Brand Soul in Higher Education: A Case Study of a U.S. University's GO program

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INTRODUCTION

We identified the Global Opportunities (GO) program at Susquehanna University as a focal point for discussion on *Brand Soul*. It was recently awarded the Andrew Heiskell Award from the Institute of International Education for its dedication and advancement in the Internationalization of Campus, a distinction that lends itself to identifying a unique international marketing opportunity as a component of the overall marketing activities for the university. Susquehanna is one of only a handful of universities in the USA to require a domestic or overseas study-away experience, and is unique in that it requires a post-travel course during which students reflect on their cross-cultural experience and how it changed them. In addition to incorporating intercultural interventions before, during, and after a study-away experience, the GO requirement grounds each program in Experiential Learning Theory. This focus on experientially based learning defines and differentiates the GO program from other

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more traditional study abroad programs that have a primary focus of a course-linked study-away program.

The GO program's success stems from the fact that it emerged from a combined strategic planning and decennial accreditation review process that engaged the entire campus in institutional planning. A key feature of the program is its overwhelming support by Susquehanna faculty, staff, administration, students, and alumni—the *Brand Soul* of the institution. Inclusion of staff and faculty broadens the base of stakeholders in the program across campus, and exemplifies to students the commitment of the institution to, and value of, intercultural competence development through experience for all members of the Susquehanna family. The GO program at Susquehanna University is an example of utilizing the *Brand Soul* of the university as a 'soft' international marketing tool, by helping to align the institution's brand identity activities with the consumer's brand image.

Branding in Higher Education

In the non-profit Higher Education Institution (HEI) sector, a competitive market for postsecondary education with multiple stakeholders has developed (Collis 2001; Dill 2003; Ruch 2001; Williams 2012). HEIs are moving toward a model of corporatization (Brookes 2003; Geiger 2004; Hemsley-Brown and Goonawardana 2007), and marketing themselves very aggressively (Naude and Lvy 1999; Pusser 2002; Ruch 2001). Additionally, a shift from private to public financing of Higher Education, and an ability to obtain non-government funding follows a market approach (Dill 2003; Kinser 2006). As a growing body of work focuses on increased 'managerialism' in HEI, (Constanti and Gibbs 2004; Meyer 2002), and HEIs have become more marketized, they have become increasingly promotionalized; brand-building gains in importance with names and reputation becoming increasingly important (Morphew et al. 2001; Toma et al. 2005; Vidaver-Cohen 2007). Motivation for HEI branding includes counteracting declining enrollments; reduced retention and overall competition; enhancing image and prestige; increasing financial resources; honoring a philanthropic donor; mission alignment; or signifying a merger between institutions (Cobb 2001; Koku 1997; Morphew et al. 2001; Toma et al. 2005; Williams 2012; Williams, Osei, and Omar 2012; Williams and Omar 2014).

In 2011, there were a total of 4495 non-profit institutions of Higher Education in the USA, plus 8986 degree-granting for-profit institutions. The majority of HEIs (63 %) are private colleges or universities, while

37 % are public; 62 % are four-year schools compared to two-year colleges or technical schools (38 %); 40 % have fewer than 1000 students. Additionally, the rise of Massive Open Online Courses and other online forms of education present a new and growing force that is likely to impact HEIs in ways that are not yet fully understood.

As a service industry, Higher Education is characterized as having a focus on people; involving largely intangible actions; a lengthy and formal relationship of continuous delivery with the customer; a high level of customization and judgment; relatively narrow fluctuations of demand relative to supply; and single or multiple sites of service delivery methods (Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2006; Mazzarol and Soutar 1999). Balmer and Liao (2007) suggest that HEI branding affords graduates a sense of identification and a way to define themselves, not merely as customers but as lifelong organization members of a corporate 'brand community', while Lerman and Garbarino (2002) posit that a brand name becomes the psychological property of consumers. Lowrie (2007) explains that HEI branding must pay attention to the intangibility and inseparability aspects of educational services. As a service brand, HEI brands require greater emphasis on internal marketing, in part since all employees become consumer touchpoints and service brands play a role in reducing the risk of intangibility (Berry 2000; De Chernatony and Segal-Horn 2003; Khanna et al. 2014).

The development of a clear HEI brand principle may not be easy because of the complexity of HEI brands due to numerous factors: diverse stakeholders; internal structures; institutional resistance to change; the wide range of majors and programs; sub-branding by schools/majors/facilities; information gap between choice factors identified by students and HEI publications; and the need for support by institutional leadership and formal communication mechanisms (Birnbaum 1983; Chapleo 2007; Edmiston 2008; Hankinson 2001; Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka 2006). Targeted at multiple stakeholders, the HEI brand is externally focused on positioning and marketing, and internally focused on the organization and promotion of values/culture/vision (Aaker 2004; Hatch and Schultz 2003). Brands are essential to consumers' social status (Hamann et al. 2007), and indeed, one aspect of a Higher Education degree is the bestowing of a certain level of social status. Students perceive the image of their HEI in relation to other HEIs (Ivy 2001) and vast sums are spent by HEIs in the USA to increase their rankings, such as in the annual US

News and World Report to enhance their image and positioning, and to impact retention (Bock et al. 2014; Bunzel 2007; Wernick 2006).

HEI brand equity is focused on (1) customer image positioning and marketing; (2) firm identity and the clarification and promotion of values/culture/vision; and (3) how employees perceive and live the brand, thus creating a particular brand 'soul' (Aaker 2004; Furey et al. 2014; Hatch and Schultz 2003; Jillapalli and Jillapalli 2014; Lowrie 2007; Williams et al. 2012). A brand audit is undertaken to assess the health of the brand and its brand equity, and is referred to by Keller (1998, p. 373) as a 'comprehensive examination of the health of a brand in terms of its sources of brand equity from the perspective of the firm and the consumer', while Ambler et al. (2002) discuss the need to determine the relevancy of the brand and its associations related to the positioning in the consumer's mind and resistance to attack from competition. Brand life-cycle literature describes a cycle from the birth of the brand, through growth, maturity, decline, and eventually death or retirement of the brand, with brand decay caused by loss of brand salience (Barwise and Meehan 2004; Jevons et al. 2007; Lehu 2006). Keller (1998) points out that a problem regarding a declining brand involves the 'breadth' of brand awareness, such that the brand is perceived in a very narrow way and a repositioning may be in order, while brand avoidance is defined by Lee et al. (2008, p. 10) as occurring 'when customers are motivated to reject a brand because of the negative meanings associated with that brand'. It can lead to negative brand equity and thus, brands have the potential to become market-based liabilities', and brands die because of neglect and consumer indifference (Wansink 1997; Wansink and Huffman 2001).

Regardless of the exact health of their brand, given the competitive pressures discussed above, an HEI brand audit often results in a decision to make adjustments. In some cases, a revitalization can be sufficient, in other situations, a rebranding or repositioning (refocusing) is necessary; each situation is followed by reinforcing actions and a return to equilibrium. Most organizations with unhealthy brands will be able to embark on a rebranding or repositioning strategy to realign their existing brand to meet their goals and customer base. If the brand remains unhealthy despite repositioning or rebranding attempts, literature points out that during this 'flux', the desire to rename often surfaces and the decision to rename is generally evaluated in more earnest. (Williams, 2012). The other extreme option is to retire the organization brand or close down the institution. Brands can be eliminated (or retired) for various reasons that

take into account the aging process brought on by contamination created by the environment and consumer perception as the brand is compared with other points of reference (Jevons et al. 2007; Kapferer 2008; Lehu 2006). While relatively rare, this retire option does occur. Sometimes a college or university completely merges or is acquired by another institution and loses most or all of its own brand—with whatever brand equity that existed being transferred into the dominant institution. The Brand Flux Model™ (Fig. 6.1) combines the many identified processes often referred to as 'redefining', 'rebranding', 'realignment', 'recreating', 'revitalizing', 'restructuring', 'relaunching', 'redeployment', 'repositioning', 'renaming', and so on, into a simple coherent descriptive five-stage model. The term Brand Flux is derived from the definition of flux, meaning a state of uncertainty preceding the establishment of a new direction of action. It reflects the environmental uncertainty prompting a disruption in equilibrium, followed by any activity resulting from a brand audit process incorporating the option of either reinforcement or change, and then a return to equilibrium. Brand Flux is defined as: "A state where the identity, image or reputation of an organization is reinforced over long periods of time in equilibrium with its environment, yet with environmental challenges can adapt by altering the branding and/or positioning via revitalization, refocusing, and/or renaming"(Williams 2012, p. 246).

The branding process model (Fig. 6.2) incorporates the Brand Flux Model(tm), and hinges on the interplay of customer, firm, and employee perceptions and actions. The three boxes—Brand Image, Brand Identity, and *Brand Soul*—depict the essence of the process. *Brand image* is the consistent set of associations which form an impression and leads to
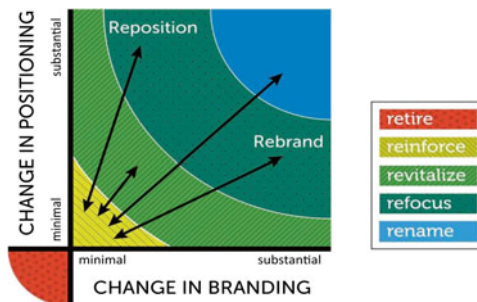

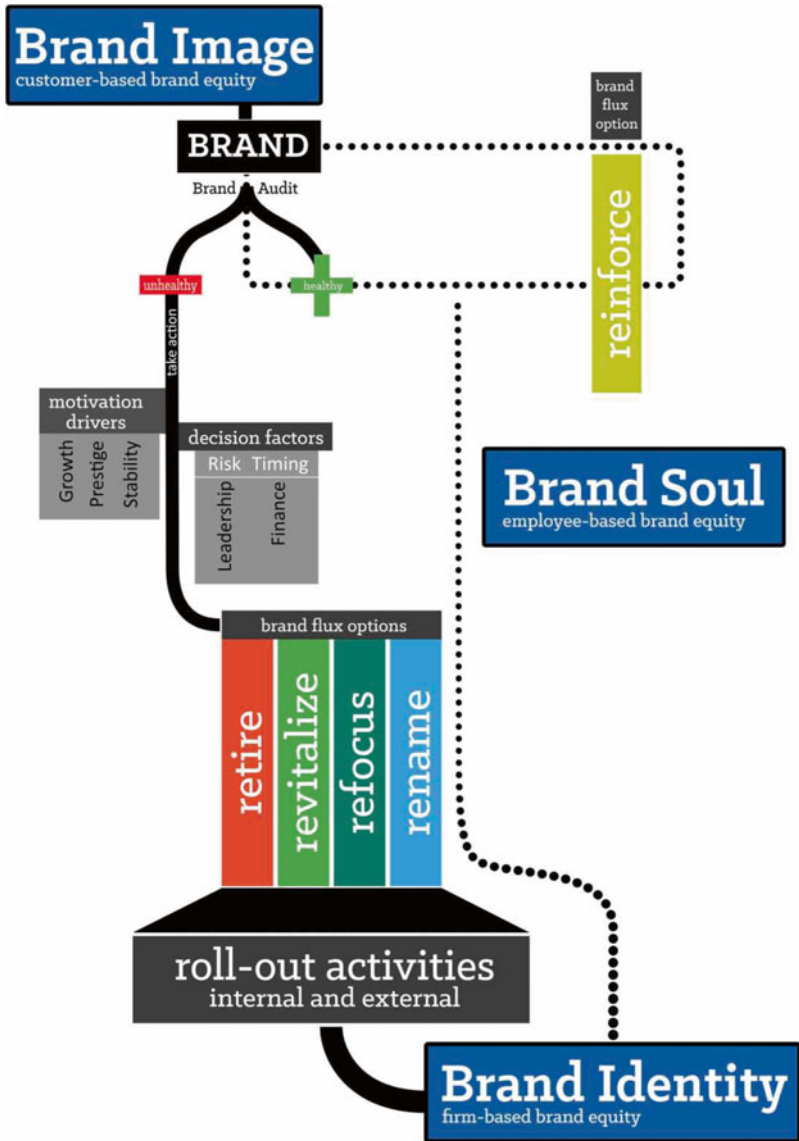**Fig. 6.1**   Brand Flux Model(TM). *Source*: Williams (2012)

Fig. 6.2   Branding process model (Williams, 2012)

customer-based-brand-equity (CBBE). It is also about past and present customer perceptions, and in Higher Education, what current students and alumni believe and communicate about the institution. All elements of an organization's *brand identity*, such as brand name, slogan, and logo, developed and communicated to the market in order to form a favorable brand image, generate firm-based-brand-equity (FBBE). Everything that the institution encompasses (from infrastructure to core values) and the administration communicates serves to promote and explain its heritage and current brand identity practices. The *Brand Soul* concept is strongly linked to stakeholder involvement, resources, and internal marketing. *Brand Soul*, defined as '*the essence or fundamental nature—the authentic energy—of a brand*', refers to the positive way employees (and key internal stakeholders) perceive and live the organization's brand (Williams 2012), and leads to employee-based-brand-equity (EBBE).

Avoiding brand confusion and reinforcing consistency become key objectives of the branding process model, and in this way, the three forms of branding: FBBE, CBBE, and EBBE are aligned.

THE GO PROGRAM AND *BRAND SOUL* AT SUSQUEHANNA UNIVERSITY

An example of international marketing as a component of the overall marketing activities of an HEI is the GO program at Susquehanna University (GO 2015). Susquehanna University educates enterprising, independent thinkers—2100 students from 35 states and 22 countries—with a solid foundation in the liberal arts and science or pre-professional programs offered by the School of Arts and Sciences and the Sigmund Weis School of Business (SWSB). Students choose from more than 60 majors and minors, or they can pursue a self-designed major, that teach critical thinking, writing, teamwork, and communication skills. Susquehanna encourages students to engage in professional experiences such as internships and research opportunities; in fact, 78 % of graduates get professional experience before graduation, which helps prepare them for postgraduate success. Their international experiences are extraordinary opportunities for personal and professional growth; fully 94 % of Susquehanna graduates report being employed or in graduate/professional school within six months of graduation. Susquehanna is one of only a handful of universities in the USA to require a domestic or overseas study-away experience and is

unique in that it requires a post-travel course during which students reflect on their cross-cultural experience and how it changed them.

The GO program is the centerpiece of Susquehanna University's recently revised Central (core) Curriculum, a comprehensive four-year program based on the University's learning goals. GO follows best practices for increasing students' intercultural competence by incorporating intercultural interventions throughout the study-away program, defined as 'intentional and deliberate pedagogical approaches, activated throughout the study abroad cycle (before, during and after) that are designed to enhance students' intercultural competence' (Vande Berg and Paige, p. 30). To maximize growth and learning, every student at Susquehanna must complete an approved, cross-cultural immersion experience of at least two weeks, imbedded in preparatory and reflective work on campus. The credit-bearing portion of the requirement is divided between a graded single semester-hour pre-departure course and single semester-hour reflection course focused on student progress on a single set of clearly defined cross-cultural learning goals, as adopted by the Susquehanna faculty. Thus GO is more involved than just a study abroad program. In addition to incorporating intercultural interventions before, during, and after a study-away experience, the GO requirement grounds each program in Experiential Learning Theory, which Kolb defines as 'the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience' (Kolb 1984, p. 41). The GO program facilitates this process through development of curricula that focuses on learning activities that promote spontaneous authentic cultural interactions while immersed in the host culture. These interactions can take shape through a variety of ways, such as community-based research, collaborative service-learning projects (working with and alongside local peers), and culturally investigative projects. Although learning can be accomplished through a traditional lecture-based overview of a topic that ties into a local cultural phenomenon, student learning can also be cultivated through meaningful interactions with peers when values, traditions, and experience can be shared in less contrived settings. This focus on experientially based learning defines and differentiates Susquehanna University's GO program from other more traditional study abroad programs that have a primary focus of a course-linked study-away program.

The GO program's success stems from the fact that it emerged from a combined strategic planning and decennial accreditation review process that engaged the entire campus in institutional planning. This multiyear

planning process highlighted engagement around some specific questions: How can the university foster a culture of greater student engagement on our campus? How can it ensure that students will learn to work with and learn from people of backgrounds different from their own?

As stated, the GO program has three components: preparation on campus, experiential learning in a cross-cultural immersion off campus, and reflection in a class back on campus. The experience itself, however, can be achieved in a variety of different ways. GO Short programs are short-term programs led by Susquehanna faculty and staff. Ranging from two to six weeks in length, these programs generally have a topical focus that reflects the interests of the program directors, and most are open to students from all majors. GO Long students participate in traditional semester study abroad, and transfer credits earned in courses taken overseas back to Susquehanna, but it is the experiential learning that takes place in and out of the classroom that is the focus of the cross-cultural learning goals. The GO Your Own Way option allows students to propose a self-designed cross-cultural experience during winter or summer break. Students completing the immersion component of the requirement are not required to earn credit during the experience, which allows them to tailor the requirement to their own particular interests and needs, as long as it is cross-cultural. Volunteer experiences, paid and unpaid internships, even an extended homestay can count in this manner. In every case, students return to campus to reflect together in class on the many varied ways in which they have experienced cross-cultural learning.

Since the GO requirement was implemented in the fall of 2009, the class of 2013 was the first to complete the requirement. In three years, Susquehanna went from an average of just 30 % of its students studying abroad to 100 % of students completing a cross-cultural program—89 % of them internationally. Four full-time staff, three student employees, and 20 student peer advisers were hired to support GO. The development of new GO Short program courses to support the curriculum has been dramatic. From just four such programs in 2009, the office now manages 28 approved faculty-led programs; approximately 20 of them run each academic year. Several new programs are in development, and three to four new programs are anticipated annually for the foreseeable future. Forty-two faculty representing almost every department (including biology, chemistry, education, and music), and 22 staff (including athletics, the library, public safety, and civic engagement) serve as GO program directors. Faculty teaching senior-level courses now have classrooms of students who bring their personal international experiences to bear on

the subject, evidence of the cultural shift taking place on campus. For example, a Political Science professor teaching an upper-level American Political Thought course now incorporates the perspectives on the topic that her students have encountered all over the world. The number of students whose senior research connects to their studies abroad has also increased. Students are actively seeking experiences abroad that can also serve as the groundwork for their senior capstone: whether it is work at a shark research lab in South Africa for Biology, or an internship at the James Joyce bookstore in Dublin for Creative Writing.

Susquehanna's financial commitment to the program will nearly triple by 2016–2017, up from the pre-GO study abroad budget. A task force composed of the Provost, Vice Presidents of Finance and Enrollment Management, the Chief Communications Officer and Directors of Financial Aid, Cross-Cultural Programs, Registrar, Residence Life, and Finance coordinate implementation of administrative issues. For example, the group developed a ten-year model of enrollment and cost projections, estimating how many students from each class were likely to choose each type of program, projecting associated costs, and predicting financial aid expenses for all of these alternatives. University policies and operating budgets were adapted as needed to support the requirement. The model is updated twice yearly in order to better refine its predictive value and assess the need for changes in policy or practice. The program has already shared much information on the planning process and models with other institutions considering similar curricular requirements. In fact, Susquehanna has in many ways led the charge in what has become a national movement. In 2013, the GO program was awarded the Institute for International Education's (IIE) Andrew Heiskell Award for Campus Internationalization. In 2014, IIE initiated the Generation Study Abroad effort to double the number of American students studying abroad by 2019. Susquehanna has pledged to contribute to this effort by sharing insights on the successes and challenges associated with such rapid large-scale change. To date, Susquehanna staff have presented and written on the program choices that Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) students make in study abroad, the impact of a universal cross-cultural requirement on recruiting students from diverse backgrounds, as well as faculty development and infrastructure development issues.

One hallmark of Susquehanna's GO program is its accessibility to every student—removing traditional barriers to study abroad related

to ethnicity, disability, academic level, major or financial ability. Nationally, African-American and Hispanic students tend to study abroad at lower rates than others, as do male students and STEM students. At Susquehanna, it is our responsibility to remove the obstacles that could have prevented many of our students from having an experience that every college student should have. We ensure that every student can *and does* go. Grade point average requirements pose an obstacle for students at most institutions. Susquehanna believes that limiting study abroad to the students who are already the most engaged in their studies is the wrong approach. As long as students are in good academic standing—with at least a 2.0 GPA—they may apply to a Susquehanna faculty-led GO program.

The ongoing internationalization of the campus also helps to ensure that students from other countries will find a welcoming and supportive environment on campus. Campus recruiters have noted that the existence of the GO program serves as a strong differentiator in their work with prospective international students, and they are able to convincingly make the case that an international student coming to Susquehanna will find a welcoming and receptive environment on a campus where every student studies away. Moreover, international students can count their time at Susquehanna as their cross-cultural experience if they wish, or they can study off campus under the same policies as domestic students, including use of financial aid. Whichever route they choose, international students also complete the cross-cultural reflection course alongside other Susquehanna students. This adds significant value to the comparative dialogue in these courses, with international students sharing their experiences of American culture alongside American students reflecting on international experiences.

A key feature of the GO program is its overwhelming support by Susquehanna faculty, staff, administration, students, and alumni—the *Brand Soul* of the institution. Inclusion of staff and faculty in the GO program at Susquehanna University broadens the base of stakeholders in the program across campus and exemplifies to students the commitment of the institution to, and value of, intercultural competence development through experience for all members of the Susquehanna family. While administrative leaders have been deeply involved in planning and supporting the effort at every level, from its inception, this project has been a faculty-driven initiative. However, the sustainability and success of GO relies on the inclusion, collaboration, and participation of both staff and faculty. GO is first introduced to new staff and faculty during their campus

orientation program to ensure that every staff and faculty member on campus is aware of and plugged into the GO program. Both faculty and staff are encouraged and able to participate in the development and implementation of GO programs. GO is also marketed internally by hosting workshops about GO program development, and providing internationally themed and culturally focused seminars for faculty and staff which are often contextualized with lessons learned from GO programs. GO Short programs, although known in the field of International Education as a *faculty-led programming model*, allow teams of faculty, faculty/staff, and staff/staff combinations to lead groups of students on short-term domestic and international programs. GO Short program leadership includes teams of faculty across academic disciplines: for example, History and Theater, Music and Political Science, International Studies and Religion; staff from campus offices typically underrepresented in study-away programs, for example, Registrar's Office, Campus Safety, Disability Services; and teams of administrators and academics, for example, Career Services staff and Environmental Science faculty, Athletics staff and Business faculty, library staff and Biology faculty.

GO Long London

One specific GO program initiated by faculty is the program in London. The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business-accredited SWSB faculty recognized a need to prepare their students for the increasingly global business environment they would enter upon graduation. Generally, business students were the least likely to choose a traditional semester-long study abroad option. Few of them had advanced language studies and it was difficult to find programs with appropriate business courses. One SWSB faculty member serves as program director in London for one semester, and the program is available for any junior student in the business school. The business school contracts with a London property management company for student flats and classroom space. Instructors are hired from the London academic community to teach three business foundation classes and one elective. The director teaches a seminar class that is built around weekly field trips to businesses in the UK and occasionally on the European continent. Initially, the program was offered one semester per year, but as it became very popular, it was expanded to both semesters. The number of business students graduating with this global learning experience increased from less than 5 % to 35 %.

The learning goals and courses in the London program have changed over time. The program is now a GO Long program that places more emphasis on the cross-cultural experience. Students currently take only one required business class and it is a diversity intensive class. In addition, they take an international business ethics class, a British history and culture class, and a British theater class. The program involves Susquehanna Alumni who work overseas, and students gain the rich, broad experience of Susquehanna University *Brand Soul* internationally. The seminar currently includes an intense consulting project for Czech companies, with reports and presentations made at their Prague headquarters. In the consulting projects, students learn that business practices grounded in other nationalities and cultures must be understood if their proposals are going to be respected.

When students return from the GO London program, they also enroll in a reflective course. Students accumulate many cross-cultural experiences, they live in very diverse London communities, and they conduct an ethnographic exercise in a particular London neighborhood. They visit businesses and cultural sites in the UK and they take advantage of their location to travel throughout Europe. But it is the reflective component that develops an awareness of how much these experiences have impacted their attitude and ability to work in multicultural and cross-cultural settings. This is the exciting outcome that business faculty see when they have returning students in their classes. Additionally, graduates are increasingly seeking opportunities to work outside of the USA and many are successful. Not only do they accept initial job offers from companies outside the USA they are also ready to seek and accept international career transfers in the future.

The *Brand Soul* effect on the GO Long London program has been a major component of the SWSB marketing strategy; it is an attractive option when recruiting high school students, and in all open houses and one-on-one meetings, GO Long London is part of the conversation. Generally, first-year business students have listed the GO London program as one of the top three reasons they chose to come to Susquehanna, with several listing it as the deciding factor. It has helped both prospective students and current students understand the importance of cross-cultural immersion experiences as a component of preparation for professional careers in the global economy.

CONCLUSION

A key component in the alignment of an organization's Brand Identity with its Brand Image is the organization's *Brand Soul*, and through brand flux, correct brand alignment is a factor in the increase of an organization's FBBE, CBBE, and EBBE. The value of these brand equities becomes evident as a HEI increases its role in terms of international marketing activities. At Susquehanna University, one way that brand image is developed is by the student, their parents, and the people who come in contact with them around the world via the GO program. This image is developed both by Susquehanna students involved in the GO program who travel internationally and are in a sense 'brand ambassadors', as well as by international students from other countries who study outside their home country, at Susquehanna. However, potentially much more valuable than the brand identity efforts by the HEI, *Brand Soul*—as illustrated by the GO program—involves all functions within the organization, and even extends to the external alumni network:

- It is the centerpiece of the Central Curriculum; focused on experientially based learning.
- The Program was derived from the institution-wide processes of strategic planning, and decennial accreditation review.
- 100 % of students now complete a cross-cultural program, in part since traditional barriers to accessibility have been removed.
- Faculty from nearly every department are involved as GO program directors, and faculty teaching senior-level courses now have classrooms of students who bring their personal international experiences to bear on the subject.
- The University is financially committed; developing, using, and twice-yearly refining a ten-year model of enrollment and cost projections.
- The sustainability and success of the GO program relies on the inclusion, collaboration, and participation of not only staff and faculty, who are encouraged and able to participate in the development and implementation of GO programs, but also on the full university.

The GO program at Susquehanna University is an example of utilizing the *Brand Soul* of the university as a 'soft' international marketing tool as it helps align the institution's brand identity activities with the consumer's brand image. The components of GO are part of effective traditional '4P'

tools in the international marketing of Susquehanna University—such as direct marketing, advertising, and open houses. As a form of marketing, this is less of a 'push format'; rather it is a co-created effort between the institution, the student, the student's contacts in an international setting, and all related stakeholders. It offers a significant opportunity not only to tie together with the brand identity and brand image of the Institution but also to do so in an experiential manner which has the potential to have a dramatic impact on all touchpoints involved with the organization. While it is always difficult to specifically link an increase in enrollment to the success of any program, such as the GO program at Susquehanna University, the incoming casing of 2015 was the largest in the school's history.

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