

# **BRANDING A“PUBLIC” UNIVERSITY: PUBLIC POLICY OR A BUSINESS DECISION?**

## **ABSTRACT**

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Naming a new product or service in a consumer goods firm generally involves a fairly straightforward process: conduct research with a defined group of experts and target customer segments, make a decision, then design and implement a plan of action, all within 3-6 months. Yet, one public university reported that “this [name] change was 20 years in the making and did not happen without a tremendous amount of effort on the part of administrators, faculty, students, alumni and many elected officials at all levels of government” (Haytko, Burris and Smith, 2008).

The technological, government, and competitive environment in which universities operate has changed radically in the past 15 years, forcing marketing to the forefront of university leadership. This case study investigates a small, rapidly growing public comprehensive teaching institution operating with a state university system as it considered a name change as part of a larger re-branding effort.

The University of South Carolina "Small Town" seeks to grow to a “full service” university to serve a geographic region with exceptionally low educational attainment. Fundamental to its entrepreneurial growth plan is attracting students from outside the region. A change in the descriptor after the words "University of South Carolina" to more powerfully connect the university to its coastal location appeared to have significant potential to accelerate its growth.

Comprehensive universities operating within state university systems are interesting subjects for a case analysis involving autonomy and the politics of state support. Independently accredited as universities, they run their own academic programs and manage their own tenure lines. Increasingly they bear the brunt of head to head competition with for-profit institutions.

The challenges of bringing strategic marketing change to higher education are, ironically, ingrained in the very character of a public university: the dependence on financial and political support from many constituents and the consensus model of governance. The roles the various actors in the re-branding decision—legislators, system leadership, university chancellor, advisory board, marketing lead--chose to play are described—and the complex interactions and conflict among them explored. Public policy, managerial implications and future research are suggested.