M.A. Thesis, University of Western Ontario.
- Chang, Gordon, and J. R. Osborn. 2005. "Spectacular Colleges and Spectacular Rankings." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 5 (1): 338–364.
- Coté, James and Anton Allahar. 2007. *Ivory Tower Blues: A University System in Crisis*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Cutlip, Scott. 1970. "Advertising Higher Education: The Early Years of College Public Relations (Part 1)." *College and University Journal* (Fall): 21–28.
- Derrida, Jacques. 1992. "Mochlos or the Conflict of the Faculties." Pp. 3–34 in *Logomachia: The Conflict of the Faculties*, ed. R. Rand. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.
- . 1983. "The Principle of Reason: The University in the Eyes of its Pupils." *Diacritics* 13: 3–20.
- Edmundson, Mark. 1997. "On the Uses of a Liberal Education: Part I—As Light Entertainment for Bored College Students." *Harper's Magazine* (September), 39–49.
- Finder, Alan. 2006. "Cornell's Image Patrol Wraps Itself in Ivy." *New York Times*, April 22. Section B. Metropolitan Desk.
- Foucault, Michel. 1982. "Afterword: The Subject and Power." Pp. 208–226 in *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, ed. H. L. Dreyfus and P. Rabinow. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Fram, Eugene. 1973. "Positive Steps for Marketing Higher Education." Pp. 56–67 in *The Future in the Making: Current Issues in Higher Education*, ed. D. W. Vermilye. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Giddens, Anthony. 1991. *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Giroux, Henry. 2008. "Marketing the University: Corporate Power and the Social Factory." *Our Schools, Our Selves* 17 (3): 147–165.
- Goldman, Robert, and Stephen Papson. 2006. "Capital's Brandscapes." *Journal of Consumer Culture* 6 (3): 327–353.
- Gould, Eric. 2003. *The University in a Corporate Culture*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Grynbaum, Michael. 2009. "Crimson and Green." *New York Times*, September 4.
- Harvey, David. 2005. *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- . 1990. *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Cambridge, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Haskins, Charles Homer. 1957. *The Rise of the Universities*. London: Oxford University Press.

- Healy, David. 2004. “You Have No Right to Present this Research.” Pp. 53–73 in *Disciplining Dissent: The Curbing of Free Expression in Academia and the Media*, ed. W. Bruneau and J. Turk. Toronto: James Lorimer and Company.
- Hearn, Alison. 2008. “‘Meat, Mask, Burden’: Probing the Contours of the Branded Self.” *Journal of Consumer Culture* 8 (2): 197–218.
- . 2006. “Money on the Brain: Narratives of the Corporate U.” *Topia: Canadian Journal of Cultural Studies* 16: 109–122.
- Holt, Douglas. 2006. “Toward a Sociology of Branding.” *Journal of Consumer Culture* 6 (3): 299–302.
- Kane, Sean. 1999. “Why Is a University?” Unpublished paper.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1979. *The Conflict of the Faculties*. Trans. M. Gregor. New York: Abaris Books.
- Luetzger, Laura. 2008. “Brands Speak Beyond Images; Reflect Lifestyle, Students.” *Rochester Business Journal* 24 (18): 22.
- Messer-Davidow, Ellen, and David Shumway. 1991. “Disciplinarity.” *Poetics Today* 12 (1): 201–225.
- Miley, Melissa. 2009. “Universities Finally Espousing Branding.” *Advertising Age* 80 (20): 6.
- Mount, Joan, and Charles Belanger. 2004. “Entrepreneurship and Image Management in Higher Education: Pillars of Massification.” *The Canadian Journal of Higher Education* 34 (2): 125–140.
- Newson, Janice. 2004. “Disrupting the ‘Student as Consumer’ Model: The New Emancipatory Project.” *International Relations* 18 (2): 227–239.
- Newson, Janice and Howard Buchbinder. 1988. *The University Means Business*. Toronto: Garamond Press.
- Porter, Jane. 2008. “Brand U: Marketing the Alma Mater.” *BusinessWeek Online*. August 6. [http://www.businessweek.com/bschools/content/aug2008/bs2008085\\_851921.htm](http://www.businessweek.com/bschools/content/aug2008/bs2008085_851921.htm) (accessed September 1, 2009).
- Readings, Bill. 1996. *The University in Ruins*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Rothblatt, Sheldon. 2008. “Global Branding and the Celebrity University.” *Liberal Education* 94 (4): 26–33.
- Sanderson, Michael, ed. 1975. *The Universities in the Nineteenth Century*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Slaughter, Sheila and Gary Rhoades. 2004. *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy: Markets, State and Education*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press.
- Steele, Carolyn. 2009. “Personal Branding in Academe—Believe It!” *University Affairs*, September 3. <http://www.universityaffairs.ca/career-sense/personal-branding-in-academe-believe-it> (accessed September 13, 2009).
- Swerdlyk, Sara. 2005. “No Longer Outstanding, Small, Trent Promotes New Image.” *Arthur: The Trent University Student Newspaper*. October 30.
- Washburn, Jennifer. 2005. *University Inc.: The Corporate Corruption of Higher Education*. New York: Basic Books.
- Wernick, Andrew. 2006a. “Rebranding Harvard.” *Theory, Culture and Society* 23 (2–3): 566–567.
- . 2006b. “University.” *Theory, Culture and Society* 23 (2–3): 557–563.
- . 1991. *Promotional Culture: Advertising, Ideology and Symbolic Expression*. New York: Sage Publications.
- Young, Robert. 1992. “The Idea of a Chrestomathic University.” Pp. 97–126 in *Logomachia: The Conflict of the Faculties*, ed. R. Rand. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.

