

2016

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Recommended Citation

Rhoades, Gary (2016) "Internationalization to what purposes?: Marketing to international students," *Higher Learning Research Communications*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 2 , Article 14.

DOI: 10.18870/hlrc.v6i2.334

Available at: <https://scholarworks.waldenu.edu/hlrc/vol6/iss2/14>

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Internationalization to What Purposes? Marketing to International Students

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Abstract: In this guest editorial, Rhoades discusses his previous research on the marketing that international offices at four universities in the United Kingdom and the United States are doing to international students. The empirical focus of his research is on the websites of the universities' international offices. He has found that the overwhelming marketing pattern in these websites, particularly among the Anglo-American universities, was a prioritizing of individualistic prestige and revenue seeking behavior of institutions and students. The marketing was remarkably devoid of deeper cultural contexts and independent of responsibility to the communities in which the universities are situated and in which the students are studying. Rhoades closes the guest editorial by noting such a model skews the university in terms of the student population it disproportionately serves—to further prioritize the already most advantaged though demographically declining population. He also notes this model undermines the institutional pursuit of important non-pecuniary public purposes of the academy, ranging from social and democratic purpose to social critique.

Keywords: community engagement, higher education, international students, international office, marketing, marketing pattern, public good, public purpose, university website

Amidst global discourse about universities' internationalization, how do universities position themselves and their purposes in recruiting international students? For professionals working to establish partnerships and increase cultural enrichment both on their home campuses and through international exchange, the purposes that are often foregrounded in professional associations speak to the public good, to the broad social benefits of such activities. However, my research on the marketing that international offices at four universities in the United Kingdom and the United States are doing to international students suggests that, as in the marketing of U.S. universities to domestic students, it is the private benefits of higher education to the students and to the individual institutions that are predominant (Hartley & Morpew, 2008; Saichaie & Morpew, 2014).

Moreover, there is an ironic and seemingly counterintuitive pattern of isomorphism to the marketing efforts that cuts across boundaries of region, country, and type of governance. The competition for international students seems to be driven less by imaginative niche seeking than by managing in different ways to be largely the same. Notably, some important exceptions to this pattern were found in the cases of the international offices of two South African universities, which emphasized an "Afropolitan agenda" linked to social, economic, and political development and to the quality of life in the country and the continent.

The empirical focus of my research is on the websites of the universities' international offices. Such sites provide a wealth of materials, documents, images, and often of videos.

Suggested citation: Rhoades, G. (2016). Internationalization to what purposes? Marketing to international students. *Higher Learning Research Communications*, 6(2), 11-14. <http://dx.doi.org/10.18870/hlrc.v6i2.334>

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Moreover, given student behavior in making college choices, it makes sense to focus on university websites. In the United States, “College and university websites are a primary means by which prospective students learn about institutions of higher education (IHES) and are essential to these organizations’ marketing practices” (Carnevale, 2005, p. A25). Upwards of 84% of prospective students report using institutional websites to gather information on them and they remain the most prevalent outlet for prospective student inquiries (NACAC, 2011). So, too, for international students, institutional websites are important sources of information. A recent study found that in 2014-2015, of key influences on the choices of undergraduates, institutional websites ranked #1 for five of the 14 countries from which students were surveyed, and was in the top three for 11 of them (UK HE International Unit, 2015).

In analyzing the websites, I focused on the goals, positioning, and strategies that were expressed on them. In each of these regards, in what I am calling a “global positioning strategy” (GPS), heuristic universities are publicly articulating their purposes.

The goals I found were overwhelmingly self-referential, both for the universities themselves and for the students they were recruiting. Consistent with a pattern of “academic capitalism” (Slaughter & Leslie, 1997; Slaughter & Rhoades, 2004), the goals had to do with the universities, as if they were independent enterprises or firms competing in a global marketplace. So, too, it was for the prospective students who were the targeted audience of the websites. As the Arizona State University website articulated, in its imagery and text, the purpose is for the individual student to “learn to thrive,” with the larger context being far less about “learning” and far more about “thriving.”

The privatized nature of the goals was evident as well in the universities’ positioning of themselves in terms of their individual prestige and rankings in a global academic marketplace. Whether it was Arizona State University (ASU) or New York University (NYU) in the United States, or the University of Strathclyde in Scotland or the University of Warwick in England, there was no real reference to the nation or the region. Moreover, the references to the cities in which these universities were located were not about the social, public responsibility or role of the universities, or of their students, in relation to the place in question. Rather, these references were overwhelmingly about the attractiveness of the campus and/or city as a tourist destination for consumption more than as a site for cultural engagement and learning with which the university was interconnected (Urry, 1990/2002). Thus, for instance, the University of Strathclyde website featured Glasgow as one the top *retail destinations* in the United Kingdom outside London and as, according to *The New York Times*, “one of the top twelve destinations to be seen.”

The strategies evident in the websites reflected a glossy, business-slick approach. The University of Warwick site was Facebook-like in appearance, with links to pics and testimonials of current students and alumni. As evident in the positioning of a place to consume quality leisure experiences (such as sport, shopping, dining), the sites were marketing a personal lifestyle, not just a general lifestyle. A lifestyle pitched to appeal to well-to-do, full-fee-paying international students. Each of the universities promotes an image of higher education as a valuable and costly consumer good: It is quite clear what sorts of students are being pursued and who are preferred customers.

The South African university sites also very much featured images and text that expressed a self-contained university lifestyle, though with some reference (totally lacking on the other sites) to personal safety. And they, like the sites of the Anglo-American universities, featured the *managerial professionals* who are part of the organizational restructuring that

comes with academic capitalism—staff who connect with the external world, who organize services around students, and who are often in offices that are oriented to generating new revenue streams (Rhoades & Sporn, 2002). That is certainly clear in the case of international students who pay not only full fees, but additional fees.

Certainly, there were some differences among the sites, beyond the distinctiveness of the South African universities' consideration of broader public good. For instance, two of the universities (ASU and Warwick) featured much more of a focus on the campus as the community and location (and as the source of school spirit) than on the metropolitan area. Moreover, there are some differences in strategy that likely have to do with the different geopolitical situations of the UK versus the U.S. universities. The UK universities were considerably more developed and polished in their social media presentation and presence, as well as in their featuring of managerial professionals who are there to recruit and support international students. The growth of these non-academic professionals as part of the new "knowledge learning regime" is particularly ironic given the increasing and very large proportions of academics in each of the countries who are contingent, temporary staff (Ates & Brechelmacher, 2013; Rhoades, 2013).

Nevertheless, the overwhelming pattern, particularly among the Anglo-American universities, was a prioritizing of individualistic prestige and revenue seeking behavior of institutions and students. The marketing was remarkably devoid of deeper cultural contexts and independent of responsibility to the communities in which the universities were situated and in which the students are studying. What was strikingly absent, with the important exception of the two South African universities, was an orientation to the public purposes and roles of universities, to the culturally and educationally transformative potentials of educational exchange, and to the responsibility of universities to address and serve local, regional, national, and global public goods. Instead, the orientation was to providing private services to the private benefit of the universities and the individual students attending them.

In closing, it is worth emphasizing that the business model that is expressed in these marketing practices is very much akin to the business model of U.S. public universities that involves replacing state appropriation monies with the tuition monies of in-state and especially increasing numbers of out-of-state students. That model of enrollment management to generate net tuition revenue is increasingly under fire from various fronts. One criticism is that such a model skews the university in terms of the student population it disproportionately serves—to further prioritize the already most advantaged though demographically declining population. Another criticism is that this model undermines the institutional pursuit of important non-pecuniary public purposes of the academy, ranging from social and democratic purpose to social critique. As universities market to international students, it is worth devoting more public, policy, and professional attention to the question of, "Internationalization to what purposes?"

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