

4-1-2004

# Developing the Brand Equity of Jesuit Higher Education

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### Recommended Citation

Laczniak, Gene R. (2004) "Developing the Brand Equity of Jesuit Higher Education," *Conversations on Jesuit Higher Education*: Vol. 25, Article 4.  
Available at: <http://epublications.marquette.edu/conversations/vol25/iss1/4>

# DEVELOPING THE BRAND EQUITY OF JESUIT HIGHER EDUCATION

*Jesuit institutions must recognize the value of their common identity and market themselves in a way that will benefit them all.*

By Gene R. Laczniak

One of the most potentially powerful brand names in US higher education is the designation “Jesuit.” In theory, the attainment of Jesuit degree training, due to its distinctive educational characteristics, could elicit the same cache that is evoked by a Harvard, Stanford, MIT, or Berkeley undergraduate degree. But, because the umbrella brand equity of Jesuit higher education has not been effectively or efficiently leveraged for its synergy, what could be a phenomenal national, or even international, nameplate in university education has been left relatively unmanaged. In practice, Jesuit colleges march onward as twenty-eight loosely affiliated US franchises. Granted, individual Jesuit colleges and universities have a clear and convincing track record of educational success. However, promoted by an integrated marketing communications campaign (IMCC) that systematically explains the philosophy and demonstrated achievements of the Jesuit colleges and universities, the collective impact of the Jesuit higher education network could be so much more than it currently is. Here is why and how.

Below are listed some of the key questions germane to this issue:

- Is “Jesuit” a distinctive brand of US higher education?
- Why has the Jesuit brand of university higher education not been more systematically developed and vigorously promoted?
- Does the Jesuit nameplate have the potential for superior brand equity?
- Why is improved Jesuit brand equity financially and strategically important?
- How should the Jesuit brand of higher education be leveraged to achieve its optimal impact?

## *Is Jesuit Higher Education a Brand?*

“Yes.” A brand is a name or symbol that acts as a communication short cut to consumers because of the attributes or associations it possesses. Jesuit education contains the necessary requisites to qualify as a powerful brand. Most obviously, Jesuit education is private and Catholic. Certain segments of the student market for university higher education wish to be educated in a private university setting. Others desire a university education in the Catholic tradition. Many want their college to be both private and Catholic. Furthermore, the Jesuit brand of higher education also has other attractive qualities that can appeal to students of all religious and secular backgrounds interested in a quality academic experience. Because of its direct association with the Society of Jesus and its nearly twenty-five thousand members worldwide, Jesuit higher education is inspired by the purposes of its founding religious order. Through its missions and parishes, as well as its educational institutions, the Society of Jesus attempts to live out a world affirming commitment to the service of faith through the promotion of justice. And most important of all, the basic education provided is based on a carefully crafted, time-tested foundation, the *Ratio Studiorum*— a compendium of central educational principles, informed by the Constitutions of the Society of Jesus. The *Ratio* attributes, each contributing to a quality academic experience, include:

- **Whole person education:** The complete education of students as future societal leaders calls for social

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and spiritual as well as intellectual growth.

- **Instruction with a moral foundation:** The Jesuit educational philosophy requires that, motivated by the spirit of the Catholic faith, students develop a disposition to seek greater justice for all persons.
- **A sequential curriculum grounded in the liberal arts:** The curriculum at Jesuit universities builds especially on a core of common studies in the humanities in an ordered, logical sequence such that students are trained to be life-long learners who are prepared not only how to make a living, but also to ethically examine how they wish to live.

Each of these dimensions — private, Catholic, Jesuit, and therefore *Ratio* inspired — is a potential platform for meaningful product differentiation in the marketplace of higher education.. Together, these elements provide an integrated and powerful philosophy of education that is cosmopolitan in its nature, compelling in its scope, and so different from the mass of higher education that, in strategic terms, Jesuit education represents a sustainable competitive advantage. Given the ongoing core curricular reviews that are presently taking place at the majority of Jesuit universities, these institutions continue to remain steadfastly serious about nurturing the knowledge, skills, aptitudes and values that are implicit in the Jesuit brand of education. If Jesuit colleges and universities deliver what they promise—and for the most part there is ample evidence they do—then there is an extraordinary story to be told. The Jesuit approach to education should be celebrated and promoted in the same manner that the Boy Scouts of America have historically positioned the designation “Eagle Scout.” Simply put: there is a brand of education labeled “Jesuit.” More of the world needs to hear about it.

### *Why Has the Jesuit Brand of Education Not Been Systematically Promoted and Developed?*

By and large, Jesuit universities have acted like independent franchises connected to the umbrella brand “Jesuit” in only the most casual of ways. The broad public marketplace for higher education is far more familiar with the names Fordham, Boston College, and Georgetown than their common and connecting Jesuit affiliation. Jesuit colleges and universities have remained loosely federated for both good and questionable reasons.

**Reason 1: Historical Artifact.** Jesuit higher education has a long and distinguished history in the US, going back to the founding of Georgetown College in 1789. As Jesuit higher education grew in the US, especially during the 19th and early 20th centuries, long distance communication and coordination among any set of schools was difficult. The Jesuit order divided the US into ten provinces with each operating in relative autonomy. Therefore, it stands to reason that the various institutions of Jesuit higher education would develop their own character and traditions. Such long-standing independence naturally restricts highly orchestrated action among the Jesuit schools, even as it depresses the possibility of developing a collective Jesuit brand equity.

**Reason 2: Geographical Segmentation.** While commonly drawing from the driving philosophy of the Jesuit order, as well as the dictums of the *Ratio*, for good cause Jesuit colleges and universities in different geographic areas have developed idiosyncratic missions. For example, Holy Cross has remained strictly a liberal arts college, Georgetown and St. Louis have positioned themselves as major research universities, and Regis in Colorado has attempted to integrate itself into the urban and sub-urban fabric of its host metropolis, Denver.

Since form follows function, it is also understandable that the various Jesuit colleges and universities are not only independent but genuinely diverse as well. Because of their different location and student needs, the various Jesuit universities differ. Some have law schools, others not. Many have business colleges, but a few do not. And the target market of students served also differs somewhat across the Jesuit schools with the *mix* varying by undergraduate versus graduate, full- versus part-time, traditional versus adult age.

**Reason #3: Individual Success.** Operating in relative independence, Jesuit colleges and universities have been remarkably successful on their own. Given this indisputable success, why should Jesuit colleges be marketed in a fundamentally new way? Consider a few of the aggregate documented accomplishments: There are 1.4 million living alumni of US Jesuit colleges and universities. Currently, the collective of Jesuit universities educates hundreds of thousands of students each year including 119 thousand undergraduates. Jesuit universities have a cumulated operating budget of \$4.1 billion with endowments of \$5.5 billion. The past President of the United States, a member of the United States

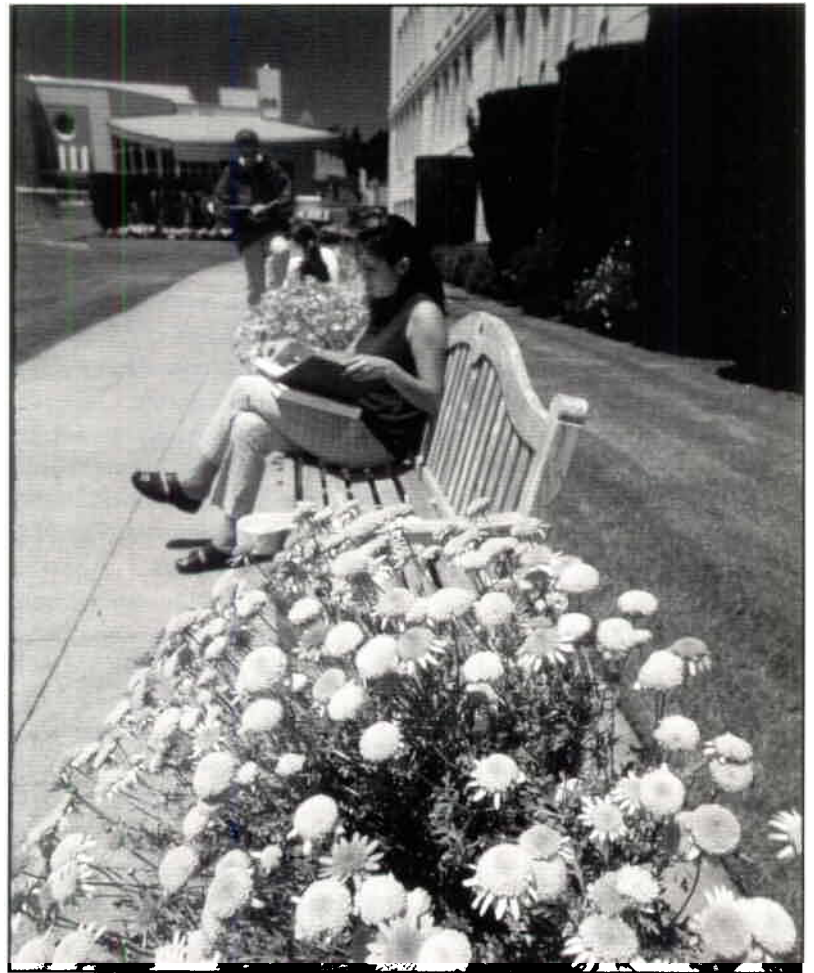
Supreme Court, and forty members of the United States Congress are graduates of Jesuit institutions. The Jesuit constellation of colleges has achievements equal to or greater than the brightest of state university "stars."

Still one can argue, "If Jesuit education ain't broke, why fix it?" The answer to this question is anchored in the cumulative brand equity, both beneficial and enriching to all Jesuit affiliates, that might be created. The Jesuits have a track record in higher education, extending back to their European roots; it exceeds 450 years of service. Even the most venerable of Ivy League institutions cannot make that claim. The perceived brand equity of Jesuit higher education should reflect this remarkable success and tradition.

**Reason #4: Competitive Caution.** Cooperation among Jesuit colleges and universities is commonly viewed with suspicion by member institutions because they sometimes compete for the same students and donor funding. For example, forty-six Jesuit high schools around the US regularly act as a common feeder system to Jesuit colleges and universities. At many Jesuit institutions (e.g., Georgetown and Boston College) the applicant list contains many overlapping candidates. In some markets, such as Kenosha County, Wisconsin, both Loyola of Chicago and Marquette University battle for the same potential graduate students in business as both universities have operated satellite MBA programs in this border county of Illinois. And when a graduate of Scranton (Pennsylvania) moves to Baltimore, for instance, Scranton worries that Loyola-Maryland may attempt to capture that Jesuit graduate's future contributions to higher education.

**Reason #5: Sibling Jealousy.** As in human nature, there are petty conflicts among the various Jesuit institutions. For example, some Jesuit schools aspire to Ivy League elitism. Others have been secretly condemned by their sister schools as having lost too much of their Catholic identity; a few are viewed as having sold out to the "false god" of highly lucrative professional training, and still others suffer from a reputation for raiding fellow Jesuit faculty and administrators.

**Reason #6: Marketing Phobia.** There is an abiding suspicion, especially among older Jesuits and faculty members in humanities departments at Jesuit schools, about the nature and benefits of utilizing



any kind of mass marketing to advance the purposes of Jesuit institutions. This is the most complex of the factors postulated as impediments to the development of a Jesuit brand. Such coordinated promotional techniques strike many in Jesuit higher education as both desperate and corrupting. Advertising, for example, is seen as the lubricant of a consumer society that has grown to excess. It is perceived as a tool of conspicuous consumption that is both manipulative and pernicious. Even if done well, mass marketing, especially TV advertising, is seen by many to be too expensive. Even if ethically executed, advertising benefits are judged as not easily demonstrated or evaluated. Thus, despite the general acceptance of mass advertising by for-profit corporations as both a necessary cost of doing business as well as a communications tool that can be used effectively, certain segments of Jesuit higher education remain steadfastly resistant. The supposition is that the public ought to acclaim Jesuit higher education for its inherent "good" without the use of any paid-for endorsements. The real-

Champion  
Campus,  
University of  
San Francisco



ity, however, is that the Jesuit franchises operate in an electronic culture where marketing, advertising and the Internet are the currency of communications exchange.

### *Does the Jesuit Nameplate have the Potential for Superior Brand Equity?*

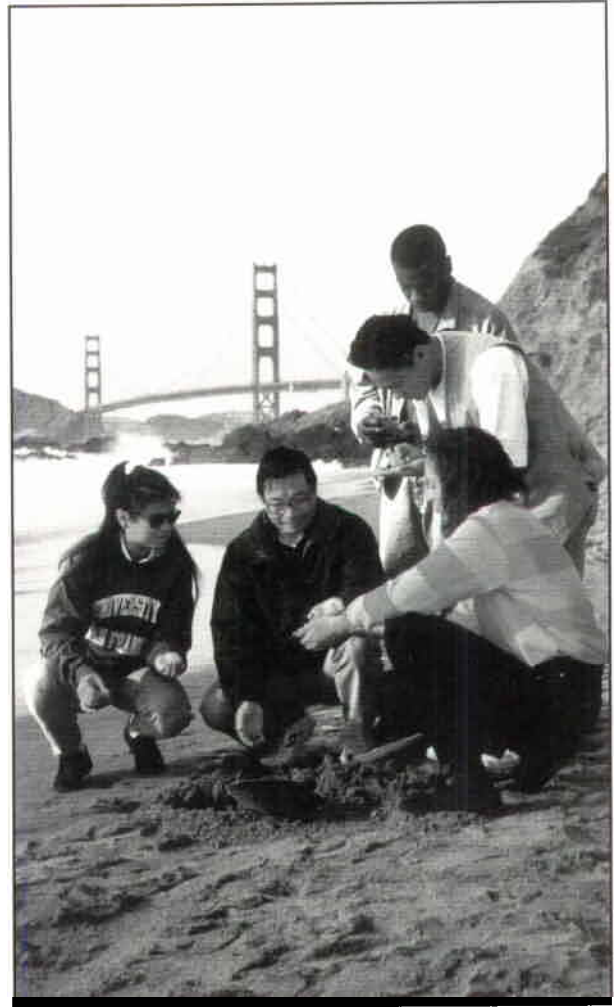
Developing strong brand equity for its products is a strategic priority for most business corporations. The central objective of strategic brand management is the cultivation of positive brand equity.

In a technical sense, brand equity is set of brand assets (and liabilities) linked to a brand name and/or symbol that increases (or subtracts from) the value provided by the product or service offered by an organization to that firm's customers.

These highly desirable and sought-after assets include: brand awareness, brand loyalty, perceived quality, as well as other qualities. When specific products or services achieve high brand loyalty, significant brand recognition and improved perceived quality, those products or services are said to possess strong brand equity—the gold standard in marketplace effectiveness.

Since we have established that Jesuit is a brand, the Jesuit brand of higher education, if efficiently managed and better publicized, should be able to acquire the substantial benefits of enhanced and improved brand equity. Indeed, to develop and promote the unique attributes of private, Catholic, Jesuit education seems to be a goal that is consonant with the contemporary aspirations of Jesuit universities as they seek to prominently assert their unique mission and identity.

**Brand Awareness:** Brand awareness involves the ability of consumers to recognize or recall a brand as part of a product or service category offering certain benefits or characteristics. Brand awareness might be thought of as a special "file folder" in the consumer's mind, in this case labeled "Jesuit." Clearly, there is already a small segment of consumers aware of and loyal to all Jesuit universities. But that number is far less than ideal or desired, and the planned growth of Jesuit brand equity would allow the connection among these institutions to develop more fully in the consumer's mind. As demonstrated previously, Jesuit schools provide a distinct brand of education valued for its rigor, crafted to inspire compassion for others and respected for its attention to character development as it fosters intellectual growth. But, even among students



USF Students at Golden Beach.

and alumni of Jesuit schools, the complete Jesuit network of educational providers is relatively unknown. For example, from time to time I ask the graduating seniors in my classes at Marquette University, what the colleges Detroit-Mercy, Seattle, and LeMoyné have in common. Over the years less than one in twenty-five of the students — individuals all about to graduate from a Jesuit institution — can correctly answer that these are all sister Jesuit schools.

**Brand Loyalty:** Brand loyalty is the degree to which consumers repurchase a brand largely due to past satisfaction. Thus, one fundamental measure of a product's success is the extent to which consumers desire to acquire the product again or to recommend it to others. In some instances, particular Jesuit schools enjoy a strong measure of brand loyalty already; most Jesuit affiliated colleges enjoy relatively high levels of customer satisfaction. The

legacy effect involving the education of successive generations of the same family at the same institution is well known to admissions specialists. A major incremental brand development opportunity lies in the systematic promotion of cross-institutional Jesuit loyalty. That is, Jesuit institutions should strive to develop the ideal outcome that the graduate of one Jesuit university, all else equal, will desire to pursue his or her future education at another Jesuit institution when seeking a new degree or further higher education. For example, under the best circumstances, bachelors' degree graduates of Loyola-Marymount thinking about law school ought to routinely consider Georgetown and the University of San Francisco among their desired choice set. In addition, employers who are graduates of one Jesuit institution should ideally exhibit a preference for the graduates of other Jesuit institutions as their employees.

**Perceived Quality:** Perceived quality is a third element of brand equity. In our context, perceived quality would address the extent to which the unique characteristics of Jesuit education (i.e., academic quality, a disposition of its graduates for service, a faith-inspired moral education, etc.) are achieved and recognized by students, alumni, employers and potential future customers. Brands with strong perceived quality have developed their brand equity both by delivering on their promises, and by promoting these benefits on a continuous basis. The valued benefits (i.e., perceived quality) that strong equity brands possess help cultivate a trusted and recognizable brand name (i.e., additional brand loyalty and awareness). Sometimes a symbol alone can remind consumers of these valued characteristics. The *Nike* "swoosh," the *Cadillac* "crest" and the five interlocking rings of the Olympic games are examples of symbols that contribute effectively to brand recognition and convey a certain understood level of implicit quality. Jesuit education would benefit from such a brand mark.

### *Why is Improved Jesuit Branding Important?*

As brand equity increases, target customers better understand and appreciate the positive attributes delivered by the organization's products or services. For example, just as the name *IBM* and its "big blue" motif are suggestive of reliable computing services at a fair price, supported by outstanding customer service, so too, Jesuit education, if developed suffi-

ciently as a brand, will evoke the fullness of its reputation. Such brand development will make the implementation of individual university communication campaigns more effective and build the perceived value of all Jesuit schools.

If Jesuit brand equity is developed, what association and attributes should it symbolize in the context of higher education? As suggested previously, "Jesuit" ought to connote quality, private education in the Catholic tradition, designed for the development of the whole person, rooted in the liberal arts, and delivered with a moral/ethical foundation that prepares the student for life-long learning and a service orientation informed by a desire for social justice.

First, Jesuit brand awareness increases. When potential consumers of higher education simply hear the umbrella brand name "Jesuit," they will immediately connect it with the positive, value-added educational characteristics that we have already discussed. Second, brand loyalty improves. That is, the probability that future educational experiences will be acquired from a Jesuit educational vendor increases dramatically. Also, alumni who are brand loyal to Jesuit institutions are more likely to be involved in Jesuit-sponsored activities and to become donors to Jesuit fundraising campaigns. Third, the price of Jesuit education becomes more inelastic. In other words, Jesuit colleges and universities can more easily increase their tuition (or offer less discount) than previously due to the enhanced educational value that students and potential future customers perceive in attaining a Jesuit education. Thus, perceived quality is magnified. In this case, the benefits of being able to command a premium price in the educational marketplace are not derived from being able to better maximize revenue, because that is not a primary goal of Jesuit education. Rather, having a premium price helps to minimize the consumer surplus (i.e., discount) from certain students who already have the ability to pay "sticker price" for Jesuit education. This allows financial aid to be given to others, especially needy students of minority status, who might not otherwise be able to afford the Jesuit brand.

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## *How Should the Jesuit Brand of Education be marketed?*

One possible blueprint consisting of three steps is amplified below. Step one will require a Jesuit university president willing to tirelessly champion this idea along with perhaps two or three other influential Jesuit college presidents who would be ready to endorse the concept in advance. These individuals must be committed and vocal supporters of the idea, be willing to advocate for the proposal at the AJCU presidents' meeting and propose it as an actionable agenda item.

Success at this level means:

(a) explicitly securing support for the "Jesuit as brand" idea; (b) receiving a commitment to fund jointly the marketing campaign component of brand equity

development; and (c) charging a committee, aided by a qualified management consultant, to put forward an implementation plan (including a specific budget).

Step two involves the AJCU and its affiliated conferences of administrators. Of the three necessary steps, this is the one most in place. The AJCU already has created a working support system for idea exchange and cooperation among Jesuit colleges and universities. It must be emphasized again that the idea behind leveraging the brand equity of the collective of Jesuit institutions is not to reduce the historic independence of individual Jesuit colleges and universities.

The cooperation required among the Jesuit universities to achieve this vision will not be easy. Skeptics will ask: How do you fairly tax specific institutional contributors for any cross-institutional promotional campaign undertaken on behalf of all Jesuit higher education? Will the tariff be by enrollment? By size of endowment? According to advertising costs in the home market of each university? For instance, why should rich Santa Clara subsidize poor Spring Hill? Why should, for example, well known Georgetown enlighten students living in Ohio, who might view the proposed "all-Jesuit" advertising campaign, that excellent Jesuit higher education is conveniently available in Cincinnati (Xavier) or Cleveland (John Carroll) as well as the more distant Washington D.C.? And so on. Various AJCU efforts, perhaps encouraged by the Jesuit provincials, can go far in mitigating, alleviating, or

mediating such concerns by stressing the net benefits that accrue to all.

Step three consists of an integrated marketing communications campaign (IMCC). This approach can best be understood and evenhandedly valued when conceived as a total package. An IMCC harnesses the coordinated use of all elements of marketing communications in a strategically focused fashion in order to contribute to a common communication objective. Specifically, the proposed approach calls for the initiation of a spot TV advertising campaign to extol the value of Jesuit higher education, associated public relations, coordinated web site development, consistent brand usage by all Jesuit universities as well as the possible implementation of a Jesuit national basketball tournament.

## *Elements of the IMCC*

The first element of the IMCC consists of a **national TV advertising campaign**. It is envisioned that a series of sixty- and thirty-second TV commercials would be developed to illustrate and promote the accomplishments, virtues and characteristics of the Jesuit education. Production costs for creating the commercials would be funded by AJCU members through an equitably tiered fee system. Perhaps Jesuit-educated advertising professionals would donate some creative work or a "guardian angel" donor would emerge to underwrite this venture. The campaign details should be left to the advertising experts but the message should inspire viewers as it highlights the unique attributes and the historical, collective impact of Jesuit higher education.

The commercials would be constructed in such a way that a five-second tag-on could be added identifying the local Jesuit university when the commercials are run on regional TV in their geographic area. For example, when the "Jesuit" TV spots run in the state of Kansas or Missouri, the tag-on might read "sponsored by Rockhurst University—the Jesuit university of Kansas City." Alternatively, when ads run in the state in New Jersey the tag might note, "sponsored by Saint Peter's College—the Jesuit university of New Jersey." Again, the content of these ads should recount, in an inspirational fashion, the overall success story of Jesuit higher education in the US and the distinctive features that it provides.

The second element of the IMCC would be a **paid PR component** designed especially for the reinforcement of the themes sounded in the ad campaign. A professional public relations agency would



be engaged to solicit the media in conversation about the national Jesuit advertising campaign and other publicity-seeking activities associated with the envisioned promotional program (see proposed athletic event below). The rationale here is to capitalize on the news-worthiness of the collective impact of Jesuit education. An advertising campaign of this nature, at least when first undertaken, would be construed as somewhat out of the ordinary. Its implementation would likely generate national media interest, allowing the Society of Jesus to leverage its investment in advertising with a multiplier effect consisting of additional [positive] media publicity about the work of the order and its apostolates. This effort could also indirectly serve to nurture vocations for the Jesuits.

The third element of the IMCC consists of **coordinating Jesuit websites** in a manner such that viewers of the TV commercials and other promotions are encouraged to learn more about Jesuit education and the diversity of Jesuit activities by going to the Internet for additional information. Most Jesuit universities already have a website, as does the AJCU. The chief information officers at Jesuit universities should plan in advance of the proposed ad campaign to give their websites a common look with corresponding features, adding further to the umbrella brand development of Jesuit education. Essential to this effort is the idea discussed next.

The fourth element of the IMCC involves the integration and development of the Jesuit name into the advertising and promotions of all its university affiliates as well as the **creation of a symbol representing Jesuit education**. As noted above, all Jesuit universities should try to use the tag-on "Jesuit" in its institutional advertising. Currently, only Wheeling *Jesuit* College (West Virginia) incorporates the umbrella brand name into its official organizational name. Therefore, when Creighton University advertises to potential students, the "runner" below the university title or emblem could be supplemented with, "the Jesuit university of Nebraska and the Great Plains."

Consistent with enhancing brand name usage and repetition, the communication officers at Jesuit institutions should help develop a symbol of Jesuit education. At this point, the specific nature of the symbol is left open-ended, although it should likely reflect the historical nature and character of Jesuit education - perhaps utilizing a coat-of-arms format - while at the same time being designed for its contemporary graphic impact.



The last step involves a **national Jesuit basketball tournament**. This is likely to be controversial due to the idea's complexity but it is also very exciting because of the high potential payoff for publicizing Jesuit education. The legend of how the Holy Cross Order has capitalized on collegiate football to build a great university is a story known to many, especially in Catholic higher education circles. Partly by luck and partly by design, the University of Notre Dame grew Fighting Irish football into a major marketing machine that serves as an alumni rallying point and a fundraising magnet for the university that now includes an extraordinary \$100 million TV contract with NBC. Jesuit Catholic universities have a more limited, but nevertheless major, opportunity with men's basketball. Jesuit-affiliated universities have a rich and glorious basketball tradition. How might this be capitalized

Lone Mountain  
University of  
San Francisco



on? One option is to initiate an early season basketball tournament that brings Jesuit universities together for a basketball competition, but also showcases the educational success story made possible by the Jesuit brand of education.

How might the details of this proposed venture play out? Each year there would be an annual basketball tournament (dare we call it “the Exercises”?) involving eight (8) to sixteen (16) Jesuit schools. The tournament would have both an overt and covert purpose. On the one hand, the competition obviously would allow sports fans around the country to witness top quality college basketball. At the same time, if things fall into place as envisioned below, the tournament would also provide a forum for TV viewers and others to learn about those colleges. The heroic assumption here is that, given the demand for cable sports programming, a TV contract for the tournament could be secured. Then the allotted TV ad space typically given to participant schools for publicity would not be used solely for individual institutional promotion, but rather (like the current ad campaign running for the Big Ten Conference) would be used to publicize the philosophy and achievements of Jesuit higher education in general.

Quite appropriately, the basketball tournament should be held in conjunction with all-Jesuit academic conferences that bring together the various associations of Jesuit administrators and academics. These groups might present their scholarly perspectives on global themes of educational merit and would rotate general categories every three or four years (e.g., year one: humanities; year two: science, health and engineering; year three: social science, law and business; and so forth).

A thumbnail sketch of the plan that emerges includes the necessity of a suitable TV contract. It likely requires a majority of basketball teams from Jesuit schools be committed to participate. It could involve both men’s and women’s teams. Most likely a central location such as Chicago or St. Louis would be desirable but the event could also rotate to the East and West coast as well. The timing of the tournament would probably best be executed as a pre-season competition (possibly late November) because this is when optimism about one’s basketball prospects are high and when TV programmers have space to fill that falls between the end of the regular college football season but before the beginning of bowl games and holiday basketball tournaments

Will there be obstacles to such a proposal? Yes, many. Some universities will complain about the loss of current revenues from possibly foregone home games. Others will worry about whether participation in such a tournament will take away the luster of their own holiday tournaments. The extant academic calendars and athletic conference revenue sharing arrangements will no doubt raise further complications. Nevertheless, a philosophy of making this tournament happen should engender a “can do” attitude.

### **Conclusion**

Beyond a fairly tight circle of Jesuit loyalists, many Catholic and non-Catholic families alike are unaware that a network of providers delivers precisely the sort of quality education that many look for. Students seeking high quality, values based, private education need to be told and sold on the Jesuit brand. To do this, the elements of an integrated marketing communications campaign (IMCC) are described. The proposed campaign is the modern day equivalent of traveling out into the world to proclaim the good news. It reflects the Jesuit ideal of helping society realize God in all things by communicating the educational values Jesuits espouse. Implemented well, this campaign should provide the necessary visibility and communicability to attain a nationally recognizable brand equity in North American higher education that is distinctively, proudly and uniquely Jesuit. What now remains to be realized by Jesuit university presidents and their associated leadership teams is the inspired vision that enhancing Jesuit brand equity provides enhanced long term value for each of their institutions as they labor together for the greater glory of God.