

MASTERING BRANDING APPLICATION: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN UNIVERSITY BRANDING AND
PROGRAM ENROLLMENT

by

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Abstract

In recent years, university enrollment, in particular that of Master of Business Administration programs (MBA), has experienced a noticeable decline. Though there are a number of factors that may affect enrollment rates, a university's marketing and branding are two facets of its persona that may have a significant impact. The purpose of this study is to define the characteristics of the ECU MBA brand and to develop a strategy that can be utilized to increase the quality of its perception from the viewpoints of current students. In terms of methodology, qualitative and quantitative data were gathered by implementing surveys among current ECU College of Business students. It can be concluded that there is a high level of brand recognition and brand loyalty to the ECU MBA program among undergraduate students surveyed. This study suggests ECU may combat negative enrollment trends by focusing marketing efforts around these student perceptions.

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Introduction

In recent years, university enrollment, in particular that of Master of Business Administration programs (MBA), has experienced a noticeable decline. Though there are a number of factors that affect enrollment rates, a university's marketing and branding are two facets of its persona that have a significant impact. Moreover, a university's branding is not just the logo that is associated with its name, but is the culmination of all of its characteristics that determine its overall value (Jevons, 2006). In addition, research has proven that a student's perception of a university's brand affects their decision to attend and ultimately whether they remain enrolled (Jevons, 2006). Considering these facts, a university's brand is essential to the prospective students it attracts and also the retention of its current students.

Though conditions have improved since the economic downturn that caused MBA program enrollment to decline initially, enrollment has stayed low due to the fact that there is a decline in the number of programs available for prospective students. As a result of this, the graduate school environment is highly competitive, especially on an international basis. In a study conducted of 11,674 prospective MBA students, the United States has been ranked as the most desired study destination

globally (MBA.com, 2015). In this competitive climate, it is clear that a university's branding is now more important than ever before.

As a marketing major aspiring to work with brands and brand development in the future, I will be able to gain practical experience performing marketing research through this study. East Carolina University's MBA program will be the focus of my study, the results of which I will relay to the ECU College of Business with the intent of providing insight that can be utilized to stop its decline in enrollment. Since a decline in university enrollment affects many universities beyond ECU, I hope that the results of my research can also be used to help other universities form an action plan to improve their branding as well.

Background

In order to understand more about why branding is important to a university, some background information must be presented. University branding has been a frequent problem in the United States for a number of years, and has the potential to affect a university internally as well as externally (Jevons, 2006). Recent studies have shown that a lack of branding may cause employees to create mental associations with smaller sections of the university rather than the entire institution (Jevons,

2006). This phenomenon is the most apparent in universities that are well known for their excellence in specific colleges or programs, rather than for their overall reputation (Jevons, 2006).

In general, the way that a university's brand is perceived might be one of the most influential factors that affect potential students' decisions to attend a university. Moreover, a study of 12,328 prospective MBA students shows that the quality and reputation of a program are the two most important factors to prospective students when considering an MBA program (MBA.com, 2014). These aspects can be perceived in a number of ways, but are most often conveyed through a marketing channel that is directly controlled by the university itself. According to the Graduate Management Admission Council's 2015 "MBA.com Prospective Students Survey Report," a university's MBA program website is the marketing channel that has the largest reach and the most influence on potential students. This is substantial knowledge in that most, if not all, university MBA programs have the ability to leverage their online presence to maximize the potential of their branding and marketing strategies if executed correctly.

Furthermore, colleges must not only be aware of the effects of their branding strategy, but also function as businesses in

order to maintain their enrollment numbers and remain competitive with other universities. They should view their branding strategy the way that a corporation would, in that like a corporation, universities experience a spillover of the company's overall brand into the public perception of individual departments and products. In a university setting, this would be equitable to a homogenous brand perception of the university as a whole, including its various colleges and degree programs. Universities around the country have introduced corporate marketing strategies and have also performed in-depth brand analyses to determine flaws in their branding, as well as ways that it can be improved (Bunzel, 2007). By comparing their branding strategies with those of top universities, colleges are able to gain new ideas and keep track of the actions of their competition (Bunzel, 2007). All in all, this type of brand analysis will be the basis of my research for this project.

Purpose of the Study

From an overall perspective, the purpose of this study is to define the characteristics of the ECU MBA brand and to develop a strategy that can be utilized to increase the quality of its perception from the viewpoints of prospective and current students, ECU alumni, and the MBA market in general. Potential strengths and weaknesses of the ECU MBA brand will be identified

and used as a basis for creating suggestions to improve its brand identity. The research and suggestions created as a result of this study will be presented to the ECU College of Business with the intention of being implemented to improve its position in the MBA degree market.

Research Questions

The findings of this study will attempt to answer the following research questions: "What comprises the ECU MBA program's brand?" "What problems are associated with the way that the brand is perceived?" and "How can perceptions of the ECU MBA brand be improved?" In order to answer these questions, a specific research methodology will be implemented.

Methodology

In order to gather information for this study, an online survey will be implemented to current undergraduate students in the ECU College of Business who are also prospective MBA students. The online surveys will be utilized to gather both qualitative and quantitative data in the form of the students' perceptions of the ECU MBA program branding. Qualitative data, such as opinions, reviews, and words associated with the ECU MBA program will be gathered from free response questions in the survey. Quantitative data will be collected through the

implementation of several Likert scales into the survey. Students will be given a list of statements and 5 numbered answer choices. The responses given are as follows: "strongly agree," "somewhat agree," "neither agree nor disagree," "somewhat disagree," and "strongly disagree."

It will be necessary to use a number of research methods in this study due to the specific nature of each data collection method and to also provide a comprehensive view of ECU's MBA program brand perception. Additionally, multimethodology, the research practice of using both qualitative and quantitative research designs, has been shown to solve problems that the use of one research method alone cannot (Niglas, 2004).

Results

After the survey was dispersed via email to ECU undergraduate College of Business students, a total of 137 undergraduate student responses were completed. The results of the surveys showed that students had generally positive perceptions of the ECU MBA program brand. Moreover, the students surveyed had a strong recognition of the ECU MBA program brand, displayed loyalty to the brand, and would recommend the program to perspective MBA students.

Overall, the ECU MBA program is effective at marketing itself to current undergraduates in the College of Business. When asked if they were aware of the services provided by the ECU MBA program, 25.56% of students strongly agreed and 35.34% of students somewhat agreed. In addition, when given the statement "The ECU MBA program is the first MBA program that comes to mind in relation to other North Carolina MBA programs," 32.33% responded "strongly agree" and 39.85% responded with "somewhat agree." The responses to these questions show that students are not only aware of the program features of the ECU MBA, but it is also highly recognizable to them as a brand.

Additionally, students surveyed felt that they shared a sense of brand loyalty to the ECU MBA brand. This can be seen in their responses to the statement "The ECU MBA program is the leader among North Carolina MBA programs," to which 31.58% responded "strongly agree" and 24.81% responded "somewhat agree." Moreover, to the statement "I would recommend the ECU MBA program to someone looking for an MBA program based in North Carolina," 50% of students responded "strongly agree" and 30.30% students responded "somewhat agree (see Table 1)." These questions prove that the students surveyed see value in the ECU MBA program and would as a result recommend it to others searching for a program to enroll in.

Table 1

Likert Statement: I would recommend the ECU MBA program to someone looking for an MBA program based in North Carolina.

#	Field	Choice Count
1	Strongly agree	50.00% 66
2	Somewhat agree	30.30% 40
3	Neither agree nor disagree	18.18% 24
4	Somewhat disagree	0.76% 1
5	Strongly disagree	0.76% 1
		132

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Though the responses were overall positive in terms of ECU students' perception of the ECU MBA brand, there are a few areas in which the scores were not as high as others. To expound, 36.09% responded "neither agree nor disagree" to the statement "The ECU MBA program is less expensive than other MBA programs in North Carolina." This shows that in terms of cost for the program, students do not particularly feel that it is less expensive than other MBA programs in North Carolina.

Recommendations

Based on the results of the survey, a few recommendations can be generated in terms of marketing strategy for the ECU MBA

program. It is already successful at creating brand loyalty and brand recognition among current undergraduate and prospective MBA students within the College of Business. However, it could expand their marketing efforts to include more information about price and program value in comparison to other North Carolina MBA options.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the implementation of an online survey to undergraduate ECU College of Business students yielded the results that students generally possess a high level of brand recognition and brand loyalty to the brand. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected and analyzed to arrive at these results. Though the results were mostly positive, the ECU MBA brand could improve its marketing strategy by seeking to further advertise their program cost in comparison to other NC MBA programs. By completing this, the MBA program could potentially increase its positive brand perception among current College of Business undergraduate students that are also perspective MBA students.

Limitations

Though a number of conclusions were drawn from the data collected, there are a number of limitations that could be

addressed if this study were to be continued. To begin, the research could be expanded to include the different populations such as alumni of the ECU MBA program and also prospective students that are not ECU students. The fact that the students surveyed are all currently members of the ECU College of Business could have affected their level of brand loyalty and brand recognition of the ECU MBA program brand. In future studies, it would be interesting to study how these two factors could change when the population sampled differs.

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