Original Article

An examination of integrated marketing communication in US public institutions of higher education

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ABSTRACT This research analyzes the strategic process of integrated marketing communication (IMC) and its current application in US public institutions of higher education (IHEs). The basis for this research was a survey questionnaire that analyzed the impact of IMC on 42 leading US public colleges and universities (as ranked by *U.S. News & World Report*). To further expand upon the findings of the survey, interviews were conducted with nine of the 42 survey respondents. The research revealed that several variables impact IMC in US public IHEs to include leadership and formal communication mechanisms. In addition, IMC was shown to contribute to heightened institutional brand recognition. The research also considers whether differences exist between an institution's IMC level and its Carnegie classification and geographic location.
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INTRODUCTION

The concept of integrated marketing communication (IMC) has gained increased acceptance over the past few decades; however, the extent to which institutions of higher education (IHEs) have adopted IMC as part of their strategic management approach has not been well understood. A review of the literature reveals limited research

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on the impact of marketing in higher education (Mulnix, 1996; Primary Research Group, 2003; Quatroche, 2004), and even fewer studies on integrated marketing in higher education (Morris, 2003; DePerro, 2006). Although a common marketing language is progressively developing in the field of higher education marketing, it remains unclear how marketing and communication processes are structured in IHEs and whether institutions have advanced to effective integration of IMC processes. This study addresses this gap in the research literature.

DEFINITIONS AND CLARIFICATIONS

Integrated marketing communication

'Since IMC extends beyond traditional media and marketing tools and involves processes that are in transition, the challenge of finding conceptual and directional guidance from research looms larger than in traditional marketing' (Cook, 2004, p. 1). As a result, over the past two decades, various definitions of IMC have evolved and consensus on a definition has not yet been reached.

For purposes of this research, the assumed definition of IMC will be, 'a strategic business process used to plan, develop, execute and evaluate coordinated, measurable, persuasive brand communication programs over time with consumers, prospects and other targeted, relevant external and internal audiences' (Schultz and Schultz, 2004, p. 20).

Schultz and Schultz (2004) maintain that IMC is developed through a four-stage framework, 'progressing from a highly practical, tactical orientation to one increasingly driven by an understanding of customers and their behaviors' (p. 21). Based on the research of the American Productivity & Quality Center, it was determined that in the early stages of IMC development, most organizations addressed 'marketing communication activities with tactical 'how-to' and 'when-to' questions. Once the IMC program was in place, they moved progressively to questions about coordinating internal and external activities; using customer data to drive priorities; and finally applying IMC principles to strategic issues such as resource allocation, organizational alignment, and financial integration and accountability' (Schultz and Schultz, 2004, p. 21). The four stages of IMC framework served as the basis for this study's survey questionnaire.

Communication vs communications

Researchers have been inconsistent as to whether IMC represents 'integrated marketing communication' (Schultz and Schultz, 2004; Swain, 2004) or 'integrated marketing communications' (Novelli, 1989/1990; Duncan and Everett, 1993; Kitchen and de Pelsmacker, 2004). While a simple letter 's' may seem to be a minor difference, there are major implied differences between the two terms. The term 'communication' is defined as 'the act of communicating; transmission' (Communication, n.d.) while the term 'communications' is defined as 'the technology employed in transmitting messages' (Communications, n.d.). Thus, *communication* could be viewed as strategic while *communications* could be viewed as tactical. As the

primary purpose of IMC is considered to be strategic in nature, the IMC acronym for this study will represent 'integrated marketing communication.'

Integrated marketing vs integrated marketing communication

It is also important to emphasize that the focus of this research is integrated marketing communication not integrated marketing. Sevier (1999) revealed that the terms 'integrated marketing' and 'integrated marketing communication' are often used interchangeably. But in actuality, these terms represent two distinct concepts.

Sevier (1999) noted 'integrated marketing is a relatively recent addition to the higher education lexicon. As such, there is – at least at this point – no one, generally accepted definition of integrated marketing' (p. 1). Integrated marketing is often defined as being 'concerned with the management of strategic assets' (p. 3) relative to three of the four standard elements of the marketing mix: product, price and place. However, such a definition relegates the concept of integrated marketing communication to a tactical function within the fourth element of the marketing mix: promotions.

Schultz and Schultz (2004) suggest that such a definition does not place IMC in its proper context. As mentioned previously, Schultz and Schultz define IMC as a strategic business process to drive *brand* communication programs, not simply *product* promotion programs. Thus, for IMC to be most effective it needs to be implemented not at a tactical level but rather at a strategic level in support of the institutional brand.

DEVELOPMENT OF IMC

The practice of IMC can trace its inception to the early 1980s when collegiate textbooks began to emphasize the concept of marketing communication. Coulson-Thomas (1983) established himself as one of the first researchers to outline the broad spectrum of marketing communication channels. Although an element of interdependence was recognized between the different communication elements (such as advertising, marketing and public relations), the idea of integration was not considered a plausible approach to developing more effective campaigns at that time.

In 1991, the concept of IMC gained greater attention when seminal research in this field was conducted by faculty at the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University (Schultz and Kitchen, 1997). The concept was relatively quick to be adopted by advertising and public relations agencies, as it served to further validate their value to corporate America (Wightman, 1999). The theory of IMC became grounded in the belief that there should be 'one basic communication strategy for each major target audience. This one strategy is then used as the basis for executing each communications function (advertising, PR, sales promotion and so on) throughout a variety of communications channels' (Duncan and Everett, 1993, p. 31). At the time, Tortorici (1991) declared that IMC was one of the most effective ways an organization can maximize its return on investment relative to marketing communication expenditures. However, significant debate ensued as to whether or not

IMC was a management fad (Cornelissen and Lock, 2000) or theoretical concept (Schultz and Kitchen, 2000).

THE FOUR STAGES OF IMC FRAMEWORK

One of the first major IMC studies was conducted in 1997 by the American Productivity & Quality Center. This research was one of the few early studies that focused on the organizations that were actually *employing* IMC rather than the ad agencies that were focused on *deploying* such efforts. The study analyzed 22 national organizations that practiced varying degrees of IMC such as Dow Chemical, Ernst & Young, FedEx, Fidelity Investments and Prudential

Insurance. The research resulted in several key findings and led to the development of the four stages of IMC framework (McGoon, 1998).

Table 1 provides an overview of the indicators of the four stages of IMC that were determined to be most relevant to IHEs, as adapted from Schultz and Schultz (2004).

IMC CHALLENGES

There are several challenges inherent in adopting and applying IMC in organizations (Duncan, 2005). Perhaps the greatest obstacle is that most individuals (to include many marketing practitioners) do not fully understand the process of IMC and the value of implementing such a process in their organizations. There is a tendency to consider marketing as a cost factor

Table 1: The four stages of IMC framework (adapted from Schultz and Schultz, 2004)

Orientation	Indicators
Stage 1	*Tactical coordination of marketing communication* • Coordinate interpersonal and cross-functional communication within the organization and with external partners
Stage 2	*Commitment to market research in support of IMC* • Utilize primary and secondary market research sources as well as actual behavioral customer data • Maintain a multitude of feedback channels to gather information about customers and effectively act upon customer feedback throughout the organization
Stage 3	*Application of information technology in support of IMC* • Leverage technologies to facilitate internal and external communications • Adopt technologies for market research and data management purposes • Employ technologies to determine individuals who have the potential to deliver the highest value (financial or service contributions) to the institution
Stage 4	*Strategic integration of IMC* • Active support of institutional leadership • Marketing communication staff empowered by senior leadership to lead the integration of external communication with internal communication directed to students, staff, alumni and other constituents • Measure effectiveness of marketing communication and incorporate findings into strategic planning

rather than as a driver of value across the institution. Until the links between IMC, institutional branding and customer value are recognized and understood, the true promise of IMC will remain unfulfilled.

Another issue with IMC is that it is not intended to be a short-term approach; therefore, a long-term perspective and institutional commitment are critical to its success. However, in a society that emphasizes quarterly growth earnings and rapid return on investment, such long-term strategies are often not given serious consideration. To substantiate the value of IMC over the long term, longitudinal measures of the impact and effects of IMC will need to be developed.

Finally, there exist many levels and dimensions to integration that pose individual and collective difficulties. 'To be implemented, IMC requires the involvement of the whole organization and its agents from the chief executive downward. It needs consideration from the highest strategic level down to the day-to-day implementation of individual tactical activity' (Pickton and Hartley, 1998, p. 450). To encourage such involvement, consideration should be given to designing compensation systems to recognize and reinforce the relationship building efforts that are critical to the success of IMC. Integrated marketing communication cannot simply be a recommended strategy in an organization; it must be practiced by each staff member, who should be rewarded accordingly.

ROLE OF MARKETING IN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

'Marketing' had once been a term that could only be spoken in the most hushed tones in academia. But during the past several years, the resistance to the concept of marketing in IHEs seems to be dissolving. This acceptance has been helped in part by publications on the topic from several prominent academics such as Derek Bok (2003) and David Kirp (2004). Kirp's most recent work, 'Shakespeare, Einstein, and the Bottom Line: The Marketing of Higher Education' has sparked an interest in not only understanding market forces in IHE but how institutions have effectively (and others not so effectively) applied marketing and communication techniques to propel their institutions forward in the twenty-first century.

COMPETITIVE NATURE OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION MARKET

In the past 40 years, the number of US colleges and universities has grown from 2300 to well over 4000, including branch campuses (Rhodes, 2006). Not only have IHEs experienced intense competition from traditional, non-profit institutions but there has also been new competition from for-profit institutions. And these for-profit institutions, such as the University of Phoenix, have adopted aggressive marketing strategies. The University of Phoenix's parent company, the Apollo Group, invested in excess of $142 million for Internet marketing in 2006, an amount that does not take into account the additional tens of millions it paid for search-engine advertising or amounts spent by companies using the Internet to generate leads on its behalf. Such spending has made the Apollo Group the seventh largest online advertiser across all industries, spending more

than Dell and General Motors (Blumenstyk, 2006).

For comparison purposes, a recent survey from Lipman Hearne (2007) revealed that only 10 per cent of public IHEs spend $1 million or more on their marketing and communications budget (compared to 16 per cent for private IHEs). In addition, 57 per cent of public IHEs spend less than 0.5 per cent of their operating budget on marketing and communications (compared to 21 per cent for private IHEs) and 61 per cent spent under $50 per student for marketing and communications expenditures (compared to 11 per cent for private IHEs).

INFLUENCE OF COLLEGE RANKINGS

If a single factor could be attributed to why marketing in higher education has evolved (or devolved, depending on one's perspective) it would likely be the proliferation of college ranking systems. As the cost of college education escalated in the 1980s, students and parents began to ask the question, 'How do I know I am getting my money's worth?' 'When organized higher education failed to provide a credible answer, *U.S. News & World Report* filled the vacuum. Thus, were born the dreaded college rankings that rather than focusing on learning and outcomes, transformed reputation and prestige into synonyms for educational quality' (Zemsky *et al*, 2001, p. 53).

The *U.S. News & World Report* rankings are 'widely considered the gold standard of college rankings because they are so comprehensive, using dozens of factors to assess more

than 1300 institutions nationwide' (Vaznis, 2007). However, these rankings are scorned by many higher education administrators who believe the various institutional outputs measured (such as selectivity factors) are not as important as certain educational outcomes (such as quality of the learning experience). In May 2007, a dozen liberal arts colleges received national press coverage for distributing a letter to hundreds of college leaders urging them not to support surveys conducted by *U.S. News & World Report* (Vaznis, 2007; Wasik, 2007). One of the supporters of the letter and a major opponent of college rankings is Lloyd Thacker, founder and executive director of the Education Conservancy. Thacker asserts, 'The commercialization of the admissions process has devalued education. What do we do when we tell a kid that where you go to college is more important than what you do?' (Wasik, 2007).

Even though negatives may exist with the current ranking systems, the power of these rankings remains undeniable. It is not uncommon for institutions such as Northeastern University to make pledges to improve their standings in *U.S. News & World Report* rankings as a way of increasing prestige (Vaznis, 2007). As Wolfson (2005) noted:

> The single best way to build your brand, as every president of every college and university in the country knows, is to make an impression where it really counts: the *U.S. News and World Report* rankings. The official line from the magazine and the colleges is that the rankings are just one tool students should

use to find the right school. But everybody knows the truth: Parents and students obsess about them. Consequently, so do universities.

Brian Kelly, editor of *U.S. News & World Report*, defends the rankings and stresses the magazine reviews its methodology several times a year. He also declares the magazine has no intention of stopping the ranking system. 'The rankings allow people to sort through a baffling array of choices,' Kelly said. 'It's a starting point. This should not be an end point of the college search' (Vaznis, 2007).

A multitude of factors in the ranking process could potentially be influenced through effective IMC to include peer assessment as well as retention, graduation and alumni giving rates. Assuming institutions ranked as 'leading' public IHEs would be more likely than others to have effectively adopted IMC, the survey sample for this research consisted of the 82 ranked public IHEs in the *U.S. News & World Report* (2005) America's best colleges.

MARKETING STRUCTURE IN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

Although it is common to have a public relations officer in IHEs, it has not been common to have a dedicated 'marketing' or 'marketing communication' practitioner within the institution. In a recent higher education administration survey by the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (June, 2006), none of the listed 163 positions incorporated the terms 'marketing' or 'communication' and yet positions such as 'museum curator'

and 'farm manager' were included in the survey. The only position related to the marketing and communication function was the 'public information specialist' role, which would seem to be limited to the practice of public relations.

The lack of a marketing communication focus tends to be the result of how IHEs have evolved over time. As institutions have grown their enrollment and program offerings, they have also become increasingly fragmented internally. Typically this has resulted in functions becoming compartmentalized and departments operating without any knowledge of the other parts of the institution. Individuals within IHEs tend to view themselves as part of a distinct department competing for limited organizational resources rather than as part of a comprehensive system working toward common objectives. Frank Rhodes, former President of Cornell University, explains that 'Structural reform remains elusive in the academic culture. The structural imbalance between goals, tasks, and resources seems to have shown little improvement since 1966. The rigidity of departmental structures continues to limit the ability of colleges to adapt and respond to new circumstances. Any change tends to be laboriously incremental, with a significant time lag between the decision to make it and the ability of the institution to carry it out' (Rhodes, 2006, p. A18).

Such a fiefdom mentality is a major barrier to effective IMC. Rather than establish a concerted, integrated marketing communication strategy, it is more typical to develop separate offices to address admissions marketing, media and public relations,

alumni and development, athletic marketing, publications and creative services to include website initiatives. Such a mindset must be overcome if the development of a true brand orientation, critical to IMC, is to occur.

VALUE OF BRAND EQUITY

Various definitions exist for 'brand equity' (Aaker, 1991; Wood, 2000); however, Schultz and Schultz (2004) have developed a definition based on the perspective of IMC:

> Brand equity is the composite of the brand's presence, identity/image, perceived quality, and commitment among constituents, culminating in long-term financial value to the firm and its shareholders. The dimensions of the brand are affected by the action of competitors as well as the attitudes and behaviors of customers, prospects, employees, alliance partners, investors, and other key stakeholders' (p. 309).

According to Schultz and Schultz (2004), brand-building efforts typically result in four major areas of return or benefit to the organization: increased number of customers supporting the brand; increased usage by existing customers; increased customer income flows that stem from increased loyalty; and the ability of the organization to extend the brand into new areas that result in increased new customers, new sales or both. 'Note how closely these brand returns mirror the four basic goals of marketing communication – acquire customers, retain customers, grow volume and value, and migrate customers through the product portfolio' (p. 313). These four benefits

can lead to increased earnings for the brand; assurance of such earnings; and the opportunity for new earnings through new customers as a result of customer advocacy, new geographic areas of service, or other factors (Schultz and Schultz, 2004).

The concept of brand equity is often difficult to understand owing to its intangible nature. Although measuring the value of a science center or library can typically be done in specific financial terms, brand equity is not as easily quantifiable. Still, the concept of 'branding' has become a powerful force in higher education in the twenty-first century. Following is an example of how branding has been effectively leveraged at one of the nation's leading public universities.

Building brand equity at University of Maryland

In 2003, John Pulley authored an article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* titled, 'Romancing the Brand,' which highlighted the branding evolution at University of Maryland. In the mid-1990s, Maryland prepared to undertake its first major fundraising campaign. Before doing so, the institution attempted to gauge the expected level of support from potential donors and was dismayed with the results. 'Maryland, it seemed, had taken for granted that its constituents – alumni, donors, parents of students, business leaders, and legislators – knew of its progress. The public, in fact, largely unaware of the strides taken at College Park, had an image of the institution that was fixed in the past' (Pulley, 2003, p. A30).

Thus, Maryland focused upon the development of a visual identity, which

eventually evolved into a national brand campaign. This evolution included the establishment of a marketing and communications office, development of a University logo, identification of core brand values and execution of a national $650 000 branding campaign. However, such efforts initially met resistance. 'Overcoming such resistance, say people who have both succeeded and failed, requires the advocacy of an institutional champion. Maryland's campaign was buoyed by its president, who insisted that the endeavor be bold' (Pulley, 2003, p. A30).

Maryland's brand investments eventually met with great success. In 4 years, freshmen applications increased from 17 000 to 23 000, while over the course of 10 years, the average high-school GPA of incoming freshmen increased from 3.01 to 3.75. In addition, membership in the alumni association increased 35 per cent and donors nearly doubled from 21 000 to 41 000 over a 5-year period, while the endowment grew to $270 million, a more than fivefold increase over a 10-year period (Pulley, 2003).

Relationship between IMC and brand equity

Madhavaram et al (2005) note that effective marketing communication 'enables the formation of brand awareness and a positive brand image. These then form the brand knowledge structures, which, in turn, trigger the differentiated responses that constitute brand equity' (p. 70). These researchers effectively argue that the IMC strategy is essential to the organization's strategic brand development and that it 'strengthens the interface between the firm's brand identity strategy and its customer-based brand equity, that is, brand awareness and brand image' (p. 70). Specifically, they propose 'a conceptual model of brand equity in which the aspirational brand identity guides IMC in an effort to develop and maintain customer-based brand equity' (p. 70).

The ability to measure the strength of the ongoing brand relationship has been enhanced through advanced technologies that enable interactive IMC. By understanding the value and nature of customer relationships, it becomes 'practical for the marketer to categorize customers based on their value to the brand and the value of the brand to the customer' (Schultz and Schultz, 2004, p. 134). 'Where moderate relationships exist, they might be strengthened. Where they are strong, they can be reinforced. The marketer can become proactive in developing lasting relationships with desirable customers and prospects by understanding the reciprocity that must exist between the two' (p. 134). Following is an example of how reciprocity relationships in IHEs contribute to effective brand development.

A MODEL OF IMC EFFECTIVENESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Schultz and Schultz (2004) contend that the IMC reciprocity approach is 'to refer to brand relationships, which are defined as the relationships that exist between buyers and sellers through the exchange of value for products or services over time' (p. 129). It is this reciprocity that will define buyer–seller relationships, and it is this shared value that creates ongoing relationships. 'Reciprocity will

be determined and continually redefined based on every brand contact and every communication delivered and received by both marketer and customer' (p. 130).

Schultz and Schultz (2004) illustrate the reciprocal approach of IMC with an example of a US-based educational services provider who offered a traditional classroom experience as well as Internet-based distance education. This particular organization sought and acquired new students through various promotional methods ranging from traditional advertising to Internet marketing. The organization had an excellent enrollment record, but customer retention had not achieved an acceptable level.

Using the reciprocal approach, the organization initially examined the value of the customer to the educational institution via the three primary components of its revenue stream: (1) the number of enrollees, (2) the length of time the students were enrolled, and (3) the revenue and profit per month (on average) for each student enrolled. The student population was divided into several segments relative to revenue and profitability.

Turning to the other side of the equation, the value of the educational institution to the customer, it was interesting to note that of those students who de-enrolled, 40 per cent based their decision to leave on some type of dissatisfaction with the institution itself. Thus, the question became, 'Could those reasons for dissatisfaction be addressed with marketing communication so that the vulnerable students would be identified and the expected attrition of other students prevented?' (p. 138).

Further analysis of the 15 major reasons for student dissatisfaction revealed that eight of them could potentially be resolved through marketing communication actions. 'Three key solutions were then identified: improvements in communication, provision for improvements in the operating systems, and development of direct systems solutions that could be implemented by local managers' (p. 139). Potential loss recovery was determined for each of the marketing-related solutions; as a result, the organization prioritized its efforts toward the solutions with the greatest financial impact.

Although this is a simplified example, it still serves to demonstrate the potential institutional and financial gains inherent in IMC and effective management of customer and brand relationships in the educational marketplace.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Quantitative survey research was conducted to analyze the impact of IMC on 42 leading US public colleges and universities as ranked by the *U.S. News & World Report* (2005). The four stages of IMC framework, based on studies of the American Productivity & Quality Center, served as the foundation for the research. To further expand upon the findings of the survey, qualitative interview research was conducted with nine of the survey respondents.

Table 2 provides an overview of the entire dissertation research approach to demonstrate the relationship between the survey research methodology and results.

Table 2: Research methodology approach

Study phase	Description
Phase I	*Conduct Secondary Research* Literature review of IMC and marketing in IHEs
Phase II	*Pre-test Survey Questionnaire* Administer survey questionnaire to six IMC senior practitioners; analyze results; modify interview questions
Phase III	*Implement Survey Questionnaire* Distribute 82 surveys to the senior marketing and communication officer at the leading public IHEs in the United States
Phase IV	*Analyze Survey Questionnaire Results* Categorize the 42 respondents by Basic, Intermediate or Advanced level of IMC
Phase V	*Follow-up Interviews* Develop interview questionnaire based on survey results; conduct interviews with three respondents from each of the Basic, Intermediate and Advanced categories of IMC
Phase VI	*Code and Classify Interview Content*
Phase VII	*Present Findings and Conclusions*

SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE METHODS

Target sample
The target population for this research was public institutions of higher education in the United States. A purposive target sample for the structured questionnaire consisted of the 82 top-ranked US public IHEs as determined across all categories of the *U.S. News & World Report* (2005) America's best colleges rankings. A purposive sample was deemed most appropriate for this research as it was important to reach a targeted sample quickly and sampling for proportionality was not the primary concern (Trochim, 2006). The attainment of a high response rate was also a consideration when determining the survey population. It was hoped those IHEs that are often most

constrained for financial resources and potentially have the most to gain from IMC, that is public IHEs rather than private IHEs, would be more willing to take the time to respond to the survey.

After the list of sample institutions was derived from the *U.S. News & World Report*, the marketing communication contact at each institution was determined based on an individual review of each institution's website. This compilation process proved quite challenging as it was often difficult to determine who within the organization would be primarily responsible for marketing communication. A few institutions did clearly identify the senior marketing communication official; however, many institutions did not seem to have such a role. In these cases, the selected individual tended to be the most senior

contact in the University Advancement or University Relations department.

Survey questionnaire format

The survey questionnaire consisted primarily of Likert-type questions structured around the four stages of IMC framework. The stated questions were close-ended and used ordinal-level items. 'Ordinal-level items are the most frequently used of the three close-ended measurement scale types in organizational survey instruments' (Church and Waclawski, 2001, p. 72). As Garson (n.d.) noted, 'Likert scales are ordinal but their use in statistical procedures assuming interval level data is commonplace.'

The selected measurement format for the questionnaire was a 5-point scale with an additional option of a 'Don't Know' response. Scales consisting of even-numbered anchors, such as 4-, 6- or 8-point scales are less common because they do not allow for the possibility of a neutral midpoint. 'Although many practitioners and researchers have examined the effects of scale length in more general contexts, with decidedly mixed conclusions, we have found in our work that 5-point scales may indeed be the best overall, based on analyses of different level (mean) and shape (variability) effects' (Church and Waclawski, 2001, pp. 74–75). Garson (n.d.) concluded that for Likert scales to be commonly used with interval procedures, such scales need to have at least five categories.

Another important issue to consider when designing a survey instrument is the number of items assigned to measure each topic area. 'In most surveys, having more than five questions on a specific concept borders on redundancy. Having too many questions on the same topic runs the risk of unnecessarily increasing response burden as well as potentially irritating respondents' (Church and Waclawski, 2001, p. 64). The number of questions for each of the topic areas in this survey research instrument ranged from four to seven questions per topic.

Implementation of the survey questionnaire

A mixed-mode approach was adopted for this survey to facilitate a response rate as high as possible. 'Response rates are generally considered to be the most widely compared statistic for judging the quality of surveys. Ironically, they are also one of the most controversial' (Johnson and Owens, 2003, p. 127). Over the past several decades, survey response rates have been declining owing to a broad range of environmental factors. 'Concerns with privacy, confidentiality, the exploitation of personal information, general cynicism, and declining civic participation are pervasive social trends that each contribute to decreasing survey participation' (p. 128). Declining participation rates have led to concerns that non-response error may cause survey findings to be selectively biased. Thus, it was deemed important to adopt a mixed-mode approach to achieve a high response rate on this survey.

The implementation of the survey involved multiple contacts and response mechanisms to include paper, email and fax. Since online and email surveys have been found to typically produce convergent results (Deutskens *et al*, 2006), it was determined that a

mixed-mode approach would be appropriate for this research study. In an attempt to limit potential question order bias, four variations of the questionnaire were developed and were equally distributed across the survey sample.

Initially, a formal letter and the survey instrument were sent to the survey sample, with a self-addressed stamped envelope for return of the survey. Respondents were also provided a fax number if they preferred to return the survey in such a manner. In addition, an Internet version of the survey was established on Survey Monkey. Within 2 weeks of the initial mailing, an email with a link to the Internet version of the survey was distributed. The following week, a final email reminder was sent to the survey population. The survey collection period extended from 24 September to 24 October 2006.

At the end of the survey collection period, 42 out of a possible 82 complete surveys had been received for a response rate of 51.2 per cent. 23 responses arrived via mail, 18 responses arrived via the Internet and one response arrived via fax. The response rate calculation did not include two individuals who responded they were not able or willing to complete the survey nor did it include four incomplete Internet surveys.

The collected data represented a cross-section of the survey population to include eight national universities, 25 regional universities and nine liberal arts and regional comprehensive colleges. The geographic dispersion of the respondents included nine institutions in the North, 12 institutions in the South, 10 institutions in the Mid-West and 11 institutions in the West.

SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE RESULTS

The findings of the questionnaire survey data were utilized to categorize an IHE relative to its institutional stage of IMC. Because the survey was based on a 5-point response scale (with an additional option for 'Don't Know'), each response was weighted as follows: 'Strongly Disagree' = 1 point; 'Disagree' = 2 points; 'Neutral' = 3 points; 'Agree' = 4 points; 'Strongly Agree' = 5 points.

Scores for the questions within each stage were totaled and then an overall average score for that particular stage was calculated. The Stage 1 (tactical coordination of marketing communication) score was an average of the individual scores for Q3–Q9. The Stage 2 (market research) score was an average of the individual scores for Q10–Q15; the Stage 3 (applied information technology) score was an average of the individual scores for Q16–Q19; and, the Stage 4 (strategic integration of IMC) score was an average of the individual scores for Q20–Q24.

If a respondent answered 'Don't Know' for a particular question, that question was removed from the overall stage calculation. Thus, for an institution to be considered as effectively demonstrating the attributes of a particular stage in the four stages of IMC framework, the institution would need to receive an average score of at least 3.0 points across the various questions that comprised that specific stage.

Interestingly, 50 per cent of the respondents did not progress in a

Table 3: Highest scored IMC framework stage of survey respondents

	Stage 1	Stage 2	Stage 3	Stage 4
Number of respondents whose average stage score was highest in this particular stage	9	1	21	10
Average score across all respondents	3.50	3.48	3.86	3.72

linear manner through the framework, that is, an institution that scored an average of below 3.0 on an earlier stage could have scored 3.0 or above at a later stage. In fact, half of the respondents achieved their highest average score in Stage 3 (which represented the application of information technology in support of IMC), as noted in Table 3.

There could be several reasons for such a non-linear progression. Nearly a decade has passed since the development of the four stages of IMC framework and information technology has become a pervasive force in the world during that time. Now, it may be more likely for IHEs to adopt information technology at an earlier point than Stage 3. The potential also exists that it may actually be simpler to adopt elements of certain stages. For example, an IHE may find it simpler to utilize secondary market research (Q11 in the survey, a Stage 2 element) and use email for internal communication (Q16 in the survey, a Stage 3 element) than it is to optimize coordination of policies, practices and procedures for the branding of all marketing initiatives (Q3 in the survey, a Stage 1 element) across the institution. Although previous research suggests that a linear progression may be a natural and perhaps even ideal framework, non-linear progression may be a more

practical framework as certain stages may take longer to achieve full integration.

It may also be the case that the often slow but methodical approach inherent in academia may lead IHEs to initially assume a more strategic (Stage 4) rather than tactical (Stage 1) focus in their IMC efforts. The intense market environment may force many commercial organizations to react with a quick tactical approach rather than a thoughtful strategic approach to marketing communication. Thus, the four stages of IMC framework relative to IHEs may actually be Stage 4 (strategic integration)→Stage 2 (market research)→Stage 3 (application of information technology in support of IMC)→Stage 1 (coordination of marketing communication).

Even if the framework is not necessarily supported in the higher education environment, each of the four stages in the framework represents a critical aspect in the development of an effective IMC strategy. Therefore, the survey findings provide valuable insight into the extent that respondents have adopted elements related to the various stages of IMC, although it is obvious from the differences in scores that certain IHEs have achieved a higher degree of integration than others. The follow-up interviews were designed to further analyze potential factors that could

account for the differences in IMC progress.

As 50 per cent of the respondents did not proceed in a linear manner through the framework, it was necessary to develop a modified framework for analyzing the impact of IMC on these IHEs. Thus, respondents were designated an overall IMC category based on the number of stages for which they attained an average score of 3.0 or above. An IHE would be considered in the Basic Category if the institution scored an average of 3.0 or above in zero or one stage; the Intermediate Category would represent those IHEs that scored an average of 3.0 or above in two or three stages; and, the Advanced Category would represent those IHEs that scored an average of 3.0 or above in all four stages. The modified analysis revealed 13 institutions in the Basic Category of IMC, 14 institutions in the Intermediate Category of IMC and 15 institutions in the Advanced Category of IMC.

INTERVIEW RESEARCH METHODS

For purposes of the interview process, three respondents from each of the Basic, Intermediate and Advanced Categories of IMC were selected. In addition to meeting the quantitative standards of the Basic, Intermediate and Advanced Categories (as noted in the previous section) the interviewees also stated at the end of the survey questionnaire that they were willing to participate in the interview process. In addition, effort was made to ensure that the interviewees represented a broad geographic distribution, that is, there were at least two interviewees from each of the four regions (North,

South, Mid-West, West) of the United States. The nine structured telephone interviews took place from 15 November to 18 December 2006.

A list of five open-ended interview questions was developed based on the survey questionnaire findings. The interview questions evolved out of five themes that permeated from the survey questionnaire: (1) importance of coordinating IMC efforts, (2) compensation effects on IMC, (3) communication of marketing objectives across the institution, (4) relevance of centralized communication on branding initiatives, and (5) impact of IMC on the selectivity of an institution. The list of questions was pre-screened by four practitioners, further refined and then distributed to the subjects before the interviews.

Each of the telephone interviews was digitally recorded with the permission of the interviewee. All participants were assured that their comments would not be directly attributed to them or their institution. Each interview lasted between 30 and 40 min.

POTENTIAL LIMITATIONS OF THE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The design of the research methods combines both quantitative and qualitative dimensions and could be criticized by a purist in either camp because of the mixing of methodologies that has taken place (Wilson, 2005). However, as noted in the literature review, there is a dearth of IMC research relative to IHEs, which prevents replication of past research methods or use of other researchers' questionnaires.

Another potential limitation is that the research is based on a convenient and purposeful sample. As Trochim (2006) noted, 'With a purposive sample, you are likely to get the opinions of your target population, but you are also likely to overweight subgroups in your population that are more readily accessible.'

The respondents self-reported their institutional experiences, which could conceivably be biased. Additionally, this research design is limited by the small number of interviews that could be conducted due to the time and resources involved with the interview process. Such biases may limit the generalizations that can be reached.

Finally, it should be recognized that IMC is still in its infancy, both as a concept and a process. Further analysis and adoption of common metrics for performance would be required to conduct a study with greater generalizable conclusions (Strasser, 2004). As IMC's theoretical foundations continue to be debated, there are bound to be inconsistencies across the survey sample of this study as well as the general population regarding their understanding of IMC.

INTERVIEW RESEARCH RESULTS

The interview findings revealed that several factors are important to the success of IMC in colleges and universities to include the support of leadership and formal communication mechanisms. In addition, those institutions that were advanced in their IMC efforts experienced greater brand recognition than other institutions. Table 4 provides an overview of the resulting interview themes.

IMPACT OF LEADERSHIP ON THE EFFECTIVENESS OF IMC

Even though there was no question specific to the topic of leadership in the interview research, the importance of institutional leadership was the most frequently mentioned IMC success factor. The importance of leadership's commitment to integrated marketing communication and their role in instituting the coordination of IMC efforts was voiced by five out of the nine interviewees. Interestingly, the four interviewees who did not mention the importance of leadership included all three of the Basic Category of IMC interviewees. Such a finding could be the result of not recognizing the important role of leadership, or the result of leadership not understanding the importance of their role in emphasizing the need for marketing and communication to be valued across the institution.

Although the research revealed that centralized communication was not necessarily a requirement for effective IMC, strong leadership was a mandate. As one interviewee noted, 'You can have a strong brand through senior management direction and no coordination, but not the opposite … if you do not have clear management direction, then centralized coordination is not going to achieve anything. Centralized coordination is a tactic not a strategy. The strategy is the more important issue.'

Another interviewee echoed such sentiment: 'The president needs to have the vision for how marketing can help the institution and how it should help the institution. And then the president needs to be willing to commit his or her power and prestige and institutional time and resources to

Table 4: Resulting themes from interviews with nine public IHEs

Interview theme	Category of IMC (three possible respondents in each category)		
	Basic IMC	Intermediate IMC	Advanced IMC
What factors have the most influence on effective coordination of IMC?			
• Leadership	—	2	3
• Culture of the organization	2	2	3
How might compensation policies or factors impact the effectiveness of IMC?			
• Nominal effect, as IHE staff value intrinsic rewards	2	1	—
• Demonstrates marketing communication is valued	—	1	2
• Encourages marketing communication to be evaluated and measured	2	1	2
What factors influence effective communication of marketing objectives across the institution?			
• Informal communication mechanisms	2	1	2
• Formal communication mechanisms	—	3	3
• Visible support of leadership	2	2	2
What factors are most relevant to achieving branding objectives?			
• Consistent understanding of the concept of branding	2	—	—
• Coordinated but not necessarily centralized communication	—	3	2
• Leadership direction	2	2	2
What internal factors impact the selectivity of an institution?			
• Mission of the institution	1	1	2
• Role of marketing and communications	2	3	1

the marketing effort.' However, as one of the Advanced Category interviewees cautioned, even with leadership support, the senior marketing communication official still needs to be capable of developing a team-oriented approach. It is the role of the marketing and communications staff to effectively support the vision of leadership and disseminate the value of IMC to all constituencies.

IMPORTANCE OF FORMAL COMMUNICATION MECHANISMS
The factors that influence the quality of communication, to include the effective communication of marketing

objectives across the institution, can be perceived differently depending on whether an institution has achieved Basic, Intermediate or Advanced IMC. In particular, while the importance of informal communication mechanisms was mentioned by IHEs across all IMC categories, formal and structured communication mechanisms were mentioned only, and unanimously, by the Intermediate and Advanced IMC interviewees.

One of the most common formal communication mechanisms is the establishment of marketing committees. A recent Lipman Hearne survey (2007) found that 'Institutions that have marketing committees, particularly

campus-wide committees, also reported greater on-campus collaboration. Half of the institutions surveyed reported that their institutions had a campus-wide marketing committee, while one-quarter had an alumni/trustee marketing committee' (p. 7).

One interviewee noted that their institution had established a senior-level executive advisory group, 'whereby we have pulled leaders from across the university to be the advocates for some of the more central marketing communications initiatives that we have undertaken.' However, as cautioned by another interviewee, the establishment of such a committee should not be the sole element of the formal marketing outreach.

Other formal communication mechanisms could include marketing and communications audits or annual reports, as well as regular marketing and communications forums. As mentioned by one of the interviewees, such formalized processes allow individuals to share feedback and feel as though they have a voice in the process, an especially important element in the environment of higher education. In addition, audits and annual reports (if constructed properly) can serve as measurement of and testament to the impact of IMC across the institution's various constituencies.

IMPACT OF IMC CATEGORY ON BRAND RECOGNITION

In addition to the questions that were used to determine an institution's IMC category, several questions were asked at the end of the survey questionnaire to better understand an institution's brand equity.

One such question asked whether 'The institution is achieving greater brand recognition across key target markets.' A t-test was conducted on the data, which revealed a significant difference in scores between institutions that achieved the Advanced Category of IMC and those institutions in the Basic Category of IMC ($t[28] = -3.613$, $P < 0.05$). Thus, the Advanced Category respondents more strongly believed than the Basic Category respondents that their institution was achieving greater brand recognition across key target markets. The mean score of institutions that achieved the Advanced Category of IMC was $\bar{X} = 4.733$; the mean score of institutions that achieved the Basic Category of IMC was $\bar{X} = 3.692$.

As noted in *USA Today* (2006), while IHEs are enjoying an unprecedented pool of students that trend will start to decline in the next several years. As such, it would seem to be in the best interest of IHEs to build an IMC foundation that will allow it to maintain its brand recognition even in the most competitive of markets. Thus, since there is a significant difference between brand success of Advanced and Basic IMC institutions, what steps might a Basic IMC institution take to strengthen their brand equity?

Based on the interview discussions, it seems one of the initial challenges that Basic Category institutions need to address is to ensure the concept of branding is understood across the organization. IHEs need to understand that brand equity is not simply logos or school colors, but rather as Schultz and Schultz (2004) explain, brand equity encompasses 'the brand's presence, identity/image, perceived

quality, and commitment among constituents' (p. 309).

Strong brand equity can translate into a multitude of positives for the organization to include increased selectivity of students. While several of the interviewees noted that the mission of the institution was an important factor related to selectivity, six out of the nine interviewees stated that marketing and communications had the power to impact the selectivity of an institution. Although institutions may not be able to control the external environment, they *can* control how they effectively respond to the environment through IMC. The Advanced Category respondents seemed to be most successful owing to solid leadership direction and coordinated (but not necessarily centralized) communication.

IMPACT OF CARNEGIE CLASSIFICATION ON BRAND RECOGNITION

As noted earlier in the section on the implementation of the survey questionnaire, the composition of the survey respondents included eight national universities, 25 regional universities and nine liberal arts and regional comprehensive colleges. If any difference in scores existed relative to an institution's Carnegie classification, it was expected that the difference would be most evident between the eight national universities and the nine liberal arts and regional comprehensive colleges (although it is important to caution that this is a small sample size).

Once again the examined question was whether 'The institution is achieving greater brand recognition across key target markets.' A *t*-test was conducted on the data, which revealed no significant difference in scores between institutions that were classified as a national university or a liberal arts and regional comprehensive college ($t[17] = 0.1371$, $P < 0.05$). The mean score of national universities was $\bar{X} = 4.285$; the mean score of liberal arts and regional comprehensive colleges was $\bar{X} = 4.222$.

It is interesting to note that while an IMC category classification *does* have an impact on brand recognition, the Carnegie classification of an institution *does not* have such an impact. In fact, each IMC category – Basic, Intermediate and Advanced – included institutions representing each Carnegie classification. This could be encouraging news for smaller institutions that might have been concerned about not being able to attain a level of IMC effectiveness similar to larger institutions.

IMPACT OF GEOGRAPHIC DIFFERENCES ON THE DIFFUSION OF IMC

As Cateora and Graham (2007) note, 'Geography has influenced history, technology, economics, our social institutions, and our ways of thinking' (p. 99). Perhaps it has even influenced the process of diffusion of IMC across the United States. Interestingly, there seems to be a pattern of horizontal diffusion of IMC whereby the number of institutions with the most advanced level of IMC is highest in the North and incrementally declines as the institutions shift from the South to the Mid-West and finally, the West, as revealed in Table 5.

When regions were combined, according to Table 6, to examine East Coast vs West Coast institutions, the

Table 5: Comparison of IMC category level and general geographic location of institution

Geographic region	No. of Basic IMC	No. of Intermediate IMC	No. of Advanced IMC
North (9)	2 (22%)	1 (11%)	6 (67%)
South (12)	2 (16%)	5 (42%)	5 (42%)
Mid-West (10)	4 (40%)	3 (30%)	3 (30%)
West (11)	5 (45%)	5 (45%)	1 (9%)

Table 6: Comparison of IMC category level and East Coast or West Coast orientation of institution

Geographic region	No. of Basic IMC	No. of Intermediate IMC	No. of Advanced IMC
East Coast North (9)+ South (12)	4 (31%)	6 (43%)	11 (79%)
West Coast Mid-West (10)+ West (11)	9 (69%)	8 (57%)	4 (21%)
Total number of IHEs in a particular IMC category	13	14	15

distinctions were even more extreme, with East Coast institutions comprising 79 per cent of the Advanced IMC level. Perhaps this trend reflects the East–West axis phenomenon popularized by Pulitzer Prize winner Jared Diamond, who ascertained that historically innovations spread faster east to west (Cateora and Graham, 2007).

As these findings suggest that IMC has been adopted and advanced much quicker on the East Coast than the West Coast, perhaps this is a potential opportunity for forward-thinking

West Coast institutions to lead their regional advancement of IMC and capture a competitive edge in the market.

VALIDITY OF THE FOUR STAGES OF IMC FRAMEWORK RELATIVE TO IHEs

As initially discussed in the section on the categorization of survey respondents' IMC level, the possibility exists that the IMC framework in IHEs may actually follow a progression of Stage 4 (strategic integration)→Stage 2 (market research)→Stage 3 (application of information technology in support of IMC)→Stage 1 (coordination of marketing communication). In fact, this may be a more ideal framework for all organizations and is certainly deserving of further research. Ideally, organizations would plan strategically, invest in market research and information technologies and then coordinate their marketing communication tactics. The corporate environment may be too demanding for this approach, but perhaps it would reduce wasted tactical efforts that are sub-optimized and non-congruent with the overall organizational strategy. Developing the strategy at the start of the process would improve the alignment of tactical efforts and specific communications with the overall strategy. At this point clarity comes in execution, and the strategy may in fact be improved or modified and the remainder of the framework iterated.

CONCLUSIONS

This research demonstrated that IMC does exist in US public IHEs. Nearly all of the interviewees expressed

enthusiasm for the study and the value of IMC in public IHEs. The interviewees in the Basic Category of IMC shared a hopeful view that their organizations were taking steps toward a more comprehensive and effective marketing communication strategy. The interviewees in the Intermediate and Advanced Categories of IMC exuded confidence in the power of integrated marketing communication and recognized it as a distinct competitive advantage.

The support of institutional leadership was revealed to be the single most powerful determinant of whether an IMC strategy was successful. Not only does leadership need to mandate the coordination of marketing communication efforts but they also need to visibly support the institution's marketing communication objectives.

Once leadership support has been established, the next challenge seems to be ensuring that the value of marketing is understood across the institution. Several of the interviewees recommended developing a pattern of small successes so that others start to appreciate the power of marketing and communications. In addition, the organization needs to recognize the value of branding, and how each marketing communication action potentially increases or decreases institutional brand equity.

For IMC to be most effective, marketing and communications staff should adopt both informal and formal outreach efforts. Campus 'influencers' should be enlisted to support both the planning and promoting of IMC initiatives. In addition, it is critical that metrics are established to evaluate the outcomes,

not simply the outputs, of marketing communication.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

As one of the first studies to research the impact of IMC on public IHEs, the findings were more encouraging than this author expected. Although a certain resistance to the concepts of marketing and branding continues to exist in higher education, such conflict is no longer as prevalent as it had been a decade ago. However, marketing and communications are still not consistently integrated in IHEs as evidenced by the 36 different titles given to the senior official responsible for marketing and communications at the 42 responding institutions. A possible limitation of this study is that these findings have been self-reported by the marketing and communications official responsible for such efforts. Future research could be conducted to seek feedback from both internal and external stakeholders relative to the impact and effectiveness of IMC initiatives.

Additional research could also be conducted on the validity of the four stages of IMC framework. While the framework was initially presented a decade ago as a linear process, this research would suggest that many IHEs proceed through the various stages at differing paces and differing rates of success. A proper sequence for the framework may actually be Stage 4 (strategic integration)→Stage 2 (market research)→Stage 3 (application of information technology in support of IMC)→Stage 1 (coordination of marketing communication). Further analysis is clearly needed to establish

the most effective implementation pattern of IMC in IHEs. This analysis should also be applied to private as well as public IHEs.

Another important consideration is the timing of this study, when there is a plethora of student applicants. Thus, many of the findings related to branding may simply reflect positive market conditions. However, it would seem that those IHEs that will be able to sustain success as the market becomes increasingly competitive during the next few years will be those that effectively differentiate themselves through strategic IMC.

Future research efforts could focus more specifically on how institutions define factors related to IMC such as branding. In addition, it would be interesting to determine how IMC can assist with attaining specific institutional objectives, especially in the areas of diversity and outreach beyond traditional target markets.

Additional research could also focus on how we measure the effectiveness of IMC efforts and whether benchmarking is an integral part of the process. As college leaders are becoming more business oriented and outcomes oriented, marketers need to be able to demonstrate the value of IMC and justify the need for resources to sustain such efforts. In addition, such research could also consider how measurable outcomes could be utilized to reward and compensate staff for their efforts.

Finally, it would be interesting to examine how IMC could play a role in understanding and strengthening a student's lifetime value to their college or university. It is still a rather common misconception that marketing should be primarily focused on

admissions. Such a mindset fails to consider that students will often have much greater value to the institution as alumni. Thus, it is important to establish strong relationships with students before they even arrive at the college, continue to build upon those relationships while they are attending college and ideally extend the value of those relationships across a lifetime. If IHEs do not consider the entire lifetime value chain of a student and connect the links in the chain with concepts such as IMC, they will undoubtedly lose considerable opportunities to advance their institutions.

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