

**TRANSFORMING INTERNAL IDENTITY IN CHALLENGING TIMES:
IMPLICATIONS FOR EXTERNAL IMAGE BUILDING**

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Abstract

This paper considers organizational identity and organizational image in colleges and universities during these challenging economic times. The two constructs are first considered through the lens of pertinent literature, suggesting how and why structuration theory, scientific management principles, systems theory, identity and image formulations, and new conceptualizations for enrollment management may apply to building, sustaining, and integrating institutional identity and image.

Initial feedback from a small number of marketing and communications professionals is then discussed, suggesting five themes involving the complex relationships between identity and image worthy of more formal exploration: 1) the potential lack of definitional consistency for the identity and image constructs among practitioners, 2) potentially varied perceptions of the importance of one or both constructs and their relationships among practitioners, 3) potentially unproductive dispersion of the internal communications function within institutions, 4) potentially unproductive dispersion of organizational identity, culture, and change initiatives within institutions, and 5) relative inability or unwillingness of institutions to use the current crisis to affect organizational change. Finally, seven hypotheses are presented for possible testing in future research.

Introduction

The economic crisis has presented colleges and universities with numerous challenges in enrollment management as well as human and financial resources. Tough times create rare opportunities, however, for evaluating, clarifying, reshaping, building, and integrating institutional identity and image.

Some institutions can find that a challenging economy provides a singular moment for changing their organizational culture for the better and bolstering their institutional identity. After all, it is often said that faculty, staff, boards of trustees, and other internal stakeholders may be more amenable to new collaborative arrangements when fear and uncertainty are present. Using tough times as a vehicle to instigate, inspire, and improve *internal* identity has clear implications for shaping *external* image, too, since it can be painfully difficult to project a credible brand image externally without the commensurate ability and willingness to “live the brand” internally.

This paper considers some of the theoretical underpinnings of organizational identity and organizational image, especially the relationship between the two constructs. The paper also examines how the leaders of identity- and image-related functions at five institutions view these constructs in their particular contexts. Finally, the paper uses initial insights gleaned from these institutions to theorize about the identity-image relationship and to provide hypotheses for future testing. As such, the thinking outlined here represents the start of a possible research project designed to test identity-image relationships using a larger, statistically significant sample.

Discussion

The British sociologist Anthony Giddens (1984) advanced the view that human actions are shaped by the social context in which they are undertaken. With his Structuration Theory, he also offered that specific elements of social context such as organizational structure are, in turn, shaped by human behavior. This reciprocal relationship between agency and structure – a symbiosis, really – is manifest across most aspects of organizational life at colleges and universities these days.

In a description that may seem frustratingly familiar to the reader, structure often influences behaviors that are undertaken simply to protect the structure – whether or not that structure and those behaviors actually contribute to organizational productivity let alone to customer or market satisfaction. This phenomenon can create and even harden the organizational silos that reduce interdepartmental collaboration and, with it, congruence between internal identity and external image.

The early 20th century progenitors of organizational design, such as Fayol (1916), Taylor (1911), and Weber (Henderson & Parsons, 1948) advocated approaches to “scientific management” that valued bureaucratization, specialization, and the clear separation of work units. These vertically structured, command-and-control orthodoxies dominated organizational design throughout the previous century of industrialization and, many would argue, still do today.

For all the subsequent understanding derived from, say, Parson’s General Theory of Action (Parsons & Shils, 1951) and other research advancing the integrated, holistic, and interdependent relationships found in Systems Theory, organizations stubbornly cling to old-fashioned, siloed structures born of an industrial age. These approaches can limit collaboration and communication among departments for which working systemically and cooperatively provides the best and maybe only opportunity to succeed in today’s hyper-competitive, fast-moving, global economy.

Nonetheless, most colleges and universities are still deploying highly vertical structures that reinforce and even reward rigid distinctions between, say, Enrollment Management and Alumni Affairs. In this ever-flattening world, however, student, parent, alumni, faculty, staff, and community stakeholders expect what might be thought of as more horizontal, lateral, or even linking relationships that project one institutional voice and work across one customer-service continuum that is shared throughout the entire organization. It was in this very spirit that Harvard University President Drew Faust greeted faculty and staff at the start of this semester with a call to “embrace the opportunity, and the necessity, to work more efficiently and cooperatively.....finding new ways, in a time of financial constraint, to benefit from what people in each part of Harvard can offer one another. In short, we must dedicate ourselves – individually and collectively – to harnessing the power of a more unified Harvard.” (Harvard Gazette, 2009)

Indeed, while the differences among admitted students, current students, and alumni seem very large inside an organization, involving all manner of separate, sometimes competing departments, that difference is not so large for the students themselves. It is literally just a matter of time, as prospective students become successful students who, in turn, become generous alumni. It is often the ability and willingness of institutional actors – Enrollment Management, Academic Affairs, Student Life, and Alumni Affairs & Advancement – to understand this continuum and work systemically across traditional silos that define whether that student is actually satisfied, actually persists to graduation, and actually supports the institution later in life.

In this context, Maguire & Butler (2008) called for a “new, more expansive approach to Enrollment Management (p. xi) that, in part, regains what they refer to as the “original synergies” intended for the practice; “creating strategic alignment and coherent messaging across the institution and building a high degree of interpersonal collaboration within and across functions, all guided by strong institutional leadership.” (p. ix) Their new framework for Enrollment Management advances a systems approach to higher education administration and, with it, some necessary erosion of the unproductive barriers that can impede horizontal integration among departments. Realizing this vision will undoubtedly test how far higher education has moved – or is willing to move – from industrial-era organizational models and toward more contemporary structures and practices that motivate and reward interdepartmental collaboration and communication.

The Identity-Image Relationship

It is contended here that the complex relationship between organizational identity and organizational image provides one example of the ways in which organizational silos can limit institutional effectiveness. Most identity and image professionals would agree that building and sustaining effective internal identity is an essential prerequisite for building and sustaining effective external image. And yet, too often it seems by way of observation and experience, organizational responsibility and accountability for these portfolios is split among different units and, therefore, subject to the willingness and ability of people within those units to collaborate across the silos. Furthermore, it is also speculated here that there may be no standard definitions for identity and image that are shared among marketing and communications professionals in higher education and, perhaps, the presidents of their institutions. This perceived lack of conceptual and definitional clarity and consistency may also contribute to an unnecessary demarcation of internal and external outreach to key stakeholders.

Albert & Whetten (1985) were among the first to define organizational identity as those *internal* cultural characteristics that are “central, distinctive, and enduring” (p. 91). Dutton & Dukerich (1991) and Hatch & Schultz (1997, 2002) integrated this internal identity framework with an *external* image consideration, suggesting that a dynamic, holistic relationship actually exists among culture, identity, and image. In their formulation, internal identity and external image are constantly shaping one another and, in turn, shaping and being shaped by the organizational culture.

One might say that Dutton & Dukerich and Hatch & Schultz take a systems approach to identity and image, in keeping with the Parsonian thinking referenced above. Indeed, it would be difficult to argue that internal identity and external image are not constantly in a fluid, seamless, and mutually reinforcing equation with one another in which, for example, an effort to position and promote a college or university in external media affects (and reflects) how students, faculty, and staff understand themselves. This is especially true today as social media and other new technologies blur the line between internal and external domains and among the media platforms themselves.

Understanding Giddens' perspective that structure shapes action, and vice versa, it is useful to consider the consequences of locating departments with responsibility for internal identity and culture, if such entities exist at all on campus, separately from those with responsibility for external image. If one accepts both the internal orientation of identity and the external orientation of image as well as their holistic nature and mutual reciprocity, it would be logical to surmise that separating these functions, failing to view them systemically, and splitting them among various departments is problematic.

Initial Feedback

Initial feedback on these considerations was received from senior Marketing, Communications and External Affairs officials with responsibility for building and sustaining identity and image at five colleges and universities. No attempt is made here to claim generalizability or transferability of findings from such a small sample size. Instead, this effort is intended only to call attention to an interesting and understudied issue, engage in some theorizing, identify useful hypotheses for formal research, and establish a meaningful framework for a panel discussion at the 2009 American Marketing Association Symposium on Higher Education.

Officials at these five institutions completed a survey on this subject in September 2009, which allowed for both a testing of the subject matter and of the survey instrument itself. Their initial feedback suggests five interesting themes worthy of formal exploration:

1. **Potential lack of definitional consistency for the identity and image constructs among practitioners:** When asked whether they made distinctions between “identity” and “image” in their work, all of the officials said they *did* distinguish between the constructs. Interestingly, however, none of them chose the same definitions or made the same distinctions:
 - One official said that identity relates to “rules for using marks, fonts, seals and logo,” which is understandable given the role of “visual identity systems” in the branding and marketing professions, while image concerned a “challenge or opportunity within the overall marketing scheme,” such as “an image problem in town-gown relations.”
 - Another individual said that “identity is how you want to see the organization in the market place. Image is how the public see you.”

- A third person offered that “identity includes everything we do to shape and reinforce our image.”

These are all useful responses. No suggestion is made here that senior practitioners must necessarily agree with the identity-image definitions and distinctions established by research and scholarship. What is interesting, however, is the divergence on the subject among the officials themselves and, furthermore, that none of them addressed the internal (employee culture and communication) aspects of identity. Some of these officials may not have responsibility for internal communications, and so the concept may not have naturally arisen. But should it have arisen?

Hypothesis for Testing

H1: Officials at colleges and universities responsible for organizational identity and organizational image do not share comparable definitions for organizational identity and organizational image.

Hypothesis for Testing

H2: Officials at colleges and universities responsible for organizational identity and organizational image do not share the predominant view among scholars that identity concerns internal stakeholders and image concerns external stakeholders.

2. **Varied perceptions of the importance of one or both constructs and their relationships among practitioners:** Four institutions reportedly undertook an external rebranding effort over the past two years. On a four-point scale of importance – Great Importance, Some Importance, Little Importance, and No Importance – two said that internal communication of the branding and messaging was of “some importance” and another indicated that it was of “little importance.” One institution said it was of “great importance.” The individual indicating “little importance,” added that the focus of the rebranding effort “was on the external view not the internal view.” One of the individuals reporting “some importance” attributed it to the fact that their recent branding effort “built on an earlier effort five years ago where everyone was involved in shaping the identity and messaging.”

Hypothesis for Testing

H3: As measured by investments of time and money, colleges and universities place more importance on external image development than internal identity development.

- 3. Potentially unproductive dispersion of the internal communications function within institutions:** Institutions appear to vary significantly in locating their employee or internal communications functions. Two institutions reported that no single department is responsible for employee communication at their school. Two other institutions said that Marketing/External Affairs was responsible for these internal tasks, while a fifth institution placed responsibility for the function in the Office of the President. These initial indications seem consistent with observation over many years.

Hypothesis for Testing

H4: There is no one department clearly and consistently responsible for internal (employee) communications at colleges and universities today.

- 4. Potentially unproductive dispersion of responsibility for organizational identity, culture, and change initiatives within institutions:** When it comes to internal identity, culture, and change management strategy and initiatives, the dispersion of responsibility may be even wider than that for internal communications. One institution said that nobody is responsible for these portfolios while another said that no single department is responsible for them. Two others placed ownership in the Office of the President and another institution reported that Marketing-External Affairs is responsible for identity, culture, and change issues. Interestingly, and despite being given the choice, none of the respondents said that these the responsibilities were the purview of the Human Resources Department.

Hypothesis for Testing

H5: There is no one department clearly and consistently responsible for internal identity, culture, and change strategies and initiatives at colleges and universities today.

Hypothesis for Testing

H6: Primary responsibility for internal identity, culture, and change strategies and initiatives does not generally belong to the Human Resources Department at colleges and universities today.

5. **Relative inability or unwillingness of institutions to use the current crisis to affect organizational change:** It is consistently said that tough times provide institutions with some license to undertake organizational and culture change. When asked whether the current challenging economy enabled their institutions to embark on efforts to change the organizational culture for the better, three schools responded “no” and another institution said that the current crisis “helped people see that there is a need to change our culture. So, in a sense, it has created a certain level of buy-in at all levels that previously didn't exist. We'll see how far that takes us, though.” Indeed, none of the responses suggests an intentional, disciplined effort to use the current crisis to catalyze culture change. If this initial indication proved true across colleges and universities, it could represent an enormous opportunity costs for U.S. higher education today.

Hypothesis for Testing

H7: Colleges and universities are generally not using the current economic crisis as a catalyst to improve the organizational culture.

Summary

This preliminary work suggests that colleges and universities may not be sufficiently aligned internally for the purpose of leading, managing, and integrating organizational identity and organizational image. Indeed, responsibility for identity and image and their derivative internal and external communications functions may currently be atomized among too many units including the Office of the President, Enrollment Management, Marketing, Human Resources, Advancement & Alumni Affairs, and Student Life.

These circumstances may owe, in part, to diverse if not divergent definitions of identity and image held by institutional leadership and identity/image practitioners. They may also reflect the role played by traditional, vertical organizational silos in thwarting the lateral or horizontal orientation needed to build and sustain relationships with key stakeholders across a lifecycle or continuum, for example, from prospective student, to current student, to satisfied graduate, and to generous donor.

It appears, as well, that institutions may not be utilizing the current recessionary moment to understand and integrate these disciplines better and, in the process, achieve meaningful and measurable organizational change and culture improvement.

At this point, these speculations are fueled by limited, initial inquiries made with five institutions buttressed by considerable experience and observation in these domains. However, this paper does advance five themes that serve as a basis for testing seven proposed hypotheses in future, more formal research.

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