

## **Corporate identity for higher education: The GRUsome process of naming a university**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article uses a case study approach to examine the challenge of renaming a newly formed research university from two disparate legacy institutions as a study of higher education branding. Unique branding and marketing issues of public entities and higher education entities in particular, with comparisons to private entities are explored using a strongly supported framework for corporate name change processes (Balmer & Geyser, 2006). With growing emphasis on university financial self-sufficiency, global competition for students and research impact, and expectations for contribution to the public good, a simple name change process is demonstrated to be not so straightforward.

Keywords: Higher education, corporate identity, branding, public policy



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## INTRODUCTION

*“What’s in name? That which we call a rose  
By any other name would smell as sweet”*

In Shakespeare’s classic play, *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet uses these words to express her love for Romeo, a man from a clan her family has been feuding with for decades. But as Romeo and Juliet both learn to their great cost, names do matter. Names have tremendous symbolic meaning and power. They become shorthand for an individual’s or an organization’s identity. As a consequence, changing the name of an organization, even if the organization is “new,” is fraught with peril. This article uses a case study approach to examine the challenge of renaming a newly formed research university from two disparate legacy institutions as a study of higher education branding. Unique branding and marketing issues of public entities and higher education entities in particular, with comparisons to private entities are explored using a strongly supported framework for corporate name change processes (Balmer & Geysler, 2006). With growing emphasis on university financial self-sufficiency, global competition for students and research impact, and expectations for contribution to the public good, a simple name change process is demonstrated to be not so straightforward.

Like other states, the State of Georgia is dealing with reduced funding and increased demand for higher education. By 2020, over 60% of job openings in Georgia are projected to require at least a bachelors’ degree but only 40% of Georgians currently have any post-secondary credential (Higher Education Funding Commission, 2012). Over the past 5 years, Georgia’s full-time equivalent enrollment (FTE) rate increased 27.3%, the third highest increase in the nation. At the same time, state educational appropriations per FTE were \$6,644, down 29.7% over the same 5-year period. Tuition revenue per FTE, on the other hand, increased to \$3,872, up 77.5% over the past 5 years (State Higher Education Executive Officers, 2013). The amended 2013 budget cut another \$83.7 million from the USG’s budget, and while the 2014 budget has a modest increase for higher education, funding is still well below 2009 levels. “In inflation-adjusted dollars, the state is now investing less than half per full-time equivalent student as it did in 2001” (Suggs, 2013, p. 3)

In 2012, the USG, led by Chancellor Hank Huckaby, decided to consolidate eight of the 35 institutions of higher education in the state. The consolidations were presented as forward-thinking, cost-saving measures that would eliminate duplicated services and improve access and quality for students (USG, 2012a). Three of the four consolidations connected quite similar organizations in that state colleges merged with state universities. The fourth, however, was quite different.

The focus of this study is that fourth consolidation, a move that involves an academic health center with a university and tertiary health care delivery system with a predominately professional, graduate student body and a small, primarily non-residential, liberal-arts state university with a predominately undergraduate population in Augusta, Georgia. The consolidation went into effect January 8, 2013. With consolidation, the new university is slated to develop and earn the Carnegie ranking of a Research University with Very High research (RU/VH). It is, according to the USG website, “a bold move” as they acknowledge that “significant differences exist in institutional mission, organization, and governance” of the legacy universities (USG, 2012).

Business, nonprofit, and political leadership were, and continue to be, supportive of the consolidation. There is a sense that the consolidation ensures that the medical school will now be securely anchored to Augusta and not be moved to Athens, as many community leaders feared. Moreover, the prospect of creating a research university, with the potential for innovative research, growth, and new employment opportunities is obviously attractive in a city where 24% of the population lives below the poverty level (Mayor Deke Copenhaver, personal communication, November 5, 2013). An important component of the consolidation was the selection of a name for the new university, embedded in the growing interest in the commercialization of higher education (Bok, 2009).

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Marketing and corporate communication scholars have repeatedly demonstrated the relationship between organizational names and their meaning for internal and external stakeholders (Olin, 1989). Balmer and Wilkinson (1991) note that during periods of upheaval and major change, it is particularly important to focus on corporate identity. To be successful, that identity should be driven by an over-arching strategic vision that ties the corporation's identity to its mission (Balmer & Soenen, 1999). Lowrie (2007) has explored the complex and often retroactive ways that naming creates branding identity for higher education in particular finding that naming in higher education can sometimes create antagonistic relationships where stakeholders who do not relate to the name feel incompatible with university mission and go elsewhere for education, employment or philanthropy. Public universities in particular have naming and branding challenges given the expectation of responsiveness to public needs that is not faced by private corporations and the tendency of public entity managers to often overlook the benefits and importance of marketing strategies (Whelan et al. 2010).

There are five basic principles in corporate marketing that can be applied to the process of changing the name of any organization, whether public or private, including the adoption of a name for a new consolidated university (Balmer & Geysler, 2006). These five principles are character, covenant, conceptualizations, communication and constituencies. Table 1 (Appendix) outlines these principles and provides a brief description of each one. This framework is the theoretical basis of our study with content analysis of current events reporting (newspaper articles and internal documents) forming the methodology.

### **Character**

For a name to be successful, it should preserve aspects of the organization's identity or character (Balmer & Soenen, 1999). This promotes a sense of continuity and respect for the past that internal and external stakeholders expect. Corporate identity changes that do not preserve at least some aspects of an organization's past character can backfire (Lomax & Mador, 2006) and in higher education, create antagonistic relationships with certain stakeholders (Lowrie, 2007). Leaders are challenged then to balance stakeholder attachment to the historical character of the organization with the necessary culture change to move it forward towards its new strategic vision.

Augusta State University (ASU) had deep roots in the local community and a strong sense of community and family (Bloodworth, 2012). Georgia Health Sciences University (GHSU) on the other hand had a state-wide presence. Before the consolidation with ASU,

GHSU already had a vision for becoming a regional and national presence in medical and biotechnology research (Azziz, undated). With the consolidation, came a new expanded vision: “Our vision is to be a top-tier university that is a destination of choice for education, health care, discovery, creativity, and innovation” (GRU, 2013). To balance this past with the new, much more ambitious vision was clearly a huge challenge. The clearest path forward was to couple the internationally-known name of Augusta (preserving a central aspect of ASU) with a name that conveyed the new vision of becoming what GRU President, Ricardo Azziz, MD, MPH, MBA (2012 May 1), called the next great American university.

### **Covenant**

Internal and external stakeholders expect a new name to explain the corporate covenant, or what the organization promises them. In addition, beyond the name change, stakeholders expect to see evidence that the covenant is being upheld (Lam, et al., 2010). For public universities part of the covenant is responsiveness to public needs and consideration of a wide variety of stakeholders (Whelan et al. 2010). In the case of the ASU-GHSU consolidation, external stakeholders would be expecting to see a new name capture in some way the excitement of becoming “the next great American university” with its promise of growth, innovation, and new opportunities for the community. Internal stakeholders would be looking to see a name that reflected the prestige and status of a Research 1 university. However, both sets of stakeholders would also be looking to see evidence that these promises were moving towards fulfillment. For example, internal stakeholders, in particular faculty from the former ASU, would be looking to see teaching loads, pay, and benefits commensurate with the move from a teaching towards a research university.

### **Conceptualizations**

Internal and external stakeholders actively seek evidence in corporate behavior and expressed values that a new name creates a new conceptualization of the organization. The adoption of the strategic plan, Transition Forward (GRU, 2013), articulates a new mission, vision, and organizational values for the newly merged institution. “The plan is designed to take the enterprise—the whole of the university, its aligned health system, and our branch campuses across Georgia and around the world—down the road toward success.”

The new mission statement, “to provide leadership and excellence in teaching, discovery, clinical care, and service as a student-centered comprehensive research university and academic health center with a wide range of programs from learning assistance through postdoctoral studies” captures the teaching and student-centered approach of the former ASU. At the same time, it includes the research and health components of the former GHSU. The new set of values (collegiality, compassion, excellence, inclusivity, integrity, and leadership) also incorporates aspects of both former institutions. “Collegiality” in particular is an expression of the organizational culture of the former ASU, while “compassion” clearly refers to the medical care aspects of the former GHSU. Moreover, the plan was developed by faculty and staff from both institutions, and all internal stakeholders had an opportunity to offer comments and suggestions through an on-line survey. Thus, stakeholders should expect the new name to express in some way this new mission, vision, and values.

## Communication

Given that there are internal and external stakeholders, as well as a wider public, communication is key to any name change (Kang & Fair, 2007). Employees are a particularly critical set of internal stakeholders since they communicate the new name internally and externally (Lomax & Mador, 2006). To ensure success, a communications plan that includes timelines, plans for creating new materials from stationary to major signage, the use of media outlets, and other tools is essential.

In particular, stakeholders expect to receive a clear explanation of the process used to select the new name (Balmer & Geysler, 2006). In the case of the ASU/GHSU consolidation, an important part of the communications plan was to explain to both internal and external stakeholders the process used, and include those stakeholders in that process. When done effectively, this builds acceptance of, and loyalty to, the new name and its associated organization.

## Constituencies

Once the name change occurs, the new name becomes the psychological property of a much wider segment of the population. In this case, students, faculty and staff, and the wider public become “owners” of the new name (Muzellec, 2006, Lowrie, 2007). A critically important external *constituency* for a university is its alumni with its associated philanthropic foundations. As the state’s budget for higher education continues to shrink (Suggs, 2013), institutions such as GRU rely increasingly on tuition revenue, donations, and grants. It therefore becomes important for stakeholders to embrace the new name so they encourage friends and family members to enroll in, and donate to, the new institution.

## METHODS

This case study explores the principles and processes of university name changes in the context of this consolidation of two disparate institutions with literature drawn largely from the marketing disciplines. Little is known about branding in academia due to lack of empirical studies and case studies in particular (Waerass & Solbakk, 2007). This case study describes a recent and remarkable renaming and rebranding approach that has predictable successes and failures given the current literature on higher education marketing and theoretical frameworks borrowed from the general marketing literature. The process of adopting the name “Georgia Regents University” and the public reaction are examined using a variety of sources ranging from media coverage to internal memoranda. Some lessons that can be learned when changing the name of a public organization in general and an institution of higher learning in particular are suggested.

## RESULTS

Once the consolidation of ASU and GHSU was announced, a series of working groups was formed to address the organizational, human resource, and budgetary challenges that come with such a massive undertaking. And speculation as to the new name began. A special committee was formed to collect ideas from the community; ultimately, almost 1,200

suggestions for the new name were placed in a pool. This number was then reduced to a more manageable 25, then cut further.

At this point in the process, the story begins to get interesting. David Brond, the Senior Vice President for Communications and Marketing, is quoted in a local newspaper as saying there were 6 on the final list (Crawford, 2012). But another sentence in the exact same article said there were 7 names that were ultimately tested in market research. However, President Azziz stated in a public forum (McManus & Mirshak, 2012) that the list was narrowed to just 3. In a guest blog on June 15, 2012, Susan Barcus, Senior Vice President and Chief Development Officer, announced there were 6 top names: Augusta University, University of Augusta, Arsenal University, Augusta Arsenal University, Bartram University, and Noble University. Of those six, three would be sent to the Board of Regents for approval after completion of a marketing study.

The A. L. Burruss Institute of Public Service and Research at Kennesaw State University was then hired to conduct a national survey to evaluate the potential new names at a cost of \$45,000. The original survey polled 1,200 people with the University of Augusta coming out as the most popular name. However, the process was complicated when the working group contacted the Burruss Institute and asked them to stop the survey and use a second set of names. According to David Brond, this change was made because none of the names on the original list included "Georgia" in the name. Since the other research universities in the state use "Georgia," he felt it was important to test a name that included "Georgia" (Crawford, 2012). However, Susan Barcus in her blog (June 15, 2012) stated "After careful consideration of multiple options, we determined that a name that contains Georgia (Georgia University? Georgian University?) would be difficult to differentiate in such a strong field of established universities."

With that change in place, the Burruss Institute finished the polling. However, the name ultimately chosen, "Georgia Regents University" was only provided to small subsample (200) of the original sample of 1,200. The name "University of Augusta" received the best results in the poll, with 57% of respondents ranking it 4 or 5 on a scale where 5 indicated "liked very much." "Georgia Regents University" came in 4<sup>th</sup> in the poll. President Azziz interpreted the results for the Regents name as "neutral"; however, Terry Sloope, the Assistant Director for Research at the Burruss Institute characterized the results for that name as "neutral to slightly negative" (Crawford, 2012).

Ultimately, the Board of Regents selected the name "Georgia Regents University" in a 17-1 vote. The board was not given the actual results of the Burruss Institute study. Reports of the final name disposition vary but only through unnamed sources; the conventional wisdom is that the Regents were presented with one name, the one recommended by unnamed staff. That name was "Georgia Regents University" (Jones, 2012). David Brond acknowledged that the new name did seem to ignore the results of the Burruss Institute study; however, he stated "you can't depend 100 percent on objective data" (Crawford, 2012).

In his first blog post after the public announcement of the name (August 13, 2012) President Azziz acknowledged that some people were inevitably going to be disappointed with the choice. He then went on to state, that "while important on one level, the selection of a name for this university is one of the lesser decisions that must be made in what is, and will continue to be, a complex and difficult process."

Public response was immediate and intensely negative. In an editorial in the local paper, the name was characterized as a "mega-clunker," the community was described as being "in full rebellion" against it, and the process of choosing the name as "arrogant, heavy-handed"

(“Suffocating,” 2012 August 12). During a public forum discussing the new name, President Azziz took heavy criticism from a highly skeptical audience that demanded to know why the survey results were ignored and \$45,000 wasted. One student in the audience told President Azziz, “We don’t trust you!” (McManus & Mirshak, 2012).

In the ensuing months, a grassroots campaign led by local business leaders began to protest the new name. Calling their campaign “Save the A,” the group succeeded in collecting thousands of signatures asking that the name be changed to “University of Augusta” in petitions sent to Board of Regents Chancellor Hank Huckaby and Governor Nathan Deal. In addition, hundreds of “Save the A” yard signs appeared across the city and vehicles were decorated with “Save the A” bumper stickers (Corwin, 2012a).

This campaign appeared to end successfully when, after months of discussion and negotiation, President Azziz and Chancellor Huckaby, along with “Save the A” members Nick Evans and Barry Storey announced a compromise solution. While the official name would not be changed, “Augusta” would be unofficially added to the Georgia Regents University name. According to President Azziz, the Georgia Regents University Augusta would “appear on all materials, shirts, cups and in the logo” (Corwin, 2012b).

In his annual State of the Enterprise address one week later (Corwin, 2012c), President Azziz acknowledged critics of the name. But went on to say “Some in our community are not yet ready or prepared to embrace and accept a strong and growing university in their midst. Nor do they fully comprehend that their success and future, and that of the city, is intimately tied to how well the university does. But I know that with time and continued education and engagement, those who oppose our progress and change will soon embrace the vision of this great university.”

The controversy over the name, however, did not end at this point. It resurfaced a few months later in what the local newspaper referred to as the “case of the disappearing logos.” Promotional materials developed for campus recruiters included photos of Augusta State University (ASU) athletes with its trademark insignia digitally erased. In photos of ASU’s back-to-back national championship golf team, the “A” logo had been removed. Photos of ASU’s men’s basketball team and softball players were also altered in this way. David Brond claimed the changes were made to avoid confusing potential students with the names of former institutions, and conform to the principle that “less is better”. Nick Evans from the Save the A campaign stated that the alterations seemed to be part of a pattern of abandoning the ‘Augusta’ name despite the compromise his group made with the university in August (Crawford, 2013a).

Josh Gregory, a former golf coach at ASU, labeled the removal of the logos a “complete embarrassment.” One former player, now on the PGA tour as a rookie, stated “It’s sad, pathetic, and a slap in the face for the people of Augusta” (Crawford, 2013b). In an editorial in the local newspaper, GRU’s leaders were criticized for failing to live up to the bargain made with the Save the A campaign and accused of deliberately attempting to “erase Augusta.” David Brond’s characterization of the decision the erasures were done to ‘eliminate other brands’ earned special scorn: “Really? That’s all Augusta State University is to these people? A ‘brand?’” (“The expunging of Augusta,” 2013). After spending an estimated \$10,000 on creating the publications and distributing as many as 5,000 to high school guidance counselors across the state, distribution was halted and Dr. Roman Cibirka, Vice Provost for Enrollment Management, accepted the blame in a public statement. He acknowledged what he characterized as “an error of judgment” and formally apologized to the Augusta community.

## DISCUSSION

The five marketing principles introduced earlier provide guidelines for how to successfully navigate the processing of naming a new university created from the consolidation of two legacy institutions. The principles are built on an understanding that names really do matter as they provide a quick guide to the meaning, purpose and culture of an organization. When used successfully, the principles can help an organization build loyalty and promote positive relationships with internal and external stakeholders.

The first principle, character, respectfully acknowledges the past of an organization while firmly focusing stakeholder attention on its intended future. Unfortunately, the chosen name did not provide any meaningful connection to the past of either institution involved in the consolidation. And it can be argued that the erasure of ASU logos and the perceived unwillingness of GRU leadership to honor its agreement with the Save the A campaign present clear evidence that the past, particularly that past associated with ASU, is neither respected nor cherished. Instead, it is a past best forgotten.

The new name should also reflect the institution's covenant, or promises, to the community. It is unclear what promise the name "Georgia Regents University" offers the community. But there is no doubt that the local community has no trust in whatever promises are made. In her blog, Susan Barcus (2012) claimed "your opinion is an integral part of this important and far-reaching decision." But the actual process used to choose the name succeeded in completely ignoring the local community's passionate desire to retain the city's name in the new university name. The community perceives that survey results were ignored, and agreements with the Save the A campaign were not kept. GRU leaders were quoted as having very different ideas about the importance of including "Georgia" in the new name, and conflicting reports were provided about just what was given to the Board of Regents to use in making the final decision. None of this promotes trust and confidence between the community and the university.

By way of contrast, the third principle of conceptualizations appears to have been well-handled. The institution did develop a mission statement, vision, values, and a strategic plan that do pay respect to the past but also paints a bold picture of a better future. Stakeholders had ample opportunity to participate in the process, offer feedback, suggestions, and comments through a convenient on-line process. Internal stakeholders such as faculty and employees were especially engaged and encouraged to rediscover legacy institutional values while considering new opportunities. Consistent themes among internal constituents occurred and this led to fairly consistent self-definition of the GRU future as a research extensive university with strong historical roots. Without conceptualization by internal stakeholders the University could be expected to remain in a state of ongoing self-definition without proceeding to the next step of communicating its identity to its external stakeholders (Waeraas & Solbakk, 2009).

Perhaps university administration was focused a bit much on a big and better future, including a focus on the global market using Georgia in the new name and rebranding strategies. This would be understandable given the trends in global student mobility and the new opportunities, challenges and an increasingly competitive higher education environment. Even with exceptional conceptualization of the future of the institution, problems can be expected. The legacy of universities for their local communities and the university proper, including faculty, students and staff, has great influence and can be expected to be a source of conflict in

any rebranding process that attempts to harmonize future, especially global, market aspirations of the university with its legacy (Hemsley-Brown & Goodawardana, 2007).

The issues noted earlier with the name selection process also led to problems with the fourth principle of marketing, communication. However clear the process may have been to those involved with it, that process was not clearly and effectively communicated to internal and external stakeholders. Statements that local opinion was important to the process were undermined when local sentiment was ignored and ‘Augusta’ was not part of the chosen name. And the confusing statements, coupled with the “case of the disappearing logos,” convinced many locals that the name Georgia Regents University was a deliberate “slap in the face.”

The final principle deals with the importance of constituencies, particularly external stakeholders such as alumni. The initial community reaction to the name raises serious doubts about whether these constituencies will be willing to support the new name with efforts to steer potential students to the institution and provide it with monetary support. Many alumni have been vocal in their criticism of the new name and two trustees (one from the hospital and the other from the medical college foundation) resigned in protest over the choice of name (R. Smith, personal communication, October 25, 2013). This does not bode well for the institution.

## CONCLUSION

Just two years before the consolidation with ASU, GHSU had successfully changed its name from the former Medical College of Georgia to the more inclusive and descriptive name of Georgia Health Sciences University. That process had begun informally a decade earlier, an ultimately involved three separate studies, and a highly organized and thorough communication plan once the new name was approved. The selection of the GRU name, along with how it was handled with the community, stands in sharp contrast. This contrast was not, as some locals believe, the result of a well-conceived and executed plot to insult Augusta and its residents. Rather, it was most likely the result of the speed with which the consolidation was conducted. From time of official announcement to the execution of the consolidation, planning committees had less than a year to choose a new name and communicate it to internal and external stakeholders as well as the general public. One important conclusion then seems to be that a successful name change requires a significant investment of time, certainly more time than was allocated in this case.

A second lesson to be learned from this case concerns the process used to change the name. The steps used in this process were appropriate; however, specific details provided in public statements seemed to contradict each other. For example one GRU official said there were 6 names in the final pool, another said 3. In the end, they may both have been talking about the same process, just different steps. But as reported in the local media, the statements come across as contradictory, as though university leadership had not coordinated its actions. Clear, coordinated communication with the public is essential to promote confidence in the university’s leadership and the processes it uses to make decisions. Such communication was lacking, and as a consequence, the community lost trust in the institution and its leadership.

One final lesson involves the specific language chosen by institutional leadership. Referring to Augusta State University as a “brand,” or labeling those who do not like the new name as being “opposed to progress,” does not promote good relationships with the community. Such language is correctly seen as disrespectful and using the framework of Lowrie (2007), antagonistic of key stakeholders.

During its last year of existence, Dr. Shirley Strum Kenney served as the interim president of Augusta State University. Just prior to the official consolidation, she wrote a final letter to President Azziz which was subsequently published in the local paper (Kenney, 2013). In it, she summed up the dilemma facing the institution after the name change: “There will have to be considerable fence-mending in the community. The whole town really loves ASU; it was their place, and it has been dissed and discarded, in their eyes. The University definitely has fence-mending to do, and you should find some really talented people to do it. Otherwise, the old resentments will not die.”

This article contributes to better understanding of branding in academia in the ever more competitive environment in higher education. The theoretical watchwords for renaming and rebranding for any organization are the five C’s, including *character, covenant, conceptualizations, communication and constituencies* (Balmer & Geyser, 2006). The case study shows that the theory holds evidenced by successes and failures of a consolidation effort, with lessons to be learned for many types of public institutions. Specific and predictable challenges are explored through the case and its particular set of events, yet there is much more research to do as public institutions of higher learning reorganize and restructure to address continually decreasing financial resources and increasing competition from domestic and global sources (Mingle, 2000).

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**APPENDIX**

**Table 1: Principles for Corporate Identity Change (Balmer & Geysler, 2006)**

<b>Principle</b>	<b>Description</b>
Character	Preserving aspects of the historical identity while signaling profound change in the organizational culture
Covenant	Explaining organizational promises or value
Conceptualizations	Creating a vision for stakeholders of what the organization is meant to become
Communication	Engaging with internal and external stakeholders
Constituencies	Aligning the proposed name with related organizations and entities such as alumni organizations or foundations

