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From the Editor: Branding for Mission

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Branding for Mission

Most of us probably encountered the word “branding” as children when we first went to Western movies. It meant that those cattle with the RRBar brand belonged on Roy Rogers’s ranch and that if any rustlers snuck in among the herds at night and stole them they would have to answer to Roy and Trigger.

As we matured so did the meaning of the word. A brand is a symbol of the self, an identity card, a guarantee of our integrity.

And in the business world it is all that and much more — and sometimes less: a marketing tool, a public image summed up in a logo like a crocodile or a polo player, a tease, an implicit contract, a promise of a better life.

The Chronicle of Higher Education (October 24, 2003) describes how the University of Maryland at College Park overcame the 1986 cocaine death of its basketball star Len Bias and its reputation as a party school with low academic standards by a bold marketing campaign, by “institutional branding” with a “retooled logo.”

Should Jesuit education be branded and marketed like another commercial product? Are the strategies of branding consistent with our goals?

This issue of *Conversations*, with its provocative essays and your responses which we hope will follow, is meant to have an influence on how Jesuit institutions present themselves to future generations of students and faculty.

In the spring of 2001 the Executive Committee of the Jesuit Advancement Administrators (JAA) recommended that the presidents of the Association of Jesuit Colleges and Universities (AJCU) appoint a task force to ask how the public perceives the difference between Jesuit and other universities, how the different generations of Jesuit alumni perceive the term “Jesuit,” and what can be done to enhance public understanding of the Jesuit brand name?

This was not a proposal for a joint marketing plan but for research that would help individual institutions. Earlier research by Rockhurst, Regis and Gonzaga Universities had indicated that “Jesuit” evoked ambiguous or no reaction from the possible constituencies. Meanwhile the Conference of Jesuit Admissions Directors began discussing the importance of Jesuit identity or brand in their recruiting efforts. In the fall of 2000, James Purcell, vice presi-

dent for university relations at Santa Clara University, agreed to chair a JAA branding task force to develop a detailed proposal for the presidents.

In November 2002, the AJCU Conference of Mission and Identity Coordinators discussed branding in the context of the recent document, “Communal Reflection on the Jesuit Mission in Higher Education.” The AJCU Conference of Chief Academic Officers was also discussing the issue, and in March, 2003, held a special meeting to consider papers on branding and marketing from Professor Thomas E. Scheye, of Loyola College in Maryland, Thomas J. Hayes, of Xavier University, Cincinnati, and from James Purcell.

In January, 2003, the presidents, after receiving the task force’s proposal, agreed to approve a funded study that would include all existing data. The eight research proposals submitted by research firms were narrowed to four, and a finalist was selected in mid-November. Now we’re looking for the funding.

The firm chosen will survey students, parents, faculty, and alumni on what is the perceived image of Jesuit higher education. At Xavier, Sarah Kelly, assistant vice president for student development, is conducting her doctoral research on faculty and staff appreciation of five characteristics of Jesuit education.

As soon as possible, *Conversations* will tell you what they have found.

RAS, sj



Also in this issue, we are honored to feature the distinguished sociologist, Robert Bellah, author of *Habits of the Heart*, with his reflections on educating for justice. We have invited two Jesuit alumni and a professor to respond to our last issue’s discussion of divided loyalties, specifically in dealing with Hollywood. And we invite you to respond as well to whatever you read here.