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Our University – What’s in a Name?

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Our University – What’s in a Name?

Universities across the nation are rushing to “brand” themselves. There is the “D+” branding idea at Drake, the genius of a high priced expert no doubt. An unfortunate choice for a university identifier. I know. I received a D+ one time and was not proud of it. Purdue has just unveiled a new branding effort, “Makers All,” no longer “Boilermakers”.

Maryland had the early 21st century stroke of genius, “Fear the Turtle” campaign. Makes me want to go to College Park and study something.

The kind of thinking that drives this process is the same that drives students to expect an “A” in a class for which they have given a D+ effort. It is the kind of thinking that implies a university degree is a commodity.

Universities don’t produce a commodity. We are not making Chevys.

The branding experts claim that brands catch on and people appreciate them for their distinctiveness and the image created for the university. Give me every shred of marketing research available and not one iota of it will make me believe that people, who appreciate what a university offers and its impact on society, give a “tinker’s damn” about fearing a turtle, or a D+.

Knowing something for what it is: a distillation of reputation that cannot be given but is earned over a period of time is important. What the market consultants describe as brand is intention and marketeers cannot deliver that.

Only committed faculty and leadership can. Intention cannot be conjured up with the Tarot card sets of the Madison Avenue illuminati or a “D+”.

Universities live and die on academic reputation. I would challenge anyone to cite an example of a university that died because the academic programs were excellent, but the branding was out of alignment. Just one.

At Purdue, the new words “Makers All’ intend to erase the crusty image of boilermakers as limited, dated, and misdirected for a twenty-first century world. Maybe it is. I imagine pipefitters and plumbers with wrenches and knowledge. How bad is that? People who can get something done, and have been since 1869.

I am looking at a few diplomas on my wall. They are all branded, albeit without marketing expertise. The language may be old school but the mottos speak to the heart of mission:

The University of Texas - *Disciplina praesidium civitatis* - or in contemporary language, “*Education, the guardian of society*”. What a tragic way to label a seat of learning.

The University of California - *Fiat Lux* - or, from the Book of Genesis, “*Let there be light.*” How unfortunate to desire to eliminate darkness in the world.

The State University of New York, where the old language was stepped over completely, “*To learn, to search, to serve*”. A tired concept lost to the millennial set.

And, while I don't have a diploma on the wall from Southern Illinois University Carbondale, although I would be proud were that the case, I know its motto and reflect on it directly or indirectly daily, *Deo Volente*, or *God willing*. Some Latin scholars would suggest that it is more accurately translated as *God breathes it*, but you get the point. I know why that motto is not touted: a lawsuit from a constitutional separatist would have it falling like an autumn leaf.

Texas A&M University has no motto at all; its constituents are simply known as “Aggies”. If you don't know, I can't explain it. And that may be the door-busting brand. It is what it is, without explanation or apology.

Universities appealing to anything other than the profoundly important purpose in which they engage are misguided; branding can't fix them no matter how much the consultants cost, or what other institutions they have “fixed”.