

Where is the Canadian university in the marketplace of ideas?

by Robert Ferguson

Contra Brand, November 2009

The debate about positioning Canadian universities as global leaders overlooks something basic. The problem is not about the need to build a better product; quality already exists. Nor is the problem a lack of innovation; great research already happens. The problem is we don't tell anyone about our accomplishments. As a result, it only seems that intellectual leadership happens elsewhere.

That's not, however, where discussion is headed: if "people aren't listening" to Canadian universities, as UBC president Stephen Toope claims, the leading imaginative solution seems to be channeling the bulk of scarce financial resources into a "Big 5" monolith and establishing a national education brand.

"Big" is not the solution. We will only prove Canada has a strong university sector if, first, there are a greater number of strong universities whose confident, individual brands collectively support our national aspiration for intellectual leadership and, second, if that reputation flourishes organically. So, instead of spending to remake the system with new layers of bureaucracy, we need to renew the perception of each school as a leader in the marketplace of ideas.

Each one must be encouraged to invest in the right kind of marketing. At present they look too narrowly at promotion. If the world isn't listening, perhaps it's because they aren't really saying anything. They can't command global attention because they don't articulate their uniqueness – the result of a longstanding belief that standard advertising and media relations tactics will do all the work that's needed. Universities typically aim low by trying to please people with new buildings, advertising student-focused program benefits, or rekindling the warm fuzzy glow

of nostalgia for alumni – not the tactics that embed a positive, durable perception of themselves as thought leaders.

How do you properly invest a university with meaning? Enhancing communication and outreach capabilities is the "little" solution that goes missing. People value those universities able to demonstrate intellectual leadership, challenge thinking, and inspire hope for a better future, but our organizations characteristically overlook this imperative.

The Educational Policy Institute's Alex Usher acknowledges "everybody wants to be like Harvard." So why not model Harvard's success? It's no secret.

Harvard is great because it does "little" things well to establish quality perceptions. Publishing, in all its various forms – developing and selling mission-connected content – is the primary tool leveraged to position the university as the leader in the marketplace of ideas. Harvard Business School understands particularly well that offering multiple points of contact to leading ideas produces sustainable and profitable revenue streams; attracts friends and philanthropy; attracts the best and brightest students and faculty.

When Harvard speaks, people listen – and donate. That's the real benefit Canadian schools covet. "It comes down to money," acknowledges University of Ottawa president Alan Rock, who claims the biggest challenge facing the sector is "to achieve levels of funding that will enable us to succeed in our mission."

But without effective communication, our universities can't overcome skepticism and build the trust essential to successful fundraising. By pursuing the wrong marketing tactics, Canadian universities simply aren't equipped to compete for mindshare against global com-

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petitors for whom the cycle of research, accomplishment, and communication is a deeply engrained practice. Our universities have to follow Harvard's lead and revitalize their flagging publishing capabilities if they want to make themselves heard.

If Harvard's success proves a university's intellectual brand goes hand-in-hand with the transformation of scholarly communication, further evidence comes from educational think tank Ithaka. Its 2007 report, "University Publishing in a Digital Age," acknowledged publishing is crucial to keeping the research and teaching mission of a university appear vibrant and relevant. Nevertheless, Ithaka accuses administrators of remaining significantly detached from publishing's deep connection to their university's core mission, and resistant to attempts to launch a new scholarly communication vision that would better-reflect their school's unique intellectual ambitions.

Solving Canada's educational leadership issue requires neither big nor bureaucratic solutions. To reposition the university so it is understood to be the place to engage with leading ideas, to sustain a tradition of excellence, to ensure donors, foundations, and government understand their public value, our universities must be take greater responsibility for developing and promoting meaningful content. Proprietary content is more powerful than advertising, so our schools need to adopt the capabilities of a media company: a do-it-yourself communications ethos would firmly position them in the marketplace of ideas and ensure audiences know their missions are already being successfully accomplished.