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"Pretend that every single person you meet has a sign around his or her neck that says, "Make me feel important."

—Mary Kay Ash, Founder of Mary Kay Cosmetics

"It's all about you."

—Slogan in a 2006–2007 College viewbook

Introduction

Viewbooks—the glossy multi-page brochures that colleges and universities send to tens of thousands of prospective students each year—are an important medium by which institutions of higher learning entice students to matriculate. Well into the age of the Internet and the ease of interactive virtual college tours, students and parents report that college viewbooks[1] continue to play an important role in the initial courtship between student and campus (Lipman Hearne, 2001; Jaschik, 2005). Indeed, an entire industry exists to aid institutions in the design and production of these publications and college and university admissions and

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public relations professionals spend a significant amount of time and money fashioning viewbooks in order to entice students to apply.

But what are the messages conveyed in these viewbooks? What do institutions say in one of their first communications with prospective students? Although college viewbooks have been a fixture of American higher education for decades, there has been precious little attention paid to the explicit (and implicit) messages in their glossy pages. Here we offer the first empirically-based, theoretically-guided work on the subject of viewbooks. Our investigation was informed by three simple questions:

1. What content themes are found in college viewbooks?
2. Do content themes vary by institutional type and control?
3. What messages (if any) are communicated to students about the academic purposes of higher education?

The patterns that emerged from our analysis reveal a great deal about the messages colleges and universities convey to prospective students and raise important questions about how a college education is described at a critical juncture in the college decision making process.

Communicating in a crowded marketplace

In the past two decades, many colleges and universities have altered their activities in response to an increasingly competitive market for students (Zemsky, Shaman, & Shapiro, 2001). This is evident, for example, in the dramatic expansion of professional programs of study (Brint, 2002) as students increasingly seek higher education to "get a good job" (Astin, 1998). It is also apparent in how institutions represent themselves to key external constituencies (Morphew & Hartley, 2006). Today, many colleges and universities use images and symbols to project their institutional identities. "Branding," a marketing term long familiar to The Gap but virtually unheard of among higher education institutions until two decades ago, is now commonly used on American campuses (Toma, Dubrow, & Hartley, 2005). Despite the legitimate concerns that have been raised about the capacity of a market mentality to distort academic purposes (Bok, 2003; Grubb & Lazerson, 2005), the fact remains that college and universities are aggressively employing marketing tactics. Consultants and "strategists" bombard college admissions and public relations offices with offers to assist in developing a brand and monitoring how it is perceived by prospective and current students (Frank, 2000; Litten & Brodigan, 1982; Sevier & Sickler, 2006; Schwartz, 1993). Their message is simple: image is everything. What images various institutions choose to assert, however, remains largely unexplored.

Although the college choice process is highly complex and precludes the formulation of simple models, Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper (1999) argue that at its core, the process consists of "information gathering and information-processing" (p. 153). One of the most common means of communicating institutional information to students in the pre-admission process is the college viewbook. The *very* limited research that exists on viewbooks is cursory in its methodology and conceptualization. It consists of (a) comparisons between the descriptions of viewbooks and the perceptions of prospective students (Durgin, 1998); (b) documentation (i.e. counting) of the percentage of viewbooks that mention financial aid or contain pictures describing student life (Hite & Yearwood, 2001); (c) in-depth analysis of visual images in a small number of viewbooks (Klassen, 2001) and (d) examination of viewbooks in the context of a particular student life issue (Grimes, 2001). There is no empirical study that analyzes a large sample of viewbooks qualitatively, with the benefit of a conceptual framework within which the findings can be understood.

We believe that it is important to pay attention to what institutions of higher learning say to prospective students. The words, images, and symbols included in the condensed space of a viewbook constitute the basis on which institutions choose to begin forming a relationship with their students. More importantly, perhaps, these words and symbols play a substantial role in shaping how students think about the college experience during the early "attentive search" stage of the college choice process. Viewbooks also play a significant role during the latter stages of this process. Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper (1999) report that, when they surveyed a group of 12th graders about the information they used to learn more about the colleges they were considering, students ranked "publications and written information sent to you by colleges" (p. 107) as most important.

Some studies have examined how institutions communicate to external audiences through the use of mission statements (Lang & Lopers-Sweetman, 1991; Lenning & Micek, 1976; Schwerin, 1980; Carruthers & Lott, 1981; Davies, 1986; Keller, 1983; Newsom & Hayes, 1991; Morphew & Hartley, 2006). But unlike mission statements, which have various internal and external audiences (e.g. trustees, alumni, faculty, community leaders), viewbooks are directed at prospective students at the genesis of their college careers. They are a unique and particularly important institutional artifact because these messages inform the initial expectations students have about their postsecondary experience.

In addition to identifying predominant themes, we were particularly interested in examining the ways in which institutions convey their aca-

demic purposes. To that end we turned to the conceptual work of David Labaree (1997) who has eloquently described the persistent struggle over the goals of American educational institutions. He posits three distinct purposes that educational institutions explicitly or implicitly embrace: democratic equality, social efficiency, and social mobility. The first two goals are closely associated with notions of public good. Schooling should prepare students to be engaged citizens and also economically productive members of society (and thus contributors to the general welfare as taxpayers). Social mobility, by contrast, is linked to notions of education as a private good—the desire to personally benefit from a college education and to use the credential to get ahead financially and socially.

Colleges send messages to key constituent groups that can be linked to each of Labaree's (1997) three goals, though there is variation across institutional type and control. Our earlier analysis of mission statements shows that private colleges and universities tend to profess themes of democratic equality (e.g. preparing civic leaders), while public colleges and universities emphasize service to the local or regional economy and preparation for the workforce (Morphew & Hartley, 2006). Labaree would argue that these constructs reflect institutional commitment to social efficiency as well as social mobility (that is, the benefits of higher education are primarily economic though there is both a public and private benefit). This paper extends this analysis to viewbooks and compares the disparate purposes that are reflected in the images and text of the viewbooks across a range of institutional types.

Methods

For this study we employed content analysis as a means of systematically identifying, classifying, and tabulating the symbols, images, and messages from the viewbooks of 48 four-year colleges and universities across the United States. Content analysis is an empirically grounded method of examining text and images in order identify messages and meaning (Krippendorff, 2004). Berelson (1952) describes content analysis as "a research technique for the objective, systematic, and quantitative description of the manifest content of communication" (p. 18). Content analysis involves not only describing what is said but involves drawing inferences about the meanings in the messages (Holsti, 1969). Thus, a picture of smiling students is an image found in nearly all college viewbooks. The meaning that can be inferred from these messages is that college is pleasant or fun.

Content analysis embraces both qualitative and quantitative data. Not only are particular themes identified, but the frequency of themes provides additional information about the primacy of messages being conveyed. The method entails analyzing visual media through a structured series of activities, all of which were followed for this study (Krippendorff, 2004):

- *Sampling*: Establishing clear criteria for selecting the media analyzed (e.g. random, stratified);
- *Unitizing*: Identifying a set of discrete themes;
- *Reduction*: Systematically tabulating and summarizing data;
- *Making inferences*: Interpreting the patterns that emerge from the identified themes.

Content analysis has been used in the social and psychological sciences for decades, especially by linguists, anthropologists, and sociologists interested in communications research. Because viewbooks are vehicles of communication that employ the use of language, images, and symbols, content analysis is methodology ideally suited to their analysis.

The sample analyzed for this study contained viewbooks from 24 public institutions and 24 private institutions, including 15 research universities, 16 comprehensive universities, and 17 baccalaureate colleges.

The 48 viewbooks were gathered from colleges and universities from all regions of the country and include a range of institutional types including HBCUs, elite baccalaureate colleges, and research universities, as well as lesser-known public and private colleges. The institutions sampled reflected the diversity of missions among higher education institutions as well, including members of the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities, Council on Public Liberal Arts Colleges, 568 Presidents' Group, and Association of American Universities. In all, 23

TABLE 1
Distribution of Viewbooks Analyzed, by Type and Control

Institution Type	Number (public, private)
Baccalaureate College	17 (6, 11)
Comprehensive University	16 (10, 6)
Research University	15 (8, 7)
Total	*48 (24, 24)*

states are represented, from Maine to California and Florida to Idaho. The researchers purposively chose a diverse sample of viewbooks with the expectation that different messages will have more or less resonance based on the region in which the college or university is located. That is, given the prevalence of liberal arts colleges in the Northeast—and their popularity with students—institutions from that region may emphasize this selling point more than comparable colleges and universities located in the South.

In addition, we drew a sample of 15 viewbooks from colleges and universities identified by external agents as being committed to a larger public purpose either by virtue of their being recipients of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching's new community engagement classification[2] (5) or selected as a "Colleges with a Conscience" by the Princeton Review guide (11).[3] (Four institutions appeared in both listings.) Our intent was to see whether the messages conveyed by this group's viewbooks differed substantially from other institutions in the sample.

Consistent with good practice in content analysis, we began by devising a common classification procedure to ensure we were coding text and images in a similar fashion (Weber, 1990). Each of us independently reviewed several viewbooks from each institutional type. This yielded an initial list of 92 distinct themes. To ensure intercoder reliability, we then independently coded a set of ten viewbooks using these themes (Lombard et al, 2002). Subsequent comparison of coding patterns demonstrated the establishment of a shared interpretation of the meaning of pictures and words in the viewbooks. We also discovered that a number of our initial themes were so closely related that distinguishing between them in our coding was unnecessary. We therefore combined terms (thus, "clubs" and "activities" were subsumed under the broader category of "co-curricular/non-athletic activities"). We thereby reduced the total number of themes to 52.

Mindful that pictures and words might be used differently by colleges and universities in their construction of messages to prospective students, we coded words and pictures separately. This allowed for an analysis of how distinctive content themes were more or less likely to be associated with words rather than pictures and vice versa. We also paid particular attention to what viewbooks emphasized. Thus, we indicated in our coding what messages were contained in the first page of text. We also identified themes that were particularly stressed (ones that were either repeatedly mentioned in the viewbook or took up several paragraphs of text or half a page or more of space). Finally, we entered entire passages of text or descriptions of pictures in our electronic coding sheet in order to facilitate cross-institutional comparison of rhetoric around particular themes.

It should be noted that any interpretive act, including content analysis, requires a measure of judgment. The analysis that follows is based on our reading of the data. It is possible that other researchers might produce alternative interpretations. That said, the rigor of content analysis as a method, the consistency in coding between the researchers, the presence of two researchers of diverse backgrounds, and the fairly bold and clear messages imparted in the viewbooks give us a measure of confidence in the following analysis.

Findings

Déjà Vu All Over Again: Viewbooks as a Genre

Though viewbooks differ somewhat in length (from a minimum of four-pages to upwards of seventy), all of the viewbooks we analyzed were full-color, glossy, multipage documents filled with text and splashy pictures representing college life. If prospective students were to define colleges and universities solely by what appears in viewbooks they would quickly conclude that campuses are idyllic havens. They are proximate either to exciting cosmopolitan centers or the wholesome great American outdoors. They are filled with happy and healthy students (in only a few instances were the presence of a health or counseling center mentioned). Undergraduates are a racially diverse and a generally attractive group—all are in their late teens or early twenties. There are no disabled, obese, or depressed students. Everyone belongs. There are unparalleled opportunities for students to participate in a range of stimulating (if not outright "fun") activities inside the classroom (with smiling, attentive faculty members at hand) not to mention a myriad of co-curricular options. Classes tend to be small.[4] The faculty are a mixture of Marie Curie, Mr. Chips, and Mr. Rogers, notable for their international scholarly reputations, commitment to teaching and nurturing attentiveness to each "special" student in the academic neighborhood. Happily, all colleges and universities have a range of financial aid options—especially scholarships—that render postsecondary education "affordable" (so much so that many viewbooks don't need feel the need to trouble the reader with petty details such as how much tuition is). In sum, viewbooks paint a hopeful, idealized and somewhat unrealistic portrait of undergraduate life.

Looking underneath this generic utopian ideal, content analysis reveals the presence of six thematic areas that featured prominently in the viewbooks we analyzed.

TABLE 2
Six Thematic Areas and Examples

Theme	Examples
Institutional context/campus features	• Great location • Campus beauty • Campus landmarks • Diversity of the student body • Use of technology
Academics/faculty	• Curriculum/Majors • Student/Faculty interaction • Low student/faculty ratio • Chance to study abroad
Co-curricular opportunities	• Students having fun • Students engaged in non-sports activities (e.g. clubs) • Varsity and intramural sports • Residence life (housing, dining)
Admissions and financial aid	• Admissions requirements • Presence of financial aid/scholarships • How to visit campus
Value of an education	• Successful alumni • Validation through external rankings or guidebooks
Purpose of higher education	• Preparing students for a job • Formative/developmental

The attractiveness of the institutional context and various campus features were emphasized in the text within the first few pages of almost every viewbook we analyzed and supported throughout in pictures (often beginning on the cover). Colleges and universities are place-bound and their attractiveness is significantly defined by their campuses (their beauty or the extent of their facilities) and geographically (whether they are close to cities or to the ocean or the mountains). Part of this "context" is the student body itself. We found almost no references to non-traditional students (or commuters) and few to transfer students. The viewbooks depict students as a diverse, young, fun-loving crowd. Physically, the prevailing image, even at institutions with large commuter populations, is the archetypal residential college—brick, stone, and grass covered quad. Viewbooks spend considerable space highlighting their geographical attractiveness, or making the most of their location. In two cases, institutions in northern climes spent several paragraphs discussing the beauty of truly experiencing the four seasons and even specifying average winter temperatures to assure prospective students from more temperate regions of the country. Campus beauty is

depicted in images of campus landmarks—a façade, a tree lined walkway, a statue. There's no construction on campuses—certainly no deferred maintenance—and nary a rainy day.

After this brief introduction, the viewbooks take two different routes. Approximately a third of them go on to highlight the "campus community" and co-curricular life, often underscoring the institution's nurturing and communal qualities. Only after that is established is the issue of coursework broached. The majority of institutions, however, immediately address academics, listing majors and various programmatic offerings. A little more than half of the viewbooks offer student profiles or testimonials about academics. Three-quarters of the viewbooks reference a particular curricular feature (e.g. an honors program, a program for first year students, service learning), however, often such descriptions are cursory.

Despite the presence of highly distinctive institutions in our diverse system of higher education (Cardozier, 1993; Townsend, Newell, & Weise, 1992), we were surprised at how few institutions chose to appeal to prospective students on the basis of some distinctive feature or characteristic. One of the few that did wryly observed, "All those college brochures. The campus photos start to look the same after a while, don't they? Rolling meadows with big trees. Impressive buildings. Bright, smiling student faces. You've seen it all before. Maybe too many time[s] before. So what makes [us] different?" Another institution boasted "a curriculum as extraordinary as its history. At the center of this curriculum is a core . . . [though] many other colleges and universities have abandoned or diluted their core curricula." But the vast majority of viewbooks demonstrate a tendency toward conformity using similar sets of stereotypical collegiate images. The mascots, students, faculty, and the precise layouts of their quads may differ but many of the images one sees in college viewbooks could almost be interchangeable.

Another theme that emerged from our analysis was a downplaying of the rigors of academic life. Academic programs are listed (and some even described) but a clear inference that can be drawn from the viewbooks we examined is that students spend very little time studying. Half of the viewbooks contain not a single picture of a student studying. Among those that do, a few chose to depict the lone scholar, almost invariably at work in an idyllic setting—outside on a bench or a sunlit reading nook in a library. In the vast majority of cases, students are shown in groups whether in the library, in labs, or their rooms. Even many of the images of students working on computers show them in pairs. Certainly collaborative learning has many potential benefits and some institutions have made a marked commitment to encouraging such

pedagogies. But it is also the case that success in college requires a great deal of individual discipline and effort. That message is never conveyed.

A number of small, private colleges touted study abroad programs through splashy photos of students in front of well-known landmarks—the Eiffel Tower, the Colosseum, a large Galapagos turtle, even atop a mountain. But the images are more suggestive of tourism than academia. The students are not shown carrying notebooks. They are not engaged in spirited discussion nor are they shown interacting with individuals from other countries, though such poses would be quite easy to arrange.

Many institutions chose to underscore the idea that faculty care about the students and want to nurture and support their intellectual and personal growth. This is a laudable view and one espoused by many institutions. But in some viewbooks the sentiment becomes distorted. One describing its faculty indicated that "their doors are always open" and that students should walk right in because faculty members are "eager to talk and to answer questions. You're not interrupting." The fact that faculty have other legitimate demands on their time, even at teaching-centered institutions, such as remaining current in their field, participating in disciplinary or departmental matters, working with other students (not to mention the fact that entering an office without knocking is rude) is ignored. Another viewbook indicated the number of large explosions that a particular chemistry professor could be expected to produce. Such statements may be intended simply to make college seem exciting or less intimidating but they also convey the idea that the entertainment value of a college is an important consideration. There is a not-so-subtle distinction between signaling that the institution is a supportive academic environment and portraying faculty as concierges or clowns.

Out of class (co-curricular) activities are a predominant thematic area. A great deal of attention is paid to clubs, programs, student organizations, and residential options, but dwarfing all of these is athletics. It is the rare viewbook that doesn't include a picture of a student engaged in varsity sports, often high profile men's sports like football or basketball. The educational value of a rich co-curriculum is indisputable. Unfortunately, the viewbooks rarely make an appeal on this basis. Instead, the message is that there are a wide variety of things to do and that collegiate life is, well, fun. As one caption put it, "Good times this way!" There are places to hang out, athletic and cultural events to enjoy, and friends to talk to as you cross the quad or sit in your room. As one institution noted, this is "an active campus in [a] booming region [where] you will find plenty of options to enjoy and explore." Student testimonials about the fun quotient are easy to find and co-curricular activities are clearly presented as a primary consideration in choosing a college. As a

student featured in one viewbook explained: "I'm big into sailing, and the outdoor activities absolutely are some of the best things at [this university]. That's a major thing that attracted me to this school."

Ultimately, since their primary purpose is to entice students to apply, every viewbook offers admissions information. Some contain complete applications materials. Other institutions refer to a website or include a card to request additional materials. Two-thirds of the viewbooks provided information about admissions requirements (e.g. numbers of required college preparatory courses, the need to submit SAT or ACT scores.) Most of the small colleges indicated a desire to create a "well rounded class," implying that an individual applicant will be considered in the context of an emerging cohort of students, not simply "by the numbers." In fact, many highly selective institutions implied that all worthy applicants will be considered for admission. As one elite college put it, "In admissions decisions, we seek excellence—in academics, art, music, theater, work experience, publications, leadership, public service, and athletics." What constitutes "excellence," however, is left to the imagination.

Two-thirds of the viewbooks encourage prospective students to visit. As one public university stated, "The best way to find out if a university is right for you is to spend time on campus . . . to meet the people who study, work, and live here." Mention of financial aid (often visually separated from the admissions discussion) tends to emphasize affordability and the commitment of the institution to "work with all students admitted to the College to help them find the means necessary to attend." Examples of various scholarships in some cases are listed but the total number available is never specified. Half of the viewbooks we analyzed contained no specific information on tuition costs. There were also some statements that could mislead less savvy students. One institution indicated that "Approximately 87% of [our] undergraduates receive some type of financial aid." However, included in that figure were federal loans. In a few cases, the financial aid discussion drifted towards *Let's Make a Deal* with one institution giving special "grants" to children of alumni ($1,000) or in one case "family grants," a volume discount of $2,200 if children from the same family attend.

The Imperative of Narrowly Differentiating

Organizational theorist Michael Porter argues that the primary dimensions on which institutions compete are price and differentiation (Porter, 1998). As mentioned above, half of the viewbooks in our sample dispense with the former by simply not including the "price." Rather, they emphasize a willingness to help the student find the financial means to

attend. Therefore the central thrust of the appeal for most of these institutions is differentiation but within a tightly proscribed genre. Though certain forms are observed, viewbooks do have distinct characteristics that to some degree set them apart from one another. Compare the following statements on academics from four viewbooks we examined:

> *College 1: "Don't expect to take notes, memorize or reproduce information on a test."*
>
> *College 2: "[Attending our institution] is, first and foremost, about the life of the mind. It is about intellectual challenge. While that refers to challenging material and tough courses, it also implies that professors will challenge you to test your assumptions about what you know and believe and about the nature of learning. [We] will help you discover how far you can go."*
>
> *College 3: "[Our] core curriculum contains the essence of the classic liberal arts education. Through it, our students are introduced to the history, the philosophical and theological ideas, the works of literature and the scientific discoveries that set Western Civilization apart."*
>
> *College 4: "[Attending our institution] is about academic excellence. It is also engagement, political awareness, leadership, community service, arts and the media, activism, citizenship and responsibility. Our faculty and students understand that the greatest outcome of [this] education is transforming your knowledge into action and by what you do, learning even more."*

Each of these statements comes from a baccalaureate college. But the messages (and institutions) are distinct. The first is from a non-selective college that emphasizes a nurturing environment and student support. The other three take pride in the rigor of their academic program. However, the academic programs they represent are distinct. College 2's emphasis on the "life of the mind" and an engagement in intellectually challenging work that will "test your assumptions" represents a particular liberal arts ideal—an education that encourages critical thinking, free thought, and the formation of an independent identity. By contrast, College 3 offers a "classical" education based on the merits of "Western Civilization." Here, a set of important ideas are to be conveyed to the students and form the foundation of their education. Finally, College 4 promotes a wedding of liberal arts and experiential education. In a real sense, these institutions have carved out a particular niche—one not oc-

cupied by any of the other three. Similar comparisons could be drawn in other thematic areas as well. Although large universities reference the excitement and school spirit generated by having a competitive Division 1 athletic program, they also are keen to emphasize participation. "At some point—in the midst of participating in on all your own activities and competitions—you'll probably also want to take some time to become a part of the proud tradition of [our] Division 1 athletics." Institutions in other divisions emphasize participation and the ideal of the "scholar-athlete": "Forget warming the bench at some oversized institution. Turn up the heat with [our] athletics. Dunk the winning basket. Kick the perfect field goal. Sink the spot-on putt. Cross the finish line in a blaze of glory because [here], you're the star."

But ultimately this is differentiation within a fairly restrictive range. (No institution, for example, argues that athletics is irrelevant in an institution of higher learning.) It is rather a matter of highlighting some elements and not others, not questioning the presence of the accepted set of elements. This makes good sense as a marketing strategy. In part it is a matter of giving the "customer" what they expect. As institutional theorists have explained, there are powerful normative expectations that confer legitimacy on institutions, particularly where technologies and outcomes are difficult to define and measure (DiMaggio & Powell, 1991). As Meyer and Rowan (1977) observe, "Organizations that incorporate societally legitimated rationalized elements in their formal structures maximize their legitimacy and increase their resources and survival capabilities." The danger for any organization operating in an institutionalized environment is seeming too different, which might cause others to question said organization's legitimacy.

Prospective students and their parents have only rough indicators for determining variations in quality among colleges and universities, such as average SAT scores, percentages of students continuing on to graduate school, and retention rates. Such rational arguments are not the appeal being made in the vast majority of viewbooks. Instead, institutions establish their legitimacy by projecting a collegiate image. (Looks like a beautiful campus with happy students, attentive faculty, a quad and a football team, must be a good one!) Evident in viewbooks is the prevalence of institutional isomorphism.

Why don't institutions stake out unique claims? Surely distinctiveness has advantages. A distinctive institution is better able to draw students to itself that share similar values or interests (Townsend, Newell, & Wiese, 1992). It will greatly appeal to a particular group of students. But this reveals the double-edged sword. Pepperdine and Hillsdale may to appeal to students of a different political leaning than Hampshire and Oberlin

and in doing so both actively define and exclude portions of the student market. It is a niche strategy and one with risks. First, because of the normative pressures outlined above, students looking for something "mainstream" may balk at applying. A second risk of occupying a specific niche is that the environment may shift over time (as some women's colleges, faith-based institutions, and historically black colleges and universities have found). Organizations that have clearly defined (and deeply held) institutional purposes are loathe to abandon them, even if they become a competitive disadvantage (Collins & Porras, 1996.) This is laudable—we certainly are not calling into question the validity of institutions with distinctive missions—but it is clear that it can be a challenge to "sell" these vision in a market dominated by a generic collegiate ideal. As the admissions director of a highly selective women's college mentioned to one of us recently, "A lot of prospective students initially say they wouldn't even consider a women's college—it's a hurdle I have to get beyond again and again before they'll even take a look and see the wonderful educational experience we have to offer."

Institutions in this situation have a balancing act to perform. One college with strong ties to the conservative movement whose board voted to refuse all federal aid so it could ignore affirmative action presents this history as a somewhat vague and mild morality tale about "independence." The political dimension is never mentioned and the board's (and donors') conservative views are sidestepped. In sum, the distinctive ideological stance is softened to appeal to a wider swath of applicants. Another college affiliated with an evangelical denomination created its viewbook (one of the more distinctive we reviewed) in the form of a teen magazine, complete with advice columns and top 10 lists. The text makes clear that this is an institution where religious commitment is highly valued. Prominent profiles of a student and alumnus point to the importance of faith. So, the religious nature of the institution is acknowledged but the overall viewbook conveys a fun and ultimately quite conventional (even worldly) image. By contrast, another evangelical university underscored its strong religious nature in a manner that other faith based institutions we reviewed tended to avoid. On the inside of the viewbook's cover, the president proclaims, "We want [our] university under the Lordship of Jesus Christ." The viewbook includes a full-page picture of a student actively engaged in prayer. Few institutions are willing to take as clear a stand.[5] Instead they attempt to hedge their bets with vague slogans such as "what a college should be" or profess that they are "special" while all the while adhering to rather banal convention. Even the viewbook of an HBCU we analyzed made no reference to its distinctive mission and history, instead asserting "[The college] was created

just for you." It seems that many institutions are left in the paradoxical position of wanting to emphasize their special nature while remaining conventional—exciting and enticing but somehow familiar, unique but not weird. This is the dangerous water in which viewbooks must tread. Viewbooks must differentiate, but do so in a legitimate fashion that doesn't scare students away.

The Private Purpose of American Higher Education

One of the most striking findings of this study concerns the viewbooks' treatment of the purposes of a college education. In a third of the viewbooks there was either a brief reference to the purpose of higher education, often couched in terms of personal aspiration (e.g. "we'll help you reach your dreams") or no reference at all. Though these viewbooks might describe innovative academic programs or note the successes of their alumni or point to their place in external rankings (e.g. *U.S. News and World Report*, the *Fiske Guide*)—all markers of quality and value—they made no attempt to explain what higher education is for.

Half of the viewbooks we analyzed emphasize the formative nature of a college education—its capacity to promote human growth. Nearly half discuss the enrichment of a liberal arts education (and these two concepts were often conveyed in the same viewbook). Some of these appeals are quite eloquent. However, the benefits garnered by these experiences tend to be expressed in highly personal terms, an individual benefit. More than half the time, viewbooks making such lofty pronouncements underscore the economic benefit of college education as well. As one institution states, "college . . . is a search to understand ourselves, our purpose in life." But then it adds, conspiratorially: "Let's be honest, one of the reasons you're planning to attend college is so you can build a great career, right?"

Fully a third of the viewbooks, without a hint of self-consciousness, described the benefit of a college education in purely economic terms. As one university put it: "Some consider a plum job with financial freedom to be the true standard of success, while others see it as stellar grades and admission to a top graduate school. With [our] diploma, you may define your own success"—that is, narrowly as individual career advancement. One small college not only proudly asserted its vocational orientation, but sought to undercut its liberal arts competitors by stating that it was "no head-in-the-clouds place for idle contemplation. [This] is a hands-on place." Another stated its purpose as one fit for an investment prospectus: "The University works hand-in-hand with businesses, community organizations and neighborhoods in the greater [metropolitan] area to ensure that we deliver top quality education that meets the needs of the market."

The Public Purposes of Colleges and Universities

We found few references to any larger, public purpose for higher education in the viewbooks. We identified only four viewbooks that referenced the importance of preparing students to become engaged citizens—all were selective or highly selective private institutions. Although half of the viewbooks made reference to public-spirited activities such as service-learning and/or community service (among the most frequently cited strategies for promoting civic engagement (Colby et al, 2003; Hollander & Hartley, 2003; Kezar, 2005)) only one viewbook in seven gave these activities more than a fleeting mention. Among the 15 institutions who were designated Colleges with a Conscience or received the Carnegie engagement classification, three quarters mentioned community-based activities but only a third dedicated at least a paragraph to describing them.

The message that emanates from viewbooks is an extremely privatized conception of American higher education. Attempting to use Labaree's (1997) framework, we found it remarkably difficult to identify any references to democratic purposes. Though service to society and a desire to prepare citizens are ideals that feature prominently in institutional statements intended for other audiences (e.g. board members, faculty) (Morphew & Hartley, 2006) these ideas are apparently considered irrelevant to prospective students. Labaree's notion of social efficiency—that education benefits society by preparing people to enter it as well-trained and productive members—is implicit in some of the messages found in the viewbooks. There certainly is a great deal of talk about preparing for "careers," for example. But we found not a single mention of a larger societal benefit of higher education in the set of viewbooks we examined. The overarching emphasis is that education benefits the individual.

One area critically important to our democracy is that of diversity. College and universities are places in our society where people of different racial and socioeconomic backgrounds work and learn together. Given the segregated nature of American society, colleges and universities allow students to encounter others with different life experiences and perspectives and provide the opportunity to learn from those interactions. Almost all of institutions made reference to diversity in their viewbooks, most frequently through the presence of a diverse student body in the pictures. (In fact, 9 of 48 viewbooks depicted diversity in this way with no accompanying text.) But the prevailing message in the majority of them was simply that students of all races, creeds and incomes are welcome. Diversity is frequently "celebrated," but ill defined. For example, a number of institutions referenced the diversity of their student body and then went on to describe their geographic distribu-

tion—"our students hail from 46 states and 23 countries." Or, in more narrative form, "You could be lab partners with a biology major from Australia. Share a lunch table with an exchange student from Germany. Run sprints with a placekicker from Chicago. Be folder partners with a soprano from New Jersey (a singer—not a character on HBO)." The issue of race is thereby sidestepped. Only five institutions' viewbooks directly linked the presence of diversity with the academic purpose of the institution. One liberal arts college stated that it

> is committed to fostering a fully inclusive campus community, enriched by persons of different races, ethnicities, nationalities, economic backgrounds, ages, abilities, sexual orientations and spiritual values. We strive to confront and overcome actions and attitudes that discourage the widest possible range of participation in our community, and we seek to deepen our understanding of diversity in our daily relationship and in our dealings as an institution.

Similarly, a public university eloquently noted, "True learning requires open debate, civil discourse, and tolerance of many different individuals and ideas. We are preparing students to live and work in a world that speaks with many voices and from many cultures. Tolerance is not only essential to learning, it is an essential to be learned." Unfortunately, few institutions seem willing to make the obvious point that their marketplace of ideas is enriched by the diversity of the people at their institution and to link that educational outcome with the larger ongoing work of our country in terms of race relations and preparing for an ever more global economy.

Viewbooks are expensive to produce and intended to prompt action. So difficult decisions, no doubt, must be made about what to include. However, if first impressions matter, the message being conveyed at the beginning of the courtship between institution and student is essentially: we exist to serve you (singular), or as one institution put it, "It's all about you." This seems to us highly problematic for several reasons. First, it is grossly inaccurate. Students deserve a fine education, but it would be absurd for an individual student to claim "it's all about me." There are competing claims on faculty members' time, including generating new knowledge, serving on committees, disciplinary work (not to mention serving other students!). In depicting a caring environment, institutions ought to beware of giving the impression that students should expect hand-holding. Few institutions have the resources to provide it and all should question its efficacy. Further, even a highly supportive educational environment must make demands on students. Learning requires commitment and hard work, a concept wholly absent in these viewbooks. Alongside rights (and many potential benefits) there are also responsibilities.

Second, students have many co-curricular opportunities and such involvement should bring pleasure to the individual. But couldn't the point also be made that students have an opportunity to contribute to the broader collegiate community by participating on teams or in theater productions or assuming leadership positions? It is surprising how rarely such a connection was drawn. Comparatively few institutions described the benefits of community-based activities such as service learning or community service, despite its demonstrated educational (not to mention societal) benefits (Astin & Sax, 1998; Astin, Sax, & Avalos, 2000; Eyler & Giles, 1999). Voluntary activities have long served as an essential building block of our democracy (de Tocquville, [1835, 1840] 1969). In 2006, fully 83% of incoming first-year students had performed volunteer work and 49% had participated in a demonstration during the preceding year. This is no narcissistic, politically apathetic group of students and it would seem reasonable (even savvy from a marketing standpoint) to allow these students to see themselves reflected in the pages of college viewbooks.

Conclusion

Sidestepping discussions about purpose transmits the message that college admissions is largely a matter of selecting the most attractive package of programs, activities and amenities—it commodifies college choice. Colleges and universities are on record (through their mission statements) of standing for something more important. Our mission statements speak of the importance of formative development, service to society and state, and of colleges' role in building stronger communities and a more vibrant democracy. Certainly viewbooks have a different purpose than mission statements. But it seems reasonable to us that they not reflect their antithesis.

College and university viewbooks are selling to prospective students in the same way that print ads, billboards, and television screens do: This product will make you happy, meet your every need, help you succeed—even make your rich. It is the rare viewbook that goes beyond the sales pitch to try to connect with something more cerebral, spiritual, or educational. American colleges and universities can do better. Such callow marketing is increasingly falling on deaf ears. A recent series of focus groups with high school students conducted by the Education Conservancy found that student viewed a great deal of the college recruiting materials they received to be "disingenuous" and "generic" (Jaschik, 2007). We suspect that few faculty members (and maybe even few senior administrators) have taken a close look at the initial messages

that are being conveyed through viewbooks to students as they begin to ask themselves what college is for, why they should attend, and what they should expect it to be like. We suspect if they did, their conclusion would conform to the observation of the late Louis Kronenberger, professor and drama critic for *Time Magazine*, "The trouble with us in America isn't that the poetry of life has turned to prose, but it has turned to advertising copy."

Endnotes

[1]The term "college viewbook" will be used to describe viewbooks produced by both four-year colleges and universities.

[2]http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/classifications/sub.asp?key=784

[3]http://www.princetonreview.com/college/research/conscience/

[4]Small is, of course, a relative term: Liberal arts colleges prominently note the precise student/faculty ratio. Large universities tend to use data such as the percentage of classes that have fewer than 30 students in them, for example.

[5]It is worth noting that most of those willing to take such a stand were religious colleges and universities.

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