

The Semiotic Production of the Good Student: A Peircean Look at the Commodification of Liberal Arts Education

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ABSTRACT

Liberal arts education has become highly commodified, but what is the nature of the object commodified? I argue that that objectification is brought together through the branding process in the form of the Good Student, an unambiguously positive image of the product of higher education. Drawing from Peircian concepts and from recent works on branding as semiotic process, I show how college marketers produce this construction. I also argue that the Good Student is particularly suited to objectifying liberal arts education because of the peculiar qualities of liberal arts education: it does not train students for particular jobs, it is notoriously diffuse in academic content, and it is largely about class reproduction. The Good Student stands in as the ideal neoliberal middle-class product of such education: intelligent, flexible, self-controlled, productive, and socially safe.

Since around 2000, a growing critical literature has emerged on the commodification of higher education, charting the attrition of intellectual life in the face of corporatization (Bok 2003; Gould 2003), demonstrating particular cases of economic restructuring (Kirp 2003; Slaughter and Rhoades 2004), and providing ethnographic accounts of institutional change toward entrepreneurial models (Shumar 1997, 2008; Tuchman 2009). Among the issues taking form in this literature is that addressed here: If higher edu-

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cation is a commodity, what are consumers buying: a degree representing a particular institution? The process of education? A set of experiences leading to (or maintaining) economic mobility? How might college marketing represent any of these? In particular, when the higher education being marketed is undergraduate liberal arts education—notoriously diffuse in content and indeterminate in outcome—how is it convincingly presented to prospective students, their parents, alumni, and potential donors (collectively known as stakeholders in the higher education literature)? The marketing construction that effectively embodies the productive experience of liberal arts education at a particular school is its Good Student.

Judging from popular media discussions of higher education, most Americans judge its worth in terms of its capacity to produce outcomes that generally translate into jobs for graduates. This understanding works for some undergraduate institutions but hits a limit with liberal arts colleges, especially pricey elite ones. For these, the social reproduction of class takes precedence, although this point is not generally made explicit. To the extent that graduates of such institutions are expected to be trained for outcomes they are expected to acquire a high-end but not too specific skill set of “cultural capital,” well infused with “symbolic capital,” to use Bourdieu’s (1986) terms. The most useful cultural capital is that social knowledge by which one can successfully navigate the discursive fields, in and out of the workplace, of class mobility. It is the social and concomitant symbolic capital that really counts. It is possible to recast as “critical thinking” skills the four-year accumulation of (hopefully enlightening, but probably diffuse and inconclusive) understandings of the world. But more to the point: that accumulation is expected to have taken place in a residential setting dense with appropriate social connections, in comfort and safety, with some extracurricular enjoyment and facilities accoutrements. If fraternities exist, they form important loci for such social connections. And Greek societies or no, most students (and some parents) expect college to be an important experience, and to some extent socially enjoyable, that is, fun. The perception of all this as a single entity depends in part on perspective: for students, the product is more likely to be the whole package; for parents, the critical element is how the experience of college makes their children employable, informed, and ready to deal with the world. The particulars of education—what anyone actually specifically learns—may not actually top everyone’s list of desired outcomes.

Those whose job it is to market college—offices of institutional advancement (OIAs), as they are generally called these days—must create an unam-

biguously positive image of the college experience, selecting carefully delineated images and accompanying texts that integrate just the right elements into a coherent package, with no evidence of messy contingency. These are connected to a clearly identifiable institution in a well-marked site. In the imagery and text, extracurricular experiences are selectively recast as aspects of education. Student social life—parties and other forms of “fun”—is recast as productive activity. All outcomes are cast as positive, as the work of Good Students. “Good Student” is my term for the construction of person, developed by college marketers, that signifies the desired outcome of liberal arts education. The college produces Good Students. While faculty, and indeed everyone who works with students, including students themselves, routinely talk about “good students” or “bad students,” the Good Student embodies the defining desired qualities of college life. Good Students appear in photos in college publications, are written about in stories in college news feeds, and are met in person as college tour guides. From a marketing perspective, there cannot be Bad Students, because any student appearing in promotional discourse must embody what the school produces.¹

All colleges and universities that operate in the contemporary higher education marketplace deploy the Good Student construct to show what they produce. But, for parents who pay hefty tuition, the Good Student as a sign of educational outcomes is especially important for small, elite liberal arts schools. Undergraduate institutions that offer something other than the liberal arts—employment-oriented majors such as management, business, engineering, or nursing—can demonstrate outcomes in terms of employment placement. Liberal arts colleges, while also under pressure to demonstrate their capacity to produce employable students, are, at the same time, by definition not vocational. Liberal arts students typically major in philosophy, literature, art, history, a basic science, or even—heaven help them—anthropology, none of which chart an obvious path into a career. The whole point of liberal arts education is to not train students for anything specific. Thus, liberal arts institutions tend to advertise what their students learn in terms of such generalizations as “good writing” and “critical thinking.”

Sociologically, the primary function of liberal arts education is the institutionally (and thus unequally) distributed reproduction of forms of capital

1. An interesting prototype of the Good Student is Nicholas Murray Butler's ideal young leader, which he cast as the defining product of Columbia University around 1920. Butler saw Columbia as the place where “the student could acquire the mental and moral habits required of a leader in a new industrial order” (Wechsler 1977, 76), and he crafted his admissions policies accordingly (including limiting the numbers of Jewish students admitted).

(Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Bourdieu 1986): the provision of social capital through the reproduction of various social connections, along with the attendant forms of symbolic capital. The cultural capital with which liberal arts students are inculcated is largely that of class-appropriate social knowledge and behavior, not job-specific skills. Good Students embody such forms of cultural capital, looking, acting, sounding, and displaying knowledge appropriate to the kinds of work that graduates of such colleges should be getting, and exhibiting desirable forms of social expertise, often typified as “good social skills.” Insofar as such social and cultural capital is about class maintenance (for some students) or transformation (for others), it is provided as much by other students or by families of students, alumni, trustees, and other nonacademic associations, including social fraternities and, to a lesser extent, sororities. Indeed, if the social and cultural capital provided to students had to come entirely from the faculty, liberal arts students would be in pretty sad shape.

The college examined in this article is pretty typical of its type: a small, rural liberal arts school, roughly 75 percent white and largely middle to upper middle class. It has an open curriculum (i.e., no distribution or general education requirements), which is a quite a popular selling point. The college website’s news feed highlights the activities of its Good Students. The streams of excerpts making up the news feed are taken from longer news stories and include achievements by students, faculty, and staff; announcements of musical, dramatic, and artistic performances, visiting lecturers, and committee activities or other programs affiliated with the college; media mention of college-related activity or people; and faculty quotes in national media. But student achievement predominates. For example, excerpts from ten consecutive stories on the college’s news feed during one spring semester include seven stories about student activities: the announcement of a college choir performance, the screening of a humanitarian documentary film by a campus organization, an off-campus visit made by a class as part of its coursework, presentations of student papers at a conference, the debut of student filmmakers in the college film marathon, student delegates and their professor attending a conference on European relations, student presentations at an undergraduate conference at a nearby college, and a student winning a poster competition. Each story tells about one event or achievement, moving through the news feed fairly rapidly, up to three or four for each school day. Like beads on a wire, each story is effectively equivalent to all the others, whether an announcement of a major achievement (a student wins a prestigious fellowship, a faculty member

publishes an important book) or one rather more ephemeral (a student attends a conference with a professor, a faculty member is quoted in the media). For a faculty member whose long-labored-over book gets pushed aside by the report of a choir tour, this can be frustrating, but faculty achievements play a secondary role in the news feed, underscoring the quality of student achievement. In these news feed stories, Good Student activities define the school's quality in a way that faculty achievement cannot, because liberal arts schools are by definition teaching institutions and faculty are the service providers.

Good Students are made visually available in photographs (on the website and in college literature) in which they are engaged in campus activities, and they come to life in college videos. They look intelligent, healthy (if not always fully able-bodied), engagingly attractive, if not always conventionally pretty or handsome, varying in body type but very rarely obese, and of course young. These pictures suggest that they are socially, sexually, and behaviorally safe, with a solid work ethic. Clothing is casual but modest; young women in tight clothes, short skirts, or plunging necklines appear rarely and only at distances too great to show detail. Students are photographed with sports outfits and equipment, books, musical instruments, computers, art and science paraphernalia, all indexing campus lives filled with productive pursuit. They are pictured in settings such as dining halls or the snowy outdoors or, in sunny weather, on campus benches, engaged in innocent pleasures such as chatting and eating. Nothing visually indicates wasted time or indifference to studies or sports. Visual signs of conventional student sociality such as partying and dancing are generally contextualized as activities with some greater end, such as charity work. There are no visual signs that students might drink alcohol, smoke marijuana, have sex, or otherwise engage in those unproductive forms of activity characterized by LaDousa (2011) as "collegiate fun." But equally, there is no sign of the drudgery of meeting deadlines, the classes that turn out to be boring, the students that can never seem to get their work in on time, or the messiness of getting caught up in faculty politics. Instead, Good Students are visually represented as embodiments of self-controlled productivity, never letting a good time become a serious distraction, and capable of turning any social taste or bit of knowledge or talent toward a productive outcome. Whereas actual students are ordinary beings whose social identity can remain a little obscure or loosely defined, Good Students must project social identities readily identifiable through visuals. These identities must also be salient to a contemporary labor market in which potential workers are regarded, and are urged to regard themselves, as self-managing bundles of skills. Thus, Good

Students are seen either putting their talents to productive ends or to innocent ends while they briefly pause from being productive.

The Semiotics of College Marketing

In his discussion of work done by an internet-focused “new economy” branding consultancy, Moore (2003, 342) uses the Peircean terms of “Firstness,” “Secondness,” and “Thirdness” to describe the division of labor in branding production as the firm developed its “brand promise” (see *PWP*, 75–77). Firstness characterizes the construction of “the sensuous qualities of the brand” (i.e., “qualisigns”); Secondness, the identification of “source identifying indexicalities of the brand”; and Thirdness, the “ensuring (of) consistency of the brand’s qualisign characteristics and indexical associations across all channels and media” (Moore 2003, 343). Since college branding activities are also organized around the notion of “brand promise” (which I discuss below), Moore’s division of labor suggests some points of comparison, on which I will elaborate.

A series of campus photographs accessible on the college website’s home page presents elements of college life through the striking use of visual qualities. The work of talented photographers, these photos are characterized by interplay of light and shade, splashes of bright color, odd angles, images sometimes crowded and sometimes left in simple patterns within a frame, variations in skin color and hair of student subjects, and other qualisigns (potentially meaningful qualities) that correspond to Moore’s “sensuous qualities of the brand.” These are important brand-building elements, but as they enter into the production of visual representation, their meaning is organized in ways that specifically direct the viewer’s interpretation of them. They become semiotically complex.

Visual representations may occur with or without texts. Visuals without text occur at strategic points on the website and in other promotional material produced by offices of institutional advancement. As signs directed toward an interpreter, visuals present college life as collages that can be seen as Peircean “rhemes,” that is, as “signs whose interpretants represent them as being icons” (Parmentier 1994, 17). In this way they are designed to depict campus activities that are both typical and positive, much the same kind of activities that, as we will see in the final section of this article, are described and pointed out by campus tour guides. They are mostly not designed to be seen as pictures of specific events by specific actors in specific places and times. More importantly, in pretty much all the visuals, but most notably in those without texts, the visual content is set up so that the kinds of activities, arranged in vignettes, are in turn designed to be interpreted in terms of the bundles of

qualities constituting student life. They become in effect small tastes of the flavors of various realms of student experience (social or academic). Signs with texts may be briefly captioned or accompanied by the longer chunks of narrative typically found in the news feed. Such signs present to the viewer images linked to agents, time, and place.

We thus see Peircean Firstness governed by Secondness in the production of these two varieties of icons. In addition, Secondness can operate more “indexically” through texts establishing a specific connection to the school, for example, through the use of the school’s name or by reference to named buildings or sections of campus. These school connections are also established by references to students’ class year or concentration, or to faculty names (and sometimes their named chairs) or courses. At the same time, the production and direction of images and the establishment of connections to specific points and times in campus life are regimented by Peirce’s notion of Thirdness, in that they are made subject to a careful “metasemiotic” manipulation, selection, and recontextualization, the design principles for which are shared among college marketers (OIAs) generally. The objectification of liberal arts education as a commodity comes together in this branding process, which as we will see, involves the careful construction of a unified and coherent identity for the school, namely, as a school with “quality”—a veritable Peircean “First.”²

The semiotics of college marketing, with particular (though not exclusive) attention to Good Studenthood, is the subject of this essay. After reviewing the history of college marketing and sketching what college branders say they are doing, I examine examples drawn from my institution. I also examine the work of student tour guides, as an element of the college’s commodity production and intensification of its brand equity. I draw a good deal from the liberal arts college that pays my salary, but the dynamics exemplified here are found throughout the higher education market. They have to be. The marketing process itself discourages too much variation. The whole point is to make one’s product just distinct enough, in a range of fundamentally comparable products, to command a market share.

A Brief History of College Marketing

How did it come to pass that colleges became comparable products? Shumar (1997, 83; 2008) dates the imagining of education as commodity to the post-Fordist era, with the spread of market logic to all sectors of society, a process

2. I thank Rick Parmentier for this felicitous phrasing.

reinforced by concerns with dropping enrollment demographics. Marketers created narratives and imagery that cast educational spaces as consumer spaces in the restructuring of knowledge production as commodity production. Such marketing was designed not for individuals but for market segments, and the construction of market segments was greatly enhanced by the rich pile of demographic data accumulated by the College Board after decades of administering the Scholastic Aptitude Test, which by the 1980s they could sell to schools (Shumar 1997, 134).

U.S. News and World Report's college ranking publications, starting in 1983, played a key role in this process, reshaping the notion of education as commodity along the lines of the objects and services measured and ranked in *Consumer Reports*. The rankings' data director Robert J. Morse (2008) tells the origin story of the rankings in a way that illustrates the organizing notion of education as an investment that must be measured:

Today, it's hard to imagine there ever was a void of information to help people make direct comparisons between colleges, but such was the case in 1983 when we first ventured into the field. The editors back then, led by Marvin L. Stone, thought the project was worth attempting because a college education is one of the most important—and most costly—investments that people ever make. . . . So the magazine designed a survey and sent it out to 1,308 college presidents to get their opinions of which schools offered the best education. The winners: Stanford (National Universities) and Amherst (National Liberal Arts Colleges).

Ben Wildavsky, a former college guide editor at *U.S. News*, traces the history of their college rankings (2010, 102–5) in obvious, problem-solving terms: such publications might help sell magazines but they also provide useful, objective information. In fact, from 1983 to 1987, that information was, as Morse notes above, entirely reputation based, and soon college officers asked *U.S. News* to stop publishing rankings. Instead, *U.S. News* shifted its data presentation to 75 percent “objective” (graduation rate, institutional resources, faculty salaries). Reputation continued to play a sizable role, since it frames and connects the objective data and thus makes rankings meaningful to consumers. The establishment of rankings as social facts with which colleges are stuck is reinforced by the establishment of a nationwide consumer base (the students and parents who buy the guides), national comparison groups classifying colleges, the rapid acceleration of industries that profit by bringing those pieces together (higher education marketers), and of course the emergence of many competing guides.

All this results in a general notion of colleges lined up as a continuous series of products ranked from “best” on down. Above all, it saw the emergence of a higher education branding industry that happily took on the work of designing that image of just-enough-difference for each school willing to pay the industry’s hefty fees.

The decade following the rankings’ first publication was an age of expanding neoliberal ideology and growing corporate profit. The neoliberal ideology reinforced assumptions that everything connected to higher education could and should be run like a business, and neoliberal presuppositions came to shape and saturate the commodity registers of higher education. Between them, Shumar (1997) and Tuchman (2009) provide a couple of decades of close ethnographic accounts of the process in their respective sites, Shumar from the 1980s to the 1990s and Tuchman from the late 1990s through the mid 2000s. During this time, national reputation had become a central concern for probably every school that was reasonably well ranked, and the development of the college marketing and branding industry was greatly accelerated. Schools that had solid regional reputations without being well known outside their regions were motivated to develop national reputations, and those with sufficiently generous trustees were well placed to do so. At my college, decisions were made to construct a centrally located student village, supplemented some years later by renovation and expansion of an adjoining historic college building with office space for student activities and the college bookstore. Fraternity houses were closed, bought, renovated, and converted to administrative and residential use, a move designed partly to address national reputation (“party school”) concerns. These decisions yielded real payoffs over time, enhancing the campus’s already considerable physical charm and attracting incoming students with ever higher test scores, such scores being a discrete metric in the rankings. Both outcomes almost certainly enhanced the school’s reputation and were designed to do so—to “move the needle,” as I heard one trustee put it. But when these decisions were made in the early mid 1990s, they were not publicly labeled as market oriented.

That changed in the late 1990s, when the college president spoke publicly to faculty, administrators, and staff about a series of initiatives intended to establish national name recognition. These included curricular reforms to separate the school from its peer institutions and create a distinctive identity; diversity (underspecified but including intellectual) to strengthen community; facilities planning; reform of student substance use (especially alcohol); and a communications plan designed to establish national name recognition for the

college. The president stressed the importance of internal consistency, of everyone sending the same strong message about the school's strengths. He acknowledged that, yes, this did sound like marketing language. He outlined the use of strategic plans to implement these initiatives and the use of survey input from prospective, accepted, and current students to demonstrate what practices were most effective. Judging from fund-raising successes over the ensuing decade, increasingly selective admissions numbers, and favorable student survey outcomes, the reputation enhancement initiative appears to have been very successful. True, the pursuit of curricular reform has had somewhat indeterminate outcomes, and the specific shape taken by the school's image of diversity owes a fair amount to narratives supplied by the office of institutional advancement and the admissions office's provision of numbers giving shape to those narratives. The key point in the president's list was the national communication plan. It was not called a branding campaign, but that is what it amounted to.

Since we cannot replay the tape of the history of late twentieth-century capitalism, we cannot say whether or not this speech (and who knows how many others at comparable institutions) would have happened had *U.S. News's* ranking system not become an unavoidable social fact leading to the establishment of a whole range of metrics guiding higher education practices and initiatives. But it seems extremely likely that this is the case, that the statistical formulation of a degree from the college as a desirable object on the education market led to the discursive formulation of the college as a brand, a set of associations to which image making was central. Chang and Osborn (2005) analyze the *U.S. News* metrics as "spectacle," as social relations mediated by imagery. They argue that *U.S. News* "creates abstract images that stand for certain realities that are generally conceived as non-measurable according to expert conventions. The incoherence, inconsistency and assumptive leaps of this process are not merely technical errors; rather, they manifest a process central to the making of the *U.S. News* ranking enterprise: abstracting the non-measurable" (347–48).

Chang and Osborn further note how *U.S. News* justifies its rankings through what Readings (1996) called the "discourse of *excellence*," a referring expression that is highly nonspecific semantically and highly favored in corporate usage (see Urciuoli 2003 for a comparable analysis of "excellence" as strategically deployable shifter). They point out that *U.S. News* legitimizes its system by deploying expert opinion and a "technology-in-progress metaphor" (Chang and Osborn 2005, 350), as Wildavsky demonstrated above: *U.S. News* justifies

itself “as a valuable instrument providing data to college consumers who can never have too much data concerning their purchases” (353).

Thus, the terms of national recognition were set. The speech made by the president outlined a plan in which the college would be recognized for having what counted in the rankings. The college itself became “performatively” re-imagined as a thing that better fit its desired place in the rankings, its promotional imagery showcasing its visually appealing physical plant and (carefully selected) students and faculty engaged in activities imaginable as signs of excellence.

By 2000, any school that could be ranked had become concerned with national recognition, and branding had become the way to achieve that recognition. By 2010 it had become a fact of life for schools of all sizes and all places in the rankings. The academic literature on market forces in higher education that has emerged since the late 1990s generally locates branding and marketing in the context of the corporatization of higher education (see, e.g., Bok 2003; Gould 2003). Much of the work on the commodification of higher education focuses on its material dimensions. Kirp notes the competition for high-end student facilities (2003, 23–24), and the “Chinese menu of courses from which to choose” (2005, 119): “Top college applicants are treated like pampered consumers whose demands must be satisfied. The notion that these are adolescents who are supposed to be *formed* by a college education is dismissed as quaint” (2003, 11). Slaughter and Rhoades (2004) argue that the corporatization of higher education was not an inevitable development but the outcome of specific policies by specific networks of actors within and outside schools that effectively brought the corporate sector into the university. Students become not only customers but a market themselves available to be traded with corporations for product contracts (food service, bookstore, direct marketing contacts). Upon graduation, they are presentable to potential employers as “output” or “product,” a “contribution to the new economy”—and available to their colleges as alumni donors (1–2). In elite schools, the “quality and exclusive character of the brand name” (298) become associated with the focus on living, playing, and using services, contributing to the sense of college as a boutique experience.

Equally important is the promotional work that, as Shumar (1997, 2008) demonstrates, creates narratives and imagery that cast educational spaces as consumer spaces and restructures knowledge production as commodity production. College marketing over the past two decades has increasingly come to rely on imagery without clear or specific real-world referents: for students, “freedom of choice” means choosing among “prepackaged educational goods”

(Shumar 1997, 138). Moreover, as Tuchman (2009, 21) demonstrates, the fact of being ranked reinforces the set of institutional templates that guide the reworking of images of a school, implementing new managerial practices, centralizing administrative practices, shifting toward top-down authority, setting departments in competition for resources, and generally becoming more businesslike. With business as the desirable model, practices like strategic plans and outcomes assessments, and the rhetoric of excellence, efficiency, and best practices all become expected—even demanded—of institutions by stakeholders in whose eyes the institution had become a new, improved kind of “thing.” As Tuchman shows, “best practices” are borrowed from comparable institutions in ways that mask market and political forces driving change in specific directions and that put increasing emphasis on appearances, including, as we will see below, strategies promoting images of students looking engaged.

Education is a complex, open-ended process with often indeterminate goals. A neoliberal regime of higher education, with its emphasis on marketing and branding, reimagines educational institutions and their constitutive elements as a series of objects that are imagined as fundamentally the same in type across all institutions, subjecting all those elements of educational experience to the same modes of marketing, administration, and assessment. Liberal arts education is especially vulnerable to this reimagining in that it is an especially indeterminate and open-ended form of higher education in terms of the outcomes it is supposed to produce. Forms of training with specific goals—particular credentials or jobs—have outcomes with obvious “use value” (as that is generally imagined in a capitalist society) that can justify the price tag. Liberal arts use value is more of a challenge. This imagining of all modes of higher education made up of objects equally the same and equally measurable is the key to understanding how it can be branded, since branding can be understood as a system of comparable constituting qualities that exist in relation to each other. The comparability lies in how they satisfy their customers.

Making the Sausage

I start by examining a couple of examples of the “ethnometasemiotic” principles of college branding espoused by college marketers, that is, what they say branding is and how it should be done and why. The first is from a 2003 web publication, “The Brand Called U”:³

3. Perhaps referencing Tom Peters’s 1997 neoliberal-self blueprint “The Brand Called You.”

From Education to Experience. Academic ranking is no longer the only measure of an institution's quality of education. A university is judged in terms of its overall offering. From the curriculum and the quality of faculty to the personality of the student body and financial aid, today's prospective students evaluate universities on the total experience. What students remember at the end of their college careers are the experiences that they have. The friends they make. That particular seminar on American foreign policy. A professor who made a difference. In a marketplace where university brands face the threat of being devalued with increased competition and reduced financial resources, success lies in their ability to differentiate their offerings and build or maintain a strong brand image. For example, many institutions are looking to extend their brands with study-abroad programs, distance-based learning, and active alumni networks. (Harvest Communications 2003, 2)

The author characterizes "experience" as a memory mosaic including friends, favorite classes, and teachers. Two pages later, the author describes "a key success factor" as a school's capacity to "keep up with changing student expectations of the 'ideal college experience'" to create "a strong brand image" that sets them apart (4). The author describes a "brand survey" administered to "over 35 college graduates from urban, suburban and rural areas" who were asked to typify the schools that fit into the following typology of institutions: "Ivy League," "Top-Tier Private," "Public Ivies," "Sports Schools," "Individualistic Schools" (5). The author then provides a "brand chart of the various categories of American universities and colleges we identified and the institutions that best represent them" (6) with each category exemplified by two schools to show the range of associations possible. For example, the two "individualistic" schools on the brand chart are Hampshire College and Oberlin College. Hampshire is typified as "crunchy, liberal arts school, elitist, small, east coast" and Oberlin as "alternative, ultra-liberal, small, midwest" (6). (The author lists as sources the above-mentioned brand survey and *Princeton Review's Best 345 Colleges for 2003*.) In this model, each liberal arts college is best branded as a just-distinct-enough college of qualities, feelings, and images that allows it enough of an edge to attract its distinct market.

The next example is drawn from Stamats, a marketing company describing itself as "recognized and respected as the nation's leading higher education integrated marketing thought leader."⁴ Stamats links the notion of brand to the

4. <http://www.stamats.com/>.

notion of brand promise: “A brand is more than a look or a logo—it’s a collection of words, images, ideas, and emotions that comes immediately to mind when someone thinks about your institution. In short, your brand is the promise you make to stakeholders (and prospective stakeholders) that expresses your school’s core values. A promise that, if applied effectively, can help increase enrollment, boost giving, create awareness, and deliver relevance to the people who matter most to your school.”⁵ Stamats promotes its agents as brand leaders who make promises to build brand equity (Sevier and Whalen 2001, 5–6). Brand promises justify premium price tags. Comparing the brand promise of a Volvo to that of a college, Sevier and Whalen state that promises are “the heart and soul of branding,” and people “are willing to pay more for them” (2). More precisely, “It is a promise that is valued to the degree that: Students will pay for it with tuition dollars, Donors will support it with donated dollars, Faculty and staff will commit their careers to it.” Sevier and Whalen compare MIT’s promise to provide “the best technological education in the world” or Wheaton College’s promise of a “world-class Christian education” to Volvo’s promise of safety. They thus posit as equivalent an auto manufacturer’s safety record (which is directly measurable) and the “best technological” or “world-class Christian” education (which is not). Rhetorically cloaked incommensurability is central to brand promise discourse, and demonstrates what is also called “total quality management” (TQM), the premise that product improvement grows from continual efforts of all organizational members to satisfy customers. This can be seen when Sevier and Whalen advise schools to ask, “Is this the best faculty member we can hire? Is there a better way to teach this class? Can we make it easier to register? Should we evaluate our fee structure?” (4). Although “best faculty” and “best way to teach” are incommensurable with “ease of registration” or “evaluating fee structure,” the TQM-based notion of brand derives its rhetorical impact by stringing together practices whose equivalence lies in their capacity to please consumers.

These two examples of branding “ethnometasemiotics” are pretty much typical of the college branding industry. Marketers advocate decontextualizing and repackaging elements in collages designed to attract and please potential consumers. The elements making up these collages signify elements of experience. They are assembled in associations with each element on equal footing

5. Or they did until recently, at <http://www.stamats.com/services/brand-marketing.asp>. The same statement lives on elsewhere on the internet; see, e.g., “Association of College Unions International” (<http://www.acui.org/procure/promos/index.aspx?id=14812>).

with the rest. They are taxonomized according to the (branding) type of institutions (“party school” or “crunchy granola?”), the taxonomy being driven by the type of student being attracted. Their association with a particular named institution must be backed up by a TQM-style promise to deliver satisfaction on all counts.

Quite apart from these two “ethno” claims about branding, the meta-semiotic principles do, in fact, organize college branding, especially the associations of decontextualized and reassembled experiential elements and the emphasis on TQM. These principles parallel those organizing the experience industry found in Disney World and Colonial Williamsburg. Fjellman describes Walt Disney World “pulling meanings out of their contexts and repackaging them in bounded information packets” (1992, 31) in ways that direct consumers away from their own understanding and toward interpretations that work most profitably for Disney. Each piece of information is reduced to the same level as the next. The Disney corporation did not invent this technique of semiotic levelling and repackaging, but Disney effectively uses the technique to promote a sense of an enclosed world, within which it is especially easy to dry-clean and remythologize information (60), creating an encompassing sense of shared meaning and safety based on a reconfigured metanarrative. A similar recontextualized packaging of information with an eye toward customer satisfaction is demonstrated by Handler and Gable (1997) in their study of popular presentations of history at Colonial Williamsburg, which, unlike Disney World, defines its mission as educational. But the enactment of that mission, structured by the interaction of front-line tour guides with visitors, undercuts the efforts of the education department historians to emphasize to visitors the idea of history itself as a construct. This effect is especially noticeable in the interpretation of slave history, in which “front-line” interpreters emphasize “just the facts” over other possible interpretations (78), an interpretive principle that justifies avoiding discussion of complex or ambiguous subjects and enhances the production of what the authors call “good vibes,” reinforcing the sense of a personal experience. In both cases we see a process of metasemiotic regimentation underlying visitors’ interpretive experience in the ways in which associations of elements are presented to visitors. Parmentier, building on Silverstein’s (1993 and elsewhere) notion of metasemiotic regimentation of linguistic phenomena, explains the capacity of such regimentation to (explicitly or implicitly) “regulate the range of acceptable interpretants of specific segments of social semiosis” (Parmentier 1994, 128). Drawing on his own trip to Colonial Williamsburg, Parmentier notes how visitors

are implicitly guided by exhibit organization and guides' narratives toward particular patterns of social interpretation that trace extant hierarchies, all without being "confronted with explicit metasemiotic forms" (134), that is, without ever being told to "think like this." Moreover, "the reproduction of distinction is disseminated through the commoditization of historical reproduction" (142). In short, one is guided toward certain interpretations without ever being certain where the regimentation is.

The regimentation of college branding applies to what outsiders see. While the discrepancy between how college marketing materials present the college experience and what people actually experience as students can be a subject of some jest, everyone associated with the school—students, faculty, administrators, and staff—find themselves pulled into the OIA-orchestrated metasemiotic regime. This is especially noticeable on those occasions when the college is open to masses of visitors, such as during family weekend, at homecoming, and on the day accepted students visit the campus. It also kicks in when faculty and students are appropriated into the signification process.

The OIA tends to regard faculty and students as content providers. They organize the content provided into a series of institutional stories that generate an encompassing sense of shared meaning, safety, and positiveness that fits the college metanarrative, the principles guiding the selection of elements for representation and encouraging certain interpretations. These include the strategic selection of people and events to put in the narration, the decontextualization and mosaic-like reassembly of images in the college news feed and promotional materials, and the construction of narratives with minimal ambiguity and maximally positive outcomes. Much as Urban (1991, 10–18) notes regarding the mythic process, OIA production is characterized by associations of familiarity, feeling, and imagery. It is interdiscursive, with advertising discourse as described in Silverstein's discussion of advertising and political interdiscursivity: thin on propositional content for which a speaker can be held responsible; thick with injunctions, slogans, desemanticized combinations; and a Vygotskian chain-complex that has lots of "tropic leaps" that make it work, uses "identity-structuring emblems," and is highly formulaic (2005, 16–17). As already noted, every image and each bit of narrative is accorded equal status. The college choir tour, a faculty member quoted on CNN, a student internship project, alternative spring break activities, a faculty member's new book, and a student poster session are all equal representations of a good institution producing good students. Promotional literature states the college's promises about what students will gain from their four years. Every element in its bun-

dles of images is guided along lines of association and interpretation to evoke feelings about the school.

When I started this project I kept wanting to ask whether it made sense to brand higher education in the same way coffee or cars or vacation destinations are branded but this question may have no clear answer. Manning (2010, 34) argues, “Any discussion of the semiotics of brand confronts the basic problem that there is virtually no agreement on what brand is or means.” The very notion of what a brand is keeps shifting, fetish-like in its polysemy. The notion of a brand is certainly fetishlike in seeming imbued with magic powers; it has also become imbued with moral imperative: anything that can be branded should be branded, including the branded neoliberal self (Tom Peters’s *Brand You*), characterized by what Gershon (2011) calls “neoliberal agency” that runs the self like a business. It strikes me that underlying this is a privileging of corporations as models of persons; certainly for-profit companies are privileged as models for nonprofits. Stamats’s Sevier and Whalen (2001, 1) call branding “an imperative” for higher education that must demonstrate institutional values in market mode to be rewarded with resources because no other model of value counts.⁶ Manning (2010, 37), after Moore (2003), suggests that one present “the various semiotic moments of brand on the model of the communicative act itself.” Branding, in other words, is semiotic action with (potentially) performative outcomes.

Nakassis (2012, 2013) locates the performative qualities of branding in its citationality. He sees citationality, the process of discursive reiteration, as an interplay of sameness and difference that “weave[s] together different events into one complex act” (2013, 56), and thus as a kind of interdiscursivity (Silverstein 2005). This metasemiotic principle plays out across a range of discursive activities, including Austinian performatives as ritual-like reiterations of discursive actions, each invoking “itself as a token of a particular cultural type of action” (2013, 63). This principle is particularly important to the process of branding, which relies on continual reiteration linking “brand instances, or *tokens*, and its (materialized) qualities . . . and a brand identity or *type*, and its (immaterialized) qualities” (2012, 627), each citation pointing to itself doing it. This is routine in social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, that encourage continual repetition of slightly variable iterations all pointing to themselves re-

6. Speaking of which, Sevier seems to hold college presidents individually responsible for their brands, as he said in a February 1, 2013, interview: “Too many colleges tend to blame the marketplace for their troubles. But success for a postsecondary institution is really about how your senior leadership responds to the market problem or opportunity. Any college can be successful; not all of them will be. You can’t control demography, but demography isn’t destiny” (<https://www.academicimpressions.com/news/measuring-brand-roi-interview-bob-sevier>).

posting or retweeting. The same principle is deployed by the college's OIA. Its current marketing activities depend heavily on representations by students, faculty and staff—especially students—who also continuously point to themselves representing the school. One pertinent example is a social media website set up by the OIA on which students post messages about a feeling or experience or perception or greeting. Another, discussed at length below, is the activity of tour guides. In each case, what matters is the continually repeated referencing of identification with the school—that act of identification being the sameness—across a range of different representations or actions or activities, in each case done by senders referencing themselves as senders.⁷

Since branding is the outcome of semiotic action, asking whether schools can be branded like cars is a nonquestion. Schools and cars are branded. In the world of contemporary capitalism within which branding operates, there is continual pressure to construct things for people to buy and pressure to convince people to buy them. Keane (2003) makes the point that “thinginess” is emergent, that objects are semiotically contingent, open to future possibilities. There is no single defining set of meaningful processes through which things emerge in the world. Things are real to people insofar as they are significant through ongoing processes of signs giving rise to new signs. Keane writes about material things but things need not be material. Thinginess is socially produced among people sharing “intersubjective spacetime,” that is, a “chronotopic” order (Silverstein 2005, 6, citing Bakhtin 1981, 84) through the processes maintaining that order. Contemporary capitalist processes, steeped in social beliefs about economics, feature largely in the production of that order, and what gets typified as branding—the establishment of those associations as manifestations of a thing that constitutes a product—is deeply, deeply performative, taking on the capacity to instantiate a social order and make it real. In that way, college becomes thingy. Its thinginess varies: the branding time-space envelope is not the same as the day-to-day envelope. As an everyday experience, a place where people work and where students attend classes and live, a college is a pretty diffuse and hard-to-define thing, but then for those purposes it doesn't have to be tightly defined. As a branded entity, it becomes focused and defined. Insofar as college staff and students get pulled into enacting brand production, through various processes of brand iteration, the college becomes, for those moments, that focused and defined thing.

7. Another striking application of this principle is a student-produced mosaic made up of thousands of tiny images of scenes from around the school that collectively add up a representation of a statue of the historical figure eponymously associated with the school.

Building on Keane's argument on the emergence of things, Moore (2003, 334) sees the branding process "as a particular mode of 'objectification'" and brands themselves as "composite entities," "unstable conjunctions" of material 'things' and immaterial form of value: "partly a thing and partly language," with brand names representing language that "heightens its own 'thinginess'" and advertisements as entextualized representations of branded products. The branding process thus intertwines entextualization and visuals with proper names. In Silversteinian terms, this work establishes "a name and a logo, joined to a set of regimented associations, with source-identifying indexicals" (339). The associations are key: "One clear characteristic of the Brand Strategy work is the strongly associationist character of all its assumptions about consumers' thought processes. The goal of any branding project is to establish a strong and stable set of associations in the minds and memories of consumers. . . . [The] greater the number of associations in the consumer's mind, the stronger the recall" (343). If this works, a new "thing" comes into being through the process, and that is what people buy: coffee, a car, a vacation, an education.

At the beginning of this article, I mentioned the combination of visuals and text in the news feed and the uncaptioned visuals that decorate, so to speak, the website and other college publications as consistent "rhematic" signs of the college, the collegiate experience, and the produced commodity, the student. In the uncaptioned visuals, the function of the visual elements becomes especially salient, projecting Good Studenthood as the ultimate semiotic object of all these bundled qualisigns (attractive, active, healthy, industrious, productive, and so forth). These bundles add dimension to the largely indexical message provided by the narrative texts: where the texts lay out the temporal and spatial specifics of their activity and industry, telling the reader that student *X* in the picture did a presentation at *Y* on *Z* date, the uncaptioned and recurring visuals, often rotated as a slide show, continually reinforce the unified sense of the school as something made up of lots more like *X*. The college logo and other source-identifying indexicals (local identifiers in the pictures and texts) link these to place: a street address, a set of buildings, a surrounding town and countryside. The metasemiotic conventions governing these associations need to be closely patrolled and are subject to pretty frequent revision in order to cultivate the most desired patterns of association and interpretation and thus keep up the institution's brand equity, the power of its name to command respect, loyalty, and premium pricing.

With this consideration in mind, starting in the early 2000s, the OIA undertook a firm disciplining of the college's graphic identity: regimenting "Third-

ness” with a vengeance. The college seal had appeared on college stationery, but various offices around the college had mixed it with, or had substituted for it, a variety of images with similarly varied lettering fonts. Concerned with the effect of this disorder on perceptions of the school, the OIA developed a standardized graphic identity that would communicate a clear sense of the college’s distinct qualities and enhance its name recognition. A strategic plan was drawn up to better institutionalize the school’s strengths. Surveys and focus groups with students were conducted to clarify their most positive associations with the school: its lack of distribution or core course requirements, its emphasis on writing, its opportunities for off-campus study, and its research opportunities with faculty, particularly in the sciences. The idea was to connect students’ positive associations with the school to specific elements in the graphic identity. The OIA hired a communications firm specializing in college graphic identity production to produce designs and lettering, in consultation with a committee made up of the OIA director, the college editor, the admissions director, two faculty members, one alumnus, the athletics director, the print shop supervisor, and two students. A wide net was cast for institutional labor to participate in the process of production, with a college team of over one hundred faculty members, students, alumni, and employees filling out surveys and participating in focus groups to assess associations invoked by the designs suggested by the outside firm.

The goal of these procedures was to assemble a set of visual elements that would clearly and quickly invoke positive associations with selected elements of the college’s “traditional values” (particularly “oral and written communication,” long highlighted in college publication) and its (not always smooth) institutional history. The visual finally selected to be used with the college name was a detail from an old, iconic, and very beautiful campus building. (The same image, with slightly different linework, had been used in capital campaign stationery some years earlier.) Since its establishment in 2002, the OIA has issued yearly reminders for proper use of the graphic identity, encoded as rules designed to eliminate interference with source-identifying indexicality in the logo’s use.

To summarize, using Moore’s Peircean template of branding activities, we have seen the construction of an imputed Firstness in the production of the rhematic visuals and indexical narrative and the combination of these semiotic modes in the emblematic college logo and its associations. We see Thirdness in the metasemiotic rules that guide the association of visual and narrative compositions as if they formed necessary syllogisms for success and, finally,

in the regimentation of the use of the graphic identity as a stylistic abbreviation for the essence of the brand. One more point should be made. As Moore notes, all this is calibrated to fit patterns within the promotional industries: OIAs learn these regimes from other institutional OIAs and talk to each other in ways that are much more indexically coherent with each other than across different discursive fields in a given institution (Urciuoli 2009, 2010). The interdiscursivity among OIAs involves all semiotic elements that are regimented in the branding process. One can see this thirdness at work in the ways that diversity gets visually signified the same way across institutions: by highly conventionalized, carefully edited representations of such naturalized markers as skin color, hair, and facial features but nothing signifying class difference. Signs indexing limited health care, education, or income do not co-occur with nonwhite skin color or hair in college publications as they might in, say, a movie, where blackness might be equally signified by skin tone, body type, and style of dress.

The observation is often made that the promotional imagery of predominantly white undergraduate schools is noticeably more diverse than is students' day-to-day experience. Drawing from conventional representations of "white," "black," "Latino," and "Asian" looks, college publications and website photography emphasize contrasting facial features, skin tones, and hair textures on otherwise comparable students. Readers can confirm this image on the websites of pretty much any undergraduate institution. The effect is especially visible on the website of any high-priced, highly ranked liberal arts school. In college publications, diversity is established as a fact of institutional life through artful visual assemblages laid out in slick pictures, patterned to the extent that, as one student told me, layout people assemble images classified as "Asian girl" or "Latino boy." The signs of diversity are thus comparable and interchangeable as elements of imagery of the ideal student type: the young, charming Good Student. The OIA personnel select representative elements of actual students to generate appealing imagery of that type of student. A segment of the student body is thus typified as nonwhite—probably a larger proportion than actually exists—the rest are not. The value of the marked or nonwhite portion of the type is sustained by the value of the whole Good Student type. The rest of the bundle is the same for everyone: youth, attractiveness, seriousness of purpose, productivity, and safety.

Lovemarking Good Studenthood

"Lovemarking," a concept developed and named by Saatchi and Saatchi CEO Kevin Roberts (2004, 2006), is a branding process in which consumers them-

selves provide labor through interactive participation with brand management, for example, through stories and feedback folded into the brand development. This process enhances brand loyalty (creating not only respect and trust but love) in ways that justify premium pricing, as Apple or Starbucks are said to do. In his analysis of Roberts's concept, Foster (2007) draws on work by Michel Callon, arguing that specialized consumer items emerge as a stable good from what Callon calls an "economy of qualities" (Callon, Méadel, and Rabeharisoa 2002), a set of conditions whereby goods as stabilized products "are defined by the characteristics attributed to them in successive qualifications and requalifications, including those enacted by consumers" (Foster 2007, 713). Soliciting feedback from consumers and casting that (carefully regimented) feedback in the best possible light is an effective means of achieving such stabilization. Much of the OIA's work with alumni involves strategies for doing this. The OIA issued a special bicentennial issue of the alumni magazine with narratives provided by students. The OIA creates events to bring alumni back for visits (alumni weekends, class reunions) and encourages them to contribute notes, letters, and reminiscences for the alumni magazine, all involving much reiteration of brand tokens to conjure a sense of connected subjectivity. Alumni and students are surveyed about their perceptions of the school and are solicited to participate in focus groups and committees addressing some aspect of the school's brand, such as the graphic identity development committee. All this adds up to what Foster terms "brands represent(ing) the appropriation of the appropriations of branded goods by consumers" (2007, 718).

Student labor is especially sought for brand value enhancement in front line situations, acting as hosts and tour guides, and serving as key mediation points between prospectives and parents, and the school. The job of the tour guide is to maximize awareness of the campus's positive elements and to generate enthusiasm about the experience, casting the school as well worth the premium price tag. Tour guides are face-to-face brand ambassadors who bring to life key elements of the school's brand promise, its capacity to deliver premium returns for premium pricing. Tour guides provide not only information but a feel for the place, which, however intangible, is a crucial element of its brand equity. The job of tour-guiding is highly competitive. Tours last an hour and are scheduled to leave the admissions office three times a day, every two hours. A guide takes a small group of visitors around campus, walking backward while providing information, answering questions, and pointing out amenities such as the rock wall and the culinary variety in the dining halls. Guides are trained to observe guidelines without seeming scripted, and to know what not to wear

(such as apparel with names or logos from other schools). These points were drawn to my attention by two student papers (Kircher 2012; Whalen 2012) from my spring 2012 semiotics class in which the authors analyze their tour guiding experience as “lovemarking.” Both authors act equally as analysts and participants.⁸ Both make the point that tour guides play their role as living embodiments of the community, consumers who deeply care for the product and, as tour guides, help produce it. Both show how guides strategically package information, managing the frames in which prospectives and their families perceive the qualities making up the college community. Both show brand citation in action as tour guides continually link tokens of college experience to the college brand as type. Both show the college brand emerging as a composite of “unstable conjunctions of . . . material things . . . with ‘immaterial’ forms of value . . . partly thing, partly language” (Moore 2003, 334). Both highlight the importance of managed impression associations in the process of brand stabilization.

In tour guiding, the material dimensions of the college are manifested in what visitors see, continually embedded in tour guides’ discursive production. Guides provide information and field tricky questions in ways that cast the school as exciting, safe, diverse and close-knit. As Kircher puts it, they enact “being themselves” in ways that signify them as “‘candidly’ sharing their passion” for the college. This capacity is demonstrated by answers to interview questions such as, “What was your favorite class, and why?” Successful answers reflect positively on the answerer’s perception of the college, for example, commenting on a class that convinced the student to major in *X*. Suitable answers to questions about diversity play on the theme “diversity comes in so many forms” that relies on the poetic while appearing referential. Whalen explains the importance of first person pronouns in tour guide speech acts, establishing a “taste” of “our” community that prospectives might join. Guides use “we” to describe activities that highlight the particular spaces or building they are pointing to (“we” play softball in this field or study in that wonderfully designed space), whether or not the speaker herself does. They tell anecdotes and use place nicknames indexing local knowledge. Guides make a point of greeting each other, promoting a sense of friendliness and general acquaintance.

Both papers describe instances of tour guides giving responses to tricky questions, generally about college social life, that highlight the positive and inclusive, while deflecting too-close attention to the problematic. Kircher de-

8. Over the last decade I have read and supervised a number of student analyses of various aspects of school life, most quite insightful, some quite critical, and most characterized by a deep affection for the school.

scribes how a tour guide might seem just a touch embarrassed to admit she was at, say, a *Rocky Horror* party, foregrounding participation in something hip and fun without drawing attention to what students would call “sketchy” (i.e., socially risky or irresponsible) behavior that may have taken place. Whalen describes the deflection of questions about alcohol at parties by noting that it is there if anyone wants it, while emphasizing the fact that campus rules keep such parties in public spaces. Both note the challenges of manifestations of the material on tour guide rounds—posters highlighting problems of sexual assault or vandalism—that cast an image of division or danger instead of a close-knit and well-balanced community. Sometimes this raises real conflict for the tour guide: Whalen describes her chagrin at the appearance of the school’s streaking team at Accepted Students’ Day, despite her own fondness for this piece of college iconoclasm.

Conclusion

The production of the Good Student as the visible, value-carrying embodied outcome of education is not specific to liberal arts education. (In this market, it couldn’t be.) The embodiment of education in a living student is coherent with a general ideology that higher education should produce workers and that the content of education should justify the investment of time and expense by being practical for the job market. At the same time, practical job training is not the best way to market elite education, the primary function of which is the reproduction or transformation of students’ class status. The general diffuseness of the content of liberal arts education may attract a great many critics, but it does point up its class reproduction function, indexed by the respect accorded such especially emblematic (if impractical) liberal arts subjects as history, literature, and philosophy. Since a liberal arts college’s marketers cannot explicitly foreground its reproductive function, they foreground student images and stories signifying that function. As we have seen, these appear on the college website, and in print publications and videos. They represent the school in frontline situations to prospectives and their families. In performing such roles, they (ideally) showcase the best that the school can offer and they do so in ways that project the qualities of intelligence, flexibility, resourcefulness, productivity, perception, and self-management that characterize the kind of employee that such a school should be producing.

The project of branding liberal arts education points up many interesting aspects of what counts as a commodity. Colleges are not coffee or cars or even Disney World, whose taste or performance or enjoyability can be measured.

Liberal arts education is supposed to teach people stuff—exactly what is unclear, but it results in a degree. Its consumers are there for four years, during which they occupy a liminal position between adolescence and adulthood. Much of that time is spent engaged in activities that have little to do with coursework. They and their parents expect the institution to provide them with safe, comfortable accommodations and food, and a reasonable number of extracurricular activities. All this goes into what counts as the product and so becomes subject to product critique by publications that use their highly structured rankings as their product. Then there are the pundits, politicians, and journalists who issue their critiques to build up their own symbolic capital. The one thing that sets elite liberal arts education apart—social reproduction—is rarely directly referred to except by social scientists, such as Bourdieu, who critically examine higher education. Little wonder that liberal arts education is branded as it is. Its thinginess is formed not by the range of elements making up the experience of college but by what comes together in the branding process.

The thing branded is designed least for the people currently attending the school. It is for prospectives and their parents, and for alumni, trustees and donors. These constituencies do not experience the college as it is but as it might be or as it was (sort of) or as it should be. The signs composed by the college's OIA operate most powerfully on those constituencies who are not currently living with the product. For current students, everything at the school has become embedded in the indexical order of their everyday reality. What count as evocative rhemes for outsiders may for current students be just pictures of so-and-so down the hall, and so-and-so down the hall may have associations entirely at odds with those that the OIA attempts to regiment. People outside the school may see a visual of an interesting-looking young man carrying video-making equipment without knowing the indexes familiar to his dorm neighbors, to whom he may be the sarcastic dope-smoking hipster incapable of cleaning up after himself. The branded version of college life reorders indexicality, creating a sense of connection with idealizations of the school occupying the same time and place as the existing school but experienced through a different social lens. Admittedly, alumni have real time-and-place memories of the school, but it is astonishing how, after not too many years, those memories start drifting toward the OIA version, helped along by participation in reunions and by class notes in the alumni magazine. Hopefully, what prospectives see in that lens will make them want to apply and, if accepted, matriculate; what everyone else sees will make them want to help keep the place going.

It is easy to cast marketing processes as intrusions of contemporary corporate capitalism into the sacred confines of pure academe. Certainly, marketing thinking finds its way into activities that one would never previously have considered amenable. But that is my point: higher education is no more exempt from its surrounding economic and social formations than is any other human organizational activity. Nor has it ever been. The relation of higher education and corporate capitalism begins in the mid to late 1800s (Veysey 1965; Noble 1977; Barrow 1990). By examining branding, I mean to show specific contemporary dimensions of those intersections. It is pointless to talk about branding higher education as good or bad: it simply is.

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