Introduction: Mapping the Global *Brandscape* of Higher Education

Gerardo Blanco Ramírez

To understand the changes that are reshaping higher education, an analysis of the language utilized to discuss contemporary universities is illuminating. Consider, for example, the following phrase, by a senior university administrator: "I'm sorry for being late to the meeting; I was dealing with a social media crisis." In a different time, this sentence would have caused confusion. Today, however, many higher education administrators have experience responding to postings on social media, such as Twitter™ or Facebook® that portray their institutions in a negative light and that requires their immediate attention. In a different setting, another administrator may pose the following question in a meeting: "I think these are good ideas, but we need consider how these initiatives will affect our university's brand." These phrases illustrate that ideas and activities related to marketing and branding have entered the life of colleges and universities. Higher education scholars have, thus far, engaged only marginally with these phenomena. This book intends

G. Blanco Ramírez (✉)
University of Massachusetts Boston, Boston, USA

to engage with and contribute to ongoing conversations about marketing and branding among scholars and practitioners of higher education around the word.

Language does not merely reflect or represent a changing reality. Language—as poststructuralist theorists suggest—is constitutive and helps shape our constructed social realities (Jørgensen and Phillips 2011). Branding and marketing conversations reflect and reinforce the marketization of higher education (Brown and Carasso 2013), an increasing consumer orientation (McArdle-Clinton 2008), and what some have called the "consumerist turn" in higher education (Naidoo et al. 2011). As Stensaker and D'Andrea (2007) suggest, "the word branding suggests that higher education is increasingly becoming part of an emerging higher education market" (p. 5). Using language as a metaphor for understanding branding and marketing in higher education is a justifiable approach because consumption constitutes a language (Berger 2010) and because marketing is about conveying messages, and therefore, relies on linguistic tools (Oswald 2012). Marketing is the communication component of the strategic branding process for an organization (Eshuis et al. 2013).

Arjun Appadurai (1996, 2000) argues in very a compelling way, that globalization takes place through "ethnoscapes, mediascapes…" (Appadurai 1996, p. 33). Taking up this idea, and arguing that the surge of branding initiatives in higher education is linked to globalization, the idea of *brandscape* suggests that higher education institutions develop brands, not in isolation, but rather as part of a branding landscape. This branding landscape can be equated to the neoinstitutional concept of field (Scott 2008) and the isomorphic dynamics (DiMaggio and Powell 1983) within. The contributions in this book illustrate many ways in which a consumer turn has entered higher education. They also illustrate the ways in which higher education stakeholders—administrators, policymakers, and students—respond to an increasingly integrated and competitive global field of higher education. This analysis of how university brands interact with each other is akin to the process of mapping a territory, which is the main goal of this book.

Motivations for Branding

The idea that colleges and universities are complex organizations that adapt to their external environment has long been accepted in higher education scholarly circles (Enders 2004; Manning 2013; Papadimitriou 2011).

A changing environment would, then, require organizational adaptation. Following this logic, if one seeks to make sense of the emergence of branding and marketing, it is necessary to look at changes in the environment. While many complex trends can be traced, one can point to the following set of influences: (a) globalization, regionalization and internationalization, (b) increasing privatization, and (c) growing demands for accountability. While many other elements could be added to the argument, the combination of these three elements accounts for many of the changes in the higher education landscape in recent years. For example, increased globalization, regionalization, and internationalization lead to a relatively small but significant number of internationally mobile students. These students are seen are revenue sources for colleges and universities that now compete with each other to attract those students (Marginson and Rhoades 2002). This phenomenon is exacerbated by decreasing public investment in higher education, which leads to privatization (Levy 2006). This privatization does not involve exclusively the creating of private higher education institutions, but the privatization—via fees and profit-oriented activities—of public universities.

Linked to the decreasing investment in higher education is a growing questioning of the value of higher education. Conversations that cast doubts on the value of higher education are often accompanied by calls for increasing accountability. Given that traditional forms of quality assurance have recently come into question (e.g., Gaston 2014), colleges and universities engage new strategies to demonstrate their value to the public. These strategies involve participation in accreditation schemes and in rankings. Therefore, while it is unlikely that a single student may be contemplating the choice between attending her local community (2-year) college or move to a different country to pursue a degree in a selective institution, global competition is an important influence on the emergence of branding and marketing in higher education.

Global Competition and Position-Taking

In recent decades, a sense of integration among higher education systems has been noted in the literature. As higher education systems are increasingly intertwined, individual institutions need to differentiate themselves from potential competitors, often through marketing campaigns and the use of quality assurance mechanisms (Knight 2007). As an example of this need for market differentiation, it is possible to identify universities

around the world that have resourced to US accreditation as a way to demonstrate international standards of quality. This has been extensively researched in Mexico, for example (Blanco Ramirez 2015). One of these studies documented how one of these Mexican universities built an entire marketing campaign around their recently obtained US international accreditation:

> Some participants at the Mexican university suggested that, via the accrediting agency, they were now connected to reputable US institutions: 'we are accredited by the same agency that accredits Stanford, UC Berkeley and University of California Los Angeles (UCLA)'. (Blanco Ramirez 2015, p. 334)

This association with prestigious US institutions was then used as the foundation for a marketing campaign that involved printed and electronic media alike. It is noteworthy that this Mexican higher education institution is private and depends on tuition as the main source of revenue. This example illustrates the importance of position-taking in higher education. The concept of global position-taking deserves attention given its influence on marketing and branding in the context of higher education. Given the way that marketing and branding have been defined in the field of higher education (Gibbs and Knapp 2012; Maringe and Gibbs 2009), we can establish a connection between theses activities and global position-taking. As Marginson (2007) noted, position-taking has gained importance among the activities that university administrators carry out. From a neoinstitutional perspective (DiMaggio and Powell 1983; Scott 2008), maintaining legitimacy within a field (i.e., higher education) is of great importance. This is perhaps further accentuated in higher education (Meyer et al. 2007). Therefore, quality assurance and legitimacy in the context of higher education are intertwined.

Marginson (2006, 2007), building upon Bourdieu (1993) theorizes that in position-taking, higher education institutions exercise their institutional agency in order to take position while at the same time, institutions encounter the boundaries of the system that positions them. The process of higher education position-taking is perhaps best illustrated through international rankings. Most higher education institutions have aspirations to rank at the top and yet very few of them are truly competitive (Hazelkorn 2015). This process of agency and system interaction results with a few research institutions, usually located in

developed English-speaking national contexts (e.g., Australia, UK, and US), positioned at the top with few chances of being challenged. While the positions at the end are relatively stable, lower tiers tend to be more competitive. Just like neoinstitutional theorists, Marginson's analysis—which relies on Bourdieu—emphasizes the importance of legitimacy. All these themes resonate with branding and marketing in higher education.

Legitimate higher education institutions can be overwhelmed by the competitive pressures of new providers. This is particularly salient in rapidly growing contexts, where private institutions are absorbing the majority of the higher education growth. For example, Bangladesh has experienced an explosive growth of higher education providers to meet the demand of new enrolments. However, this growth has made difficult to differentiate legitimate and educationally oriented institutions from those that exclusively seek profit. The result is a negative reputation of the entire private higher education sector in that country (Blanco Ramírez and Haque 2016). Gibbs and Knapp (2012) suggest that "as educators we need to get our message through the clutter of competitive consumerism" (p. 5). As a result, Gibbs and Knapp define marketing in the following terms:

> Marketing is a social and managerial process through which institutions and individuals obtain what they want through creating, offering and exchanging products and services with others. The management of that process involves…pricing, promotion and the distribution of ideas, goods and services in such a way as to create exchanges that satisfy individual and institutional objectives. (p. 5)

This definition makes clear that marketing is complex and that it involves different aspects. This definition also emphasizes fit between a service and potential consumers. From a critical standpoint, there is extensive literature opposed to the construction of students as customers (Saunders 2015; McArdle Clinton 2008). However, Saunders and Blanco Ramírez (2017) argue that many aspects of higher education are already neoliberalized and commodified. Therefore, a resistance of disengagement would be ineffective. Rather than ignoring that many already consider students as customers, it is important here to engage and explore these market-driven ideas to imagine new possibilities. This reality is fully captured in Gibb and Knapp's (2012) assertion that educators can utilize marketing strategy in order to advance the educational mission of their institutions.

Accordingly, some of the aspects involved in marketing include market and consumer research, segmentation, pricing, advertising, recruitment, fundraising, among others. As a result, the chapters in this book will refer to these different aspects. Among these functions, branding takes an important place given that international position-taking takes place through brand construction and development.

Understanding Brands, Branding, and Marketing?

In order to understand branding in higher education, it is important to first understand the concept of brand. Oswald (2012) defines brands as "multidimensional sign systems" (p. 51) that are ruled by convention. While complex, this definition illustrates that brands have a communicative function. Berger (2010) argues that "the essence of branding lies in the claims a product has to being distinctive and having social attributes not found in competing products" (p. 79). Ng and Koller (2013) argue that branding relies on the "deliberate use of metaphor" (p. 133). As we can see, the differentiating effect of brands constitutes their main purpose. In the higher education context, for instance, the brand of a particular university separates its programs, its students, and its alumni from those from competing institutions. Oswald (2012) suggests that brands rely on the public's preconceptions in order to establish positive associations with a brand. Berger (2010) and Oswald (2012), therefore, take a semiotic approach to branding. This merely means that they approach brands from the perspective of symbols within a larger system, akin to language.

Following the semiotic perspective on branding, Berger (2010) suggests that any brand involves denotative and connotative elements. The denotative elements are evident and may include colors, shapes, letters, names, among others. Connotative elements are intangible and rely on associations. For example, the number 1863 could be found as a denotative element in a university brand. This number connotes the university's foundation year. This connotation may elicit associations such as tradition, experience, et cetera. Evidently, these associations depend on the audience and may vary significantly. Going further in the conceptualization of brand elements, Lencastre and Côrte-Real (2010, 2013), present a multilayered model for the brand. They argue that it is possible to identify "three basic pillars of the brand: identity, object and response"

(Lencastre and Côrte-Real 2013, p. 489). These authors warn against the risks of falling into "myopia" (p. 489) by ignoring any of these three elements.

The brand model proposed by Lencastre and Côrte-Real (2010, 2013) also follows a semiotic orientation. This approach can effectively be applied in the context of higher education. For example, the identity dimension of a higher education brand may involve the colors, typography, and images that a university utilizes to build its identity. Most universities have developed style or brand guidelines and encourage their use in consistent ways. The second pillar, the object dimension, involves the services the university offers. The third layer, the response pillar, involves the associations an audience makes in relation to the other elements of a brand. This model illustrates the complexities that brands involve. Moreover, Lencastre and Côrte-Real's model would suggest that marketing and branding in higher education demand attention to each of the three elements in the model. Of particular importance is the fact that these three pillars of branding are often uncoordinated in the context of higher education. In general, the identity pillar is delegated or outsourced to marketing experts who develop a particular campaign. However, the experts on the object pillar are arguably members of the faculty and staff, who execute the university's mission. However, these members of the academic and nonacademic staff are often not consulted. Finally, current and prospective students, as well as the public in general, are the experts in relation to the response pillar. While marketing agencies may keep the public in mind, this is frequently done without coordination with the object pillar. Perhaps this is why one can observe that marketing and branding campaigns result in a "sea of sameness" (Clayton et al. 2012, p. 182), despite the differentiating purpose that such campaigns are supposed to serve.

Numerous international examples of higher education research utilize the abovementioned semiotic conceptualization of branding in higher education. For instance, Ng (2014a) explored how capitalist values are enacted in Singaporean universities through metaphors of dynamism and movement. Other metaphors utilized in this context include flexibility as a metaphor for student empowerment, which is aligned with the neoliberal value of individualism (Ng 2014b). Also following a semiotic understanding of branding there have been studies (Blanco Ramírez 2016; Papadimitriou and Blanco Ramírez 2015) that visually analyzed

the content of higher education in publically displayed spaces. These examples point out the utility of semiotic understandings of brands and branding in higher education.

This Book and Its Contributions

Having discussed the current state of global competition in higher education, this chapter has explored existing models for making sense of marketing and branding in higher education. This analysis suggests that semiotics-based models have been influential in contemporary research even though theorization has been limited in the field. This edited collection brings perspectives on marketing and branding in higher education from different regions and countries. The case studies reflect perspectives from admissions and enrollment management to alumni. The cases illustrate the challenges and paradoxes involved in positioning higher education institutions in a competitive global field. Each of the following chapters explores whether it is possible to identify global patterns in university branding and marketing, and what those patterns may be. The chapters also seek to identify theories or models that can support new and more critical research on the topic. New methodological approaches are of central importance in this book.

In Chap. 2, Saichaie and Warshaw explore websites of institutions that are members of the exclusive Association of American Universities, some of the most prestigious US postsecondary institutions. Their focus is on academe-industry links and how students are recruited into these initiatives. In Chap. 3, Álvarez-Mediola and González-Ledesma compare and contrast branding strategies employed by Chilean and Mexican universities that belong to three different reputational strata.

In Chap. 4, Mampaey explores brand communication among Flemish higher education institutions in Belgium. With a focus on mixed-methods research, Papadimitriou—in Chap. 5—analyzes how universities in the Western Balkans (re)position themselves in the web. This study examines local homepages as well as English homepages in relation to quality, exotericism, and the use of social media in that region. In Chap. 6, Langa and Zavale examine how Mozambican higher education institutions use branding to differentiate themselves, promote their image and gain advantage in an increasingly competitive social field of higher education. Ngo and Ismandoyo, in Chap. 7, examine the impacts of education brand on students' decisions through advertising brochures for higher education institutions in a single Indonesian city Surabaya.

In Chap. 8, Lam and Tang explore branding among public universities in Hong Kong. By adapting the concept of corporate branding to the analysis of their self-representations in four distinctive types of communication materials (strategic plans, vision and mission statements, student recruitment materials, and press releases), the authors introduce a new approach to university branding study by examining the content alignment in addition to the content itself. Drezner, in Chap. 9, explores existing literature on why social identity should be considered in higher education marketing and provides recommendations for practice. In Chap. 10, Cremonini and Taylor focus on the concept of university hubs and apply this construct to the analysis of branding in the higher education sector in Qatar. In Chap. 11, McLaughling, McLaughlin and McLaughlin analyze the role that rankings have on multiple stakeholders of higher education institutions. They highlight some of the credibility challenges that higher education rankings face, and explore alternatives. Lastly, the concluding chapter in this collection identifies themes, theoretical and methodological trends that run through these chapters.

As the following chapters illustrate, branding and marketing are complex higher education strategies that require empirical and conceptual examination. A theoretical driven multidisciplinary approach may prove effective for understanding these emerging phenomena more deeply and for improving their practice. This practice is likely to continue increasing in importance. Returning to the opening metaphor in this chapter, it is possible to conceptualize branding and marketing as tools that assist higher education faculty, administrators, and practitioners in navigating the complex *brandscape* of higher education.

References

Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization.* Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Appadurai, A. (2000). Grassroots Globalization and the Research Imagination. *Public Culture, 12*(1), 1–19.

Berger, A. A. (2010). *The objects of affection: Semiotics and consumer culture.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Blanco Ramirez, G. (2015). US accreditation in Mexico: Quality in higher education as symbol, performance and translation. *Discourse: Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education, 36*(3), 329–342.

Blanco Ramírez, G. (2016). Many choices, one destination: Multimodal university brand construction in an urban public transportation system. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education, 29*(2), 186–204. doi:10.1080/09518398.2015.1023233.

Blanco Ramírez, G., & Haque, M. J. (2016). Addressing quality challenges in the private university sector in Bangladesh: From policy formulation to institutional implementation. *Quality in Higher Education, 22*(2), 139–151.

Bourdieu, P. (1993). *The field of cultural production*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Brown, R., & Carasso, H. (2013). *Everything for sale?: The marketisation of UK higher education*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Clayton, M. J., Cavanagh, K. V., & Hettche, M. (2012). Institutional branding: A content analysis of public service announcements from American universities. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education, 22*(2), 182–205.

DiMaggio, P. J., & Powell, W. W. (1983). The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields. *American Sociological Review, 48*(2), 147–160.

Enders, J. (2004). Higher education, internationalisation, and the nation-state: Recent developments and challenges to governance theory. *Higher Education, 47*(3), 361–382.

Eshuis, J., Braun, E., & Klijn, E.-H. (2013). Place Marketing as Governance Strategy: An Assessment of Obstacles in Place Marketing and Their Effects on Attracting Target Groups. *Public Administration Review, 73*(3), 507–516.

Gaston, P. L. (2014). *Higher education accreditation: How it's changing, why it must*. Sterling, VA: Stylus.

Gibbs, P., & Knapp, M. (2012). *Marketing Higher and Further Education: An Educator's Guide to Promoting Courses, Departments and Institutions*. Hoboken: Taylor and Francis.

Hazelkorn, E. (2015). *Rankings and the reshaping of higher education: The battle for world-class excellence*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Jørgensen, M., & Phillips, L. (2011). *Discourse analysis as theory and method*. Los Angeles: Sage.

Knight, J. (2007). Cross-border higher education: Issues and implications for quality assurance and accreditation. In Global University Network for Innovation (Ed.), *Higher Education in the World* (pp. 134–146). Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Lencastre, P., & Côrte-Real, A. (2010). One, two, three: A practical brand anatomy. *Journal of Brand Management, 17*(6), 399–412.

Lencastre, P., & Côrte-Real, A. (2013). Brand response analysis: A Peircean semiotic approach. *Social Semiotics, 23*(4), 489–506.

Levy, D. C. (2006). The Unanticipated Explosion: Private Higher Education's Global Surge. *Comparative Education Review, 50*(2), 217–240.

Manning, K. (2013). *Organizational theory in higher education*. New York: Routledge.

Maringe, F., & Gibbs, P. (2009). *Marketing higher education: Theory and practice*. Maidenhead, England: McGraw Hill.

Marginson, S. (2006). Dynamics of National and Global Competition in Higher Education. *Higher Education, 52*(1), 1–39.

Marginson, S. (2007). Global Position and Position Taking: The Case of Australia. *Journal of Studies in International Education, 11*(1), 5–32.

Marginson, S. (2011). Imagining the global. In R. King, S. Marginson, & R. Naidoo (Eds.), *Handbook of globalization and higher education* (pp. 10–39). Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Marginson, S., & Rhoades, G. (2002). Beyond national states, markets, and systems of higher education: A glonacal agency heuristic. *Higher Education: The International Journal of Higher Education and Educational Planning, 43*(3), 281–309.

McArdle-Clinton, D. (2008). *The consumer experience of higher education: The rise of capsule education*. London: Continuum.

Meyer, J. W., Ramirez, F. O., Frank, D. J., & Schofer, E. (2007). Higher education as an institution. In P. J. Gumport (Ed.), *Sociology of higher education : Contributions and their contexts* (p. 221). Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Naidoo, R., Shankar, A., & Veer, E. (2011). The consumerist turn in higher education: Policy aspirations and outcomes. *Journal of Marketing Management, 27,* 1142–1162.

Ng, C. J. W. (2014a). Semioticizing Capitalism in corporate brand enactment: The case of Singapore's corporatized universities. *Critical Discourse Studies, 11*(2), 139–157.

Ng, C. J. W. (2014b). 'We offer unparalleled flexibility': Purveying conceptual values in higher educational corporate branding. *Discourse & Communication, 8*(4), 391–410.

Ng, C. J. W., & Koller, V. (2013). Deliberate Conventional Metaphor in Images: The Case of Corporate Branding Discourse. *Metaphor and Symbol, 28*(3), 131–147.

Oswald, L. R. (2012). *Marketing semiotics: Signs, strategies, and brand value*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Papadimitriou, A. (2011). *The enigma of quality in Greek higher education: A mixed methods study of introducing quality management into Greek higher education*. Enshcede, the Netherlands: University of Twente, CHEPS.

Papadimitriou, A., & Blanco Ramírez, G. (2015). Exploring advertising in higher education: An empirical analysis in North America, Europe and East Asia. *Tertiary Education and Management, 21*(2), 99–110. doi:10.1080/13583883.2014.999702.

Saunders, D. B. (2015). They do not buy it: Exploring the extent to which entering first-year students view themselves as customers. *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education, 25*(1), 5–28.

Saunders, D. B., & Blanco Ramírez, G. (2017). Against teaching excellence: Ideology, commodification, and enabling the neoliberalization of postsecondary education. *Teaching in Higher Education.* Advanced online publication available at http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2017.1301913.

Scott, W. R. (2008). Approaching adulthood: The maturing of institutional theory. *Theory and Society: Renewal and Critique in Social Theory, 37*(5), 427–442.

Stensaker, B., & D'Andrea, V. (2007). Branding—the why, what and how. In B. Stensaker & V. D'Andrea (Eds.), *Branding in higher education. Exploring an emerging phenomenon* (pp. 5–12). Amsterdam: EAIR.