

Preface

The many conversations that were eventually channeled into the pages of this book started at the intersection of two fields or bodies of literature that had not been previously brought into sustained discourse. On one side stands the legal scholarship on trademark law's role in the global brand economy – possibly the epitome of late capitalism – and on the other side the research on the transformation of higher education in the direction of the so-called neoliberal university and its adoption of corporate managerial and marketing strategies. Our goal is to focus on academic brands both as an emergent phenomenon within the global horizon of branding and as a window on the predicament of contemporary higher education and the way the university tries to conceptualize and represent what it is and does, and what its “value” is. This is just a first iteration of that interdisciplinary experiment.

We have organized the discussion around three clusters. The first, “Are Academic Brands Distinctive?” teases out the specificities of academic branding scenarios. Do they constitute just another iteration of the brand economy or can we see different roles and dimensions in them that both reflect and can make us better understand how higher education is and is not a “service” or an “industry”? Are students consumers or producers of the academic brand? And how do academic brands connect with the discourse of excellence, rankings, and the push to represent education as a personalized experience made possible by matching the “right” student with the “right” university?

The second cluster looks at the “Local and Global Dimensions” of academic brands. Does distance make one know a university more as a brand than as an actual institution, thus conferring on it “auratic” status (which may, for instance, make franchise campuses like NYU Abu Dhabi or Yale-NUS and their degrees more attractive)? Is the university like any other corporation that can place its headquarters virtually anywhere in the world, or does its brand resemble a geographical indicator, which ties it to a specific place? And what role does the simultaneous locality and globality of the academic brand play in the acceptance and success of its online

education programs? Finally, how does the globalization of the student bodies of elite American universities, in particular as these colleges market themselves more and more to Asian students, converge with a growing clamor for luxury and status goods in Asia?

The third section, “Conflicted Interests, Haunting Associations,” focuses on the ethical challenges that adopting corporate-style brands create for the university, which has been traditionally associated with a nonprofit ethos. Our contributors then take a step further, analyzing very recent scenarios concerning the relationship between the brand of the university and that of its sponsors, and the crucial ethical, cultural, and political tensions that emerge from that intersection – tensions we may have not yet learned how to address.

Fitting for a study of how universities try to monetize their distinctiveness, this project also started with funding. A generous Mellon-Sawyer grant to UC Davis for a year-long seminar series allowed us to both start this book project and support its completion as an open access publication. It has been a thoroughly collaborative effort, involving Jamey Fisher and Molly MacCarthy at the UC Davis Humanities Institute, colleagues and staff at the UC Davis School of Law, the Center for Science and Innovation Studies, and the Science and Technology Studies Program. We also wish to thank Anne O’Connor, Nicole Kramer, Yoke Dellenback, Anthony Parenti, and especially Nina Bell who made sure that the trains would run on time – always.

This project would not have come into being without crucial generous conversations with Gaye Tuchman, Margaret Chon, Guido Guerzoni, John Marx, Kavita Philip, and Michael Szalay who helped us frame the topic and understand its ramifications. Our thick ledger of debts does not end there. The conference where these chapters were first presented and discussed greatly benefited from the interventions, contributions, and criticism by James Boyle, Anupam Chander, Vanessa Correa, Nicole Ferry, Julie Hage, Cynthia Holmes, Jennifer Jenkins, Tim Lenoir, Angus MacDonald, Libby Morse, Anne O’Connor, Kriss Ravetto, Brian Soucek, and Teresa Vilaros. The masterful closing remarks by Alberto Moreiras and George Marcus made us realize how far we still had to go to fully trace the implications of the project. We hope to have come close enough.

Finally, in the postproduction phase, we were lucky to add Beatrice Lewin-Dumin to our team. It is her editorial finesse that has crafted these chapters into that kind of object called “a book.”

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