An Examination of Integrated Marketing Communication in U.S. Public Institutions of Higher Education

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This research examined the strategic process of integrated marketing communication and its application in U.S. public institutions of higher education. A quantitative survey analyzed 42 leading U.S. public colleges and universities as ranked by U.S. News & World Report. *To further examine the findings of the survey, qualitative interviews were conducted with nine of the survey respondents. A four stage integrated marketing communication framework, based on studies of the American Productivity and Quality Center, served as the foundation for the research. The findings revealed the importance of leadership and formal communication mechanisms and demonstrated that integrated marketing communication strengthens branding.*

KEYWORDS integrated marketing communication, higher education marketing

INTRODUCTION

The concept of integrated marketing communication (IMC) has gained increased acceptance over the past few decades; however, the extent to which institutions of higher education (IHEs) have adopted IMC as part of their strategic management approach has not been well understood. Although many American colleges teach IMC concepts, the literature suggests far fewer number of colleges actually practice what they preach with respect to IMC. It remains unclear how marketing and communication processes are structured in IHEs and whether institutions have advanced to

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effective integration of IMC processes. This study addresses this gap in the research literature.

"Since IMC extends beyond traditional media and marketing tools and involves processes that are in transition, the challenge of finding conceptual and directional guidance from research looms larger than in traditional marketing" (Cook, 2004, p. 1). As a result, over the past two decades, various definitions of IMC have evolved, and consensus on a definition has not yet been reached. For purposes of this research, the assumed definition of IMC will be "a strategic business process used to plan, develop, execute, and evaluate coordinated, measurable, persuasive brand communication programs over time with consumers, prospects, and other targeted, relevant external and internal audiences" (Schultz & Schultz, 2004, p. 20).

Schultz and Schultz (2004) maintain IMC is developed through a four stage framework, "progressing from a highly practical, tactical orientation to one increasingly driven by an understanding of customers and their behaviors" (p. 21). Based on the research of the American Productivity and Quality Center (Schultz & Schultz, 2004), it was determined that

> in the early stages of IMC development, most organizations addressed marketing communication activities with tactical "how-to" and "when-to" questions. Once the IMC program was in place, they moved progressively to questions about coordinating internal and external activities; using customer data to drive priorities; and finally applying IMC principles to strategic issues such as resource allocation, organizational alignment, and financial integration and accountability. (p. 21)

The Four Stages of IMC framework was used as the basis for this study's survey questionnaire and will be further examined in the literature review.

Researchers have been inconsistent as to whether IMC represents "integrated marketing communication" (Schultz & Schultz, 2004; Swain, 2004) or "integrated marketing communications" (Novelli, 1989/1990; Duncan & Everett, 1993; Kitchen & de Pelsmacker, 2004). While a simple letter "s" may seem to be a minor difference, there are major implied differences between the two terms. The term "communication" is defined *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language* as "the act of communicating; transmission" (Communication, n.d.) while the term "communications" is defined as "the technology employed in transmitting messages" (Communications, n.d.). Thus, *communication* could be viewed as strategic while *communications* could be viewed as tactical. Since the primary purpose of IMC is considered to be strategic in nature, the IMC acronym for this study will represent "integrated marketing communication." It is also important to emphasize that the main focus of this research is integrated marketing communication not integrated marketing. Sevier (1999) revealed that the terms "integrated marketing" and "integrated marketing communication" are

often used interchangeably. But in actuality these terms represent two distinct concepts.

Sevier (1999) noted the concept of "integrated marketing is a relatively recent addition to the higher education lexicon. As such, there is—at least at this point—no one, generally accepted definition of integrated marketing" (p. 1). At the time, Sevier defined integrated marketing as being "concerned with the management of strategic assets" (p. 3) and related it specifically to three of the four Ps of the marketing mix: product, price, and place. Integrated marketing communication was considered a function of the final P: promotion.

However, the work of Schultz and Schultz (2004) suggests that such a definition does not place IMC in its proper context. As mentioned previously, Schultz and Schultz define IMC as a strategic business process to drive *brand* communication programs, not simply *product* promotion programs. As such, for IMC to be most effective it must be implemented not at a tactical level but rather a strategic level in support of the institutional brand.

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review consists of two main sections: (a) a historical overview of IMC and (b) the role of marketing in IHEs. The first section of this literature review includes background on the development of the Four Stages of IMC, the framework that guided the research hypotheses. The second section of this literature review includes an analysis of the competitive nature of IHEs and the challenges inherent with marketing in higher education.

Historical Overview of Integrated Marketing Communication

The practice of IMC can trace its inception to the early 1980s when collegiate textbooks began to emphasize the concept of marketing communication. Coulson-Thomas (1983) established himself as one of the first researchers to outline the broad spectrum of marketing communication channels. Although it was emphasized that there was an element of interdependence between the different communication elements (such as advertising, marketing, and public relations), the idea of integration was not considered a plausible approach to developing more effective campaigns at that time.

In 1991, the concept of IMC gained attention when seminal research was conducted by faculty at the Medill School of Journalism at Northwestern University (Schultz & Kitchen, 1997). The concept was relatively quick to be adopted by advertising and public relations agencies, as it served to further validate their value to corporate America (Wightman, 1999). The theory of IMC became grounded in the belief that there should be "one basic communication strategy for each major target audience. This one strategy is

then used as the basis for executing each communications function (advertising, PR, sales promotion, etc.) throughout a variety of communication channels" (Duncan & Everett, 1993, p. 31). At the time, Tortorici (1991) declared that IMC was one of the most effective ways an organization can maximize its return on investment. However, significant debate ensued as to whether or not IMC was a management fad (Cornelissen & Lock, 2000) or theoretical concept (Schultz & Kitchen, 2000).

In 1997, one of the first major IMC studies was undertaken by the American Productivity Quality Center (APQC). This research focused on the organizations that were actually employing IMC rather than the ad agencies that were focused on deploying such efforts. The study analyzed 22 national organizations that practiced varying degrees of IMC such as Dow Chemical, Ernst & Young, Federal Express, Fidelity Investments, and Prudential Insurance. The research resulted in several key findings, which were analyzed using a framework described as the Four Stages of IMC (McGoon, 1998). Following is an overview of the APQC study findings that are most relevant to IHEs.

Stage 1 is the entry point into IMC for most organizations and reflects the tactical coordination of marketing communication. One of the most critical findings relative to Stage 1 is that IMC requires extensive interpersonal and cross-functional communication within the organization, across departments, and with external partners. IMC cannot be effectively driven by formal policies and procedures alone. "At this stage, the organization is primarily focused on using IMC to achieve 'one sight, one sound, one voice' in its communication efforts" (Schultz & Schultz, 2004, p. 23).

The APQC study classified Stage 2 as a "redefinition of the scope of marketing communication" (Schultz & Schultz, 2004, p. 24). Further examination reveals the underlying driver of this stage was the level of market research that an organization undertook. A key determinant of Stage 2 is whether organizations gather extensive information about their customers and apply that information in planning, developing, and evaluating communication initiatives. Such information gathering should include primary and secondary market research sources as well as actual behavioral customer data. The research noted that most surveyed organizations had made an effort to examine communications from the customer's perspective, and most had conducted a brand contact or communication audit.

Stage 3 considers how an organization applies information technology in support of its marketing communication efforts. The leading best practice organizations maintain a greater number of data sources, and their marketing communication staff have greater access to the data for planning IMC programs. The APQC study revealed that relatively few organizations were taking advantage of available technology to create customized communication programs based on individual customer circumstances and characteristics.

TABLE 1 The Four Stages of IMC Framework

Orientation	Indicators
Stage 1	Tactical coordination of marketing communication – Coordinate interpersonal and cross-functional communication within the organization and with external partners
Stage 2	Commitment to market research in support of IMC – Utilize primary and secondary market research sources as well as actual behavioral customer data – Maintain a multitude of feedback channels to gather information about customers and effectively act on customer feedback throughout the organization
Stage 3	Application of information technology in support of IMC – Leverage technologies to facilitate internal and external communications – Adopt technologies for market research and data management purposes – Employ technologies to determine individuals who have the potential to deliver the highest value (financial or service contributions) to the institution
Stage 4	Strategic integration of IMC – Active support of institutional leadership – Marketing communication staff empowered by senior leadership to lead the integration of external communication with internal communication directed to students, staff, alumni, and other constituents – Measure effectiveness of marketing communication and incorporate findings into strategic planning

Source: Adapted from Schultz and Schultz (2004).

Stage 4 represents strategic integration, and the leading edge, of IMC; therefore, relatively few organizations reported substantial progress at this level. In fact, many organizations operating at earlier stages may not fully realize the important, high-level strategic implications of integration. The nature of strategic integration requires the visible and active support of senior leadership. In addition, the organization's marketing communication staff needs to be empowered to reach both internal and external audiences. "One key component of integration is noticeably missing in most participating companies," said APQC, "the integration of external communication efforts with internal marketing communication directed to employees, suppliers and other business partners. While most marketing communication departments report having at least some responsibility for communicating with employees, it appears this responsibility is limited" (McGoon, 1998). Table 1 provides an overview of the indicators of the Four Stages of IMC adapted from Schultz and Schultz (2004).

Role of Marketing in IHEs

"Marketing" had once been a term that could be spoken only in the most hushed tones in academia. But during the past several years, the resistance to the concept of marketing in IHEs seems to be dissolving. This acceptance

has been helped in part by publications on the topic from several prominent academicians to include Derek Bok (2003) and David Kirp (2004). Kirp's most recent work, *Shakespeare, Einstein, and the Bottom Line: The Marketing of Higher Education*, has sparked an interest in not only understanding market forces in IHE but how institutions have effectively (and others not so effectively) applied marketing and communication techniques to advance their institutions in the 21st century.

In the past 40 years, the number of U.S. colleges and universities has grown from 2,300 to well over 4,000, including branch campuses (Rhodes, 2006). Not only have IHEs experienced intense competition from traditional, nonprofit institutions but new competition has arisen from for-profit institutions. And these for-profit institutions, such as the University of Phoenix, have adopted aggressive marketing strategies. The University of Phoenix's parent company, the Apollo Group, invested in excess of $142 million for Internet marketing in 2006, an amount that does not take into account the additional tens of millions it paid for search-engine advertising or amounts spent by companies using the Internet to generate leads on its behalf. Such spending has made the Apollo Group the seventh largest online advertiser across all industries, spending more than Dell and General Motors (Blumenstyk, 2006).

For comparison purposes, a recent survey from Lipman Hearne (2007) revealed that only 10% of public IHEs spend $1 million or more on their marketing and communications budget (compared to 16% for private IHEs). In addition, 57% of public IHEs spend less than .5% of their operating budget on marketing and communications (compared to 21% for private IHEs). Perhaps most revealing was that 61% of public IHEs spent under $50 per student for marketing and communications expenditures (compared to 11% for private IHEs).

Although it is common to have a public relations officer in IHEs, it has not been common to have a dedicated "marketing" or "marketing communication" practitioner within the institution. In a recent higher education administration survey by the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (June, 2006), none of the listed 163 positions incorporated the terms "marketing" or "communication" and yet positions such as "museum curator" and "farm manager" were included in the survey. The only position related to the marketing and communication function was the "public information specialist" role, which would seem to be limited to the practice of public relations.

The lack of a marketing communication focus tends to be the result of how IHEs have evolved over time. As institutions have grown their enrollment and program offerings, they have also become increasingly fragmented internally. Typically this has resulted in functions becoming compartmentalized and departments operating without any knowledge of other parts of the institution. Professionals within IHEs tend to view themselves as part of a distinct department competing for limited organizational resources rather than as part of a comprehensive system working toward common objectives. Frank H. T.

Rhodes, former President of Cornell University, explains, "Structural reform remains elusive in the academic culture. The structural imbalance between goals, tasks, and resources seems to have shown little improvement since 1966. The rigidity of departmental structures continues to limit the ability of colleges to adapt and respond to new circumstances. Any change tends to be laboriously incremental, with a significant time lag between the decision to make it and the ability of the institution to carry it out" (Rhodes, 2006, p. A18).

Such a fiefdom mentality is a major barrier to effective IMC. Rather than establish a concerted, integrated marketing communication strategy, it is more typical to develop separate offices to address admissions marketing, media and public relations, alumni and development, athletic marketing, publications, and creative services to include Web site efforts. Such a mind-set must be overcome if the development of a true brand orientation, critical to IMC, is to occur.

SURVEY RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND RESULTS

Table 2 provides an overview of the entire research approach to demonstrate the relationship between the survey research methodology and results and the interview research methodology and results.

Based on the Four Stages of IMC framework, the following hypotheses were developed:

> H1: Institutions with a dedicated senior marketing and communications official are more likely to be at Stage 1 (tactical coordination of marketing communication) than those without.

> H2: Institutions with a commitment to market research (Stage 2) will also demonstrate a high degree of tactical coordination of marketing communication (Stage 1).

> H3: Institutions with a commitment to applied information technology (Stage 3) will also demonstrate a high degree of market research (Stage 2).

> H4: Institutions with a commitment to strategic integration of IMC (Stage 4) will also demonstrate a high degree of applied information technology (Stage 3).

These hypotheses consist of five distinct variables: (a) dedicated senior marketing and communications official, (b) exhibition of Stage 1 behaviors (tactical coordination of marketing communication), (c) exhibition of Stage 2 behaviors (market research methods), (d) exhibition of Stage 3 behaviors (applied information technology), and (e) exhibition of Stage 4 behaviors

(strategic integration of IMC). Each of these variables will be further operationalized in the following section.

The presence of a dedicated senior marketing and communications official was assessed through the first two survey questions. Q1 asked, "What is the title of the person chiefly responsible for directing your institution wide marketing and communication efforts?" Q2 determined whether the individual is at a "senior" level in the organization (defined as director-level or above). Specifically, Q2 asked, "Who does the person noted in Question 1 report to?" and allows for the responses of (a) president of the institution, (b) vice president (or an equivalent title, who reports to the president), (c) director (or an equivalent title, who reports to a vice president), or (d) none of the above (and allows the respondent to list response).

Stage 1 of the IMC framework, the level of an institution's tactical coordination of marketing communication, is influenced by several specifiable endogenous factors. Foremost, tactical coordination is influenced to the degree by which policies, practices, and procedures for the branding of all marketing efforts are effectively communicated through written and verbal methods across the institution. Three related endogenous factors are also important to consider: (a) whether formal or informal communication mechanisms have been established, (b) whether the ultimate control and approval of all marketing communication efforts is centralized, and (c) whether the physical marketing outputs (such as brochures) feature consistent visual elements and messages (Schultz & Schultz, 2004).

In the survey questionnaire, the achieved level of Stage 1 was assessed through Q3–Q9 as follows: (Q3) policies, practices, and procedures for the branding of all marketing efforts are effectively communicated through written

TABLE 2 Research Methodology Approach

Study phase	Description
Phase I	Conduct Secondary Research Literature review of IMC and marketing in IHEs
Phase II	Pretest Survey Questionnaire Administer survey questionnaire to six IMC senior practitioners; analyze results; modify interview questions
Phase III	Implement Survey Questionnaire Distribute 82 surveys to the senior marketing and communication officer at the leading public IHEs in the United States
Phase IV	Analyze Survey Questionnaire Results Categorize the 42 respondents by basic, intermediate, or advanced level of IMC
Phase V	Follow-up Interviews Develop interview questionnaire based on survey results; conduct interviews with three respondents from each of the basic, intermediate, and advanced categories of IMC
Phase VI	Code and Classify Interview Content
Phase VII	Present Findings and Conclusions

and verbal methods across the institution; (Q4) all marketing material produced by the institution features consistent visual elements, such as logo(s) and typography; (Q5) all marketing material produced by the institution features consistent messages; (Q6) ultimate control and approval of all communication efforts is centralized within an institution-wide office; (Q7) interdepartmental meetings are held frequently enough to effectively coordinate marketing communication efforts with other departments such as admissions, athletics, faculty, and development offices; (Q8) cross-functional meetings are held frequently enough to effectively coordinate efforts among marketing communication specialists; and (Q9) cross-functional meetings are held frequently enough to effectively solicit feedback and coordinate efforts among marketing specialists and external partners such as community leaders and advertising professionals.

During the second stage of the framework, IMC-focused firms tend to shift their emphasis from tactical coordination of marketing communication to a broader understanding of customers and prospects. At this stage in the process, there is a "concerted effort to identify, understand and create cross-functional communication opportunities across customer contact points" (Schultz & Schultz, 2004, p. 25). The resulting market research data needs to be broadly disseminated to staff across the organization to achieve a comprehensive understanding of customer behavior. Each staff member needs to be aware of the promises that have been conveyed to customers through external communication, and internal practices and policies need to be aligned accordingly.

In the survey questionnaire, the achieved level of Stage 2 was assessed through Q10–Q15 as follows: (Q10) the institution effectively captures primary market research from sources such as interviews and/or focus groups with prospective students, current students and alumni, and uses such information in the planning, development, and evaluation of communication activities; (Q11) the institution effectively captures secondary market research from sources such as association reports and tracking of press coverage to better understand market trends and uses such information in the planning, development, and evaluation of communication activities; (Q12) the institution creates a variety of feedback channels to gather information about prospective students, current students, and alumni then captures and disseminates such feedback throughout the organization; (Q13) all possible points of contact with prospective students, current students, and alumni are integrated in the marketing communications strategy; (Q14) all staff members have a comprehensive understanding of their constituents (such as current and prospective students, faculty, alumni, or other university affiliates)—not just how these constituents feel but what they do and why they do it; and (Q15) all staff members (even those without regular contact with prospective students, current students, and alumni) understand the institution's marketing mission and their role in meeting constituent needs.

"At the third stage of IMC development, organizations use the power and potential of information technologies to improve their integration

performance" (Schultz & Schultz, 2004, p. 28). The basics of this stage include using emerging technologies to facilitate internal and external communications. In addition, effective IMC is dependent on adopting technologies for market research and data management purposes. Of particular interest to IHEs is the identification of those individuals who have the potential to deliver the highest value (financial or service contributions) to the institution.

In the survey questionnaire, the achieved level of Stage 3 was assessed through Q16–Q19 as follows: (Q16) electronic communication is effectively leveraged to facilitate internal dissemination of information and insights about constituents (such as current and prospective students, faculty, alumni, or other university affiliates); (Q17) electronic communication is effectively leveraged to facilitate external communication about institutional news, programs, and services; (Q18) the institution uses one or more databases to capture and manage information about prospective students, current students, and alumni, and it uses such information to more effectively communicate with these constituents; and (Q19) a formalized program using information technology has been developed to identify factors that lead students/alumni to deliver the highest value to the institution (active alumni involvement, donations, etc.) over their lifetime relationship with the institution.

"The highest level of integration occurs as organizations begin to operationalize the assets and skills developed during Stages 1 to 3" (Schultz & Schultz, 2004, p. 29). In the fourth stage, IMC is concerned more with the issues facing senior management than those related to specific marketing communications.

In the survey questionnaire, the achieved level of Stage 4 was assessed through Q20–Q24 as follows: (Q20) constituent data (to include data about current and prospective students, faculty, alumni, or other university affiliates) is used at the senior leadership level to formulate and drive strategic direction; (Q21) senior leadership considers integrated marketing communication as an essential component to strategic planning; (Q22) the effectiveness of marketing communications is measured and incorporated into strategic planning; (Q23) compensation, incentive, and promotion policies have been aligned with meeting marketing communication objectives; and (Q24) the department responsible for marketing and communications has been empowered by senior leadership to lead the integration of external communication with internal marketing communication directed to students, staff, alumni, and other constituents.

The survey questionnaire consisted of Likert-type questions that were closed-ended and used ordinal-level items. As Garson (n.d.) noted, "Likert scales are ordinal but their use in statistical procedures assuming interval level data is commonplace." The selected measurement format for the questionnaire was a five-point scale with an additional option of a "Don't

Know" response. Garson (n.d.) concluded for Likert scales to be commonly used with interval procedures, such scales need to have at least five categories.

Another important issue to consider when designing a survey instrument is the number of items assigned to measure each topic area. "In most surveys, having more than five questions on a specific concept borders on redundancy. Having too many questions on the same topic runs the risk of unnecessarily increasing response burden as well as potentially irritating respondents" (Church & Waclawski, 2001, p. 64). Thus, the number of questions for each of the topic areas ranged from four to seven questions per topic.

An important element in the survey design process is the pretest of the questionnaire. As Bradburn, Sudman, and Wansink (2004) note, "We must depend on pretesting to weed out ambiguities and to help formulate questions as clearly as possible—to ask about what we want to know, not something else" (p. 4). In this case, the survey was pretested with senior-level marketing communication practitioners who were not part of the selected study sample.

A mixed-mode approach was adopted for this survey to facilitate a response rate as high as possible. "Response rates are generally considered to be the most widely compared statistic for judging the quality of surveys. Ironically, they are also one of the most controversial" (Johnson & Owens, n.d., p. 127). Over the past several decades, survey response rates have been declining due to a broad range of environmental factors. "Concerns with privacy, confidentiality, the exploitation of personal information, general cynicism, and declining civic participation are pervasive social trends that each contribute to decreasing survey participation" (p. 128). Declining participation rates have led to concerns that nonresponse error may cause survey findings to be selectively biased.

In an attempt to achieve a high response rate, the implementation of the survey involved multiple contacts and response mechanisms to include paper, e-mail, and fax. Since online and e-mail surveys have been found to typically produce convergent results (Deutskens, de Ruyter, & Wetzels, 2006), it was determined a mixed-mode approach would be appropriate for this research study. In an attempt to limit potential question order bias, four variations of the questionnaire were developed and were equally distributed across the survey sample.

Initially, a formal letter and the survey instrument were sent to a survey sample of the 82 leading U.S. public colleges and universities as ranked in *U.S. News & World Report* ("America's Best Colleges," 2005). Respondents were provided a link to an online survey, a self-addressed stamped envelope, and a fax number so they could choose their preferred response mechanism. Within two weeks of the initial survey mailing, a reminder e-mail with a link to the Internet version of the survey was distributed. The following week, a final e-mail reminder was sent to the survey population. The survey collection period extended from September 24–October 24, 2006.

At the end of the survey collection period, 42 out of a possible 82 complete surveys had been received for a response rate of 51.2%. Twenty-three responses arrived via mail, 18 responses arrived via the Internet, and one response arrived via fax. The response rate calculation did not include 2 individuals who responded they were not able or willing to complete the survey nor did it include 4 incomplete Internet surveys. The collected data represented a cross-section of the survey population to include 8 national universities, 25 regional universities, and 9 liberal arts and regional comprehensive colleges. The geographic dispersion of the respondents included 9 institutions in the North, 12 institutions in the South, 10 institutions in the Midwest, and 11 institutions in the West. Descriptive statistics and t-tests were the main forms of evaluation for the collected data.

Analysis of Hypotheses

Since the survey was based on a five-point response scale (with an additional option for "Don't Know"), each response was weighted as follows: "Strongly Disagree"=1 point, "Disagree"=2 points, "Neutral"=3 points, "Agree"=4 points, "Strongly Agree"=5 points. Scores for the questions within each stage were totaled and then an overall average stage score was calculated. For example, the Stage 1 score would be an average of the individual scores for Q3–Q9. If a respondent answered "Don't Know" for a particular question, that question was removed from the overall stage calculation. Thus, for an institution to be considered as effectively demonstrating the attributes of a particular stage in the Four Stages of IMC framework, the institution would need to receive an average score of at least 3.0 points across the various questions that comprise that specific stage.

The first hypothesis stated that "Institutions with a dedicated senior marketing and communications official are more likely to be at Stage 1 than those which do not." The findings reveal that 100% of respondents had dedicated senior marketing and communications officials. Therefore, there are no IHEs without a dedicated senior marketing communications official to correlate with achieving IMC. Thus, H1 is not clearly supported. However, even though 100% of respondents reported to either a president or vice president (or equivalent titles), there is significant difference in the Stage 1 score between respondents who report to the president ($\bar{x}$ = 3.595) versus vice president ($\bar{x}$ = 2.937; t [42]=2.118, p <.05). If the hypothesis was modified to "Institutions who have a dedicated senior marketing and communications official that reports directly to the president are more likely to be at Stage 1 than those institutions who do not have a dedicated senior marketing and communications official that reports to a president," then a sample would exist to examine the null hypothesis.

The second hypothesis stated that "Institutions with a commitment to market research (Stage 2) will also demonstrate a high degree of tactical

coordination of marketing communication (Stage 1)." The null hypothesis that institutions with a commitment to market research do not demonstrate a high degree of tactical coordination of marketing communication should then be disproved. Since there is significant difference in Stage 2 scores between institutions that achieved Stage 1 and institutions that did not (t [42]=−3.215, p < .05), the null hypothesis is disproved. Thus, there is a significant difference in Stage 2 scores between institutions that achieved Stage 1 (mean Stage 2 score= x̄ = 3.539; i.e., achieved Stage 2) and institutions that did not achieve Stage 1 (mean Stage 2 score= x̄ = 2.754; i.e., did not achieve Stage 2). Therefore, because institutions who achieved Stage 2 also demonstrated achievement of Stage 1, H2 is supported.

The third hypothesis stated that "Institutions with a commitment to applied information technology (Stage 3) will also demonstrate a high degree of market research (Stage 2)." The null hypothesis that institutions with a commitment to applied information technology (Stage 3) will demonstrate a low degree of market research, must be disproved. There is significant difference in Stage 3 scores between institutions that achieved Stage 2 and institutions that did not (t [42] = −4.850, p < .05) disproving the null hypothesis. Thus, there is a significant difference in Stage 3 scores between institutions that achieved Stage 2 (mean Stage 3 score = x̄ = 3.952; i.e., achieved Stage 3) and institutions that did not achieve Stage 2 (mean Stage 3 score= x̄ = 2.986; i.e., did not achieve Stage 3). Therefore, because institutions who achieved Stage 3 also demonstrated achievement of Stage 2, H3 is supported.

The fourth hypothesis stated that "Institutions with a commitment to strategic integration of IMC (Stage 4) will also demonstrate a high degree of applied information technology (Stage 3)." To prove this, the null hypothesis that institutions with a commitment to strategic integration of IMC (Stage 4) will demonstrate a low degree of applied information technology (Stage 3) must be disproved. There is no significant difference in Stage 4 scores between institutions that achieved Stage 3 and institutions that did not (t [42] = −1.804, p < .05). The null hypothesis is proven and H4 is not supported. Thus, there is not a significant difference in Stage 4 scores between institutions that achieved Stage 3 (mean Stage 4 score= x̄ = 3.472; i.e., achieved Stage 4) and institutions that did not achieve Stage 3 (mean Stage 4 score = x̄ = 2.955; i.e., did not achieve Stage 4). Therefore, because institutions who achieved Stage 4 did not necessarily demonstrate achievement of Stage 3, H4 is not supported.

Fifty percent of the respondents did not progress in a linear manner through the framework; that is, an institution that scored an average of below 3.0 on an earlier stage could have scored 3.0 or above at a later stage. There could be several reasons for such a nonlinear progression. Nearly a decade has passed since the development of the IMC Four Stages framework, and information technology has become a pervasive force in the world since that time. Now, it may be more likely for IHEs to adopt information technology at a point earlier than Stage 3. The potential also

exists that it may actually be simpler to adopt certain elements within each of the stages. For example, an IHE may find it simpler to utilize secondary market research (Q11 in the survey, a Stage 2 element) and use e-mail for internal communication (Q16 in the survey, a Stage 3 element) rather than optimize coordination of policies, practices, and procedures for the branding of all marketing initiatives (Q3 in the survey, a Stage 1 element) across the institution.

The often slow but methodical approach inherent in academia may also lead IHEs to initially assume a more strategic (Stage 4) rather than tactical (Stage 1) focus in their IMC efforts. The intense commercial environment may force many organizations to react with a quick tactical approach rather than a thoughtful strategic approach to marketing communication. Thus, the Four Stages of IMC framework relative to IHEs may actually be Stage 4 (strategic integration) $\rightarrow$ Stage 2 (market research) $\rightarrow$ Stage 3 (application of information technology in support of IMC) $\rightarrow$ Stage 1 (coordination of marketing communication).

Even if this framework was not necessarily supported in the higher education environment, each of the four stages in the framework represents a critical aspect in the development of an effective IMC strategy. Therefore, the survey findings provide valuable insight into the extent that respondents have adopted elements related to the various stages of IMC. It is obvious from the differences in scores that certain IHEs have achieved a higher degree of integration than others. The follow-up interviews, which will be examined later, were designed to further analyze potential factors that could account for differences in IMC progress.

Since 50% of the respondents did not proceed in a linear manner through the framework, it was necessary to develop a modified framework for analyzing the impact of IMC on these IHEs. Thus, respondents were designated an overall IMC category based on the number of stages for which they attained an average score of 3.0 or above. An IHE would be considered in the Basic Category if the institution scored an average of 3.0 or above in zero or one stage, the Intermediate Category would represent those IHEs that scored an average of 3.0 or above in two or three stages, and the Advanced Category would represent those IHEs that scored an average of 3.0 or above in all four stages. The modified analysis revealed 13 institutions in the Basic Category of IMC, 14 institutions in the Intermediate Category of IMC, and 15 institutions in the Advanced Category of IMC. The following analysis utilizes this IMC categorization structure.

INTERVIEW RESEARCH METHODOLOGY—RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

For purposes of the interview process, three respondents from each of the Basic, Intermediate, and Advanced Categories of IMC were selected. In

addition to meeting the quantitative standards of the Basic, Intermediate, and Advanced Categories (as noted in the previous section), the interviewees also stated at the end of the survey questionnaire that they were willing to participate in the telephone interview process. In addition, effort was made to ensure the interviewees represented a broad geographic distribution; that is, there were at least two interviewees from each of the four regions (North, South, Midwest, West) of the United States. The nine structured telephone interviews took place during November 15–December 18, 2006.

A list of five open-ended interview questions was developed based on the survey questionnaire findings. The interview questions evolved out of the themes that permeated from the survey questionnaire: (a) importance of coordinating IMC efforts, (b) compensation effects on IMC, (c) communication of marketing objectives across the institution, (d) relevance of centralized communication on branding initiatives, and (e) impact of IMC on the selectivity of an institution. The list of questions was prescreened by four practitioners, further refined and distributed in advance to the interviewees.

Each of the telephone interviews was digitally recorded with the permission of the interviewee. All participants were assured that their comments would not be directly attributed to them or their institution. Each interview lasted between 30–40 minutes. A Microsoft Word transcript of each interview was developed.

Miles and Huberman (1994) recommend developing a list of codes to assist with the classification of qualitative data. After carefully reviewing the transcribed interview data, line by line, the data was divided into meaningful analytical units, which is known as segmenting the data (Cohen, 2006). After finding meaningful segments or themes, category codes were given to each segment for data classification purposes. Coding was done as an iterative process. The first step in the coding process was by hand, comparing and reviewing paper copies of the interview transcripts. The second step of the process involved entering all of the segment codes and respective interviewee comments into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. This process allowed for analysis of the coded segments or themes, based on the number of times a theme appeared as well as whether themes were consistent across the IMC level (Basic, Intermediate, or Advanced) of the interviewee. Table 3 provides an overview of the resulting themes from the interviews.

Importance of Leadership

Even though there was not a question specific to the topic of leadership in the interview research, the importance of institutional leadership was the most frequently mentioned IMC success factor. The importance of leadership commitment to integrated marketing communication and the role of

TABLE 3 Resulting Themes from Interviews with the Senior Marketing and Communication Official at Nine U.S. Public Colleges and Universities

Interview theme	Category of IMC (3 possible respondents in each category)		
What factors have the most influence on effective coordination of IMC?	Basic IMC	Intermediate IMC	Advanced IMC
- Leadership		2	3
- Culture of the organization	2	2	3
How might compensation policies or factors impact the effectiveness of IMC?	Basic IMC	Intermediate IMC	Advanced IMC
- Nominal effect, as IHE staff value intrinsic rewards	2	1	
- Demonstrates marketing communication is valued		1	2
- Encourages marketing communication to be evaluated and measured	2	1	2
What factors influence effective communication of marketing objectives across the institution?	Basic IMC	Intermediate IMC	Advanced IMC
- Informal communication mechanisms	2	1	2
- Formal communication mechanisms		3	3
- Visible support of leadership	2	2	2
What factors are most relevant to achieving branding objectives?	Basic IMC	Intermediate IMC	Advanced IMC
- Consistent understanding of the concept of branding	2		
- Coordinated but not necessarily centralized communication		3	2
- Leadership direction	2	2	2
What internal factors impact the selectivity of an institution?	Basic IMC	Intermediate IMC	Advanced IMC
- Mission of the institution	1	1	2
- Role of marketing and communications	2	3	1

leadership in instituting the coordination of IMC efforts was voiced by five out of the nine interviewees. Interestingly, the four interviewees who did not mention the importance of leadership included all three of the Basic Category of IMC interviewees. Such a finding could be the result of not recognizing the important role of leadership, but more than likely it is the result of leadership not understanding the importance of their role in emphasizing the need for marketing and communication to be valued across the institution.

While the research revealed centralized communication was not necessarily a requirement for effective IMC, strong leadership was a mandate. As one interviewee noted, "You can have a strong brand through senior management direction and no coordination, but not the opposite. . . . [I]f you do not have clear management direction, then centralized coordination is not going to achieve anything. Centralized coordination is a tactic not a strategy. The strategy is the more important issue."

Another interviewee echoed this sentiment, "The president needs to have the vision for how marketing can help the institution and how it should help the institution. And then the president needs to be willing to commit his or her power and prestige and institutional time and resources to the marketing effort." However, as one of the Advanced Category interviewees cautioned, even with leadership support, the senior marketing and communications official still needs to be capable of developing a team-oriented approach. It is the role of the marketing and communications staff to effectively support the vision of leadership and disseminate the value of IMC to all constituencies.

Importance of Formal Communication Mechanisms

IMC has the potential to deliver several advantages to IHEs to include a higher quality of communication. However, the factors that influence the quality of communication, to include the effective communication of marketing objectives across the institution, can be perceived differently depending on whether an institution has achieved Basic, Intermediate, or Advanced IMC. In particular, while the importance of informal communication mechanisms were mentioned by IHEs across all IMC categories, formal and structured communication mechanisms were mentioned only, and unanimously, by the Intermediate and Advanced IMC interviewees.

One of the most common formal communication mechanisms is the establishment of marketing committees. A recent Lipman Hearne survey (2007) found that "[i]nstitutions that have marketing committees, particularly campus-wide committees, also reported greater on-campus collaboration. Half of the institutions surveyed reported that their institutions had a campus-wide marketing committee, while one-quarter had an alumni/trustee marketing committee" (p. 7).

One interviewee noted that their institution had established a senior level executive advisory group, "whereby we have pulled leaders from across the university to be the advocates for some of the more central marketing communications initiatives that we have undertaken." However, as cautioned by another interviewee, the establishment of such a committee should not be the sole element of formal marketing outreach.

Other formal communication mechanisms could include marketing and communications audits or annual reports as well as regular marketing and communications forums. As mentioned by one of the interviewees, such formalized processes allow individuals to share feedback and feel as though they have a voice in the process, an especially important element in the environment of higher education. In addition, audits and annual reports (if constructed properly) can serve as measurement of, and testament to, the impact of IMC across the institution's various constituencies.

Impact of IMC Category and Carnegie Classification on Brand Recognition

During the process of conducting this research, *USA Today* ("Mailboxes, Inboxes Burst with College Brochures," 2006) published an article on the increasingly competitive market environment in higher education. It noted that the average acceptance rate for colleges nationally is hovering around 70% and for every college turning away applicants, there are many more simply trying to fill seats. The article also predicted that things might get even worse for colleges (and better for students) as projections indicate the number of high school graduates will peak around 2009 and decline for several years thereafter. Thus, a few additional questions were asked at the end of the survey questionnaire to better understand whether IMC had an impact on institutional brand recognition. Note that these questions were not incorporated into the IMC category calculations but were included in the survey as potential market factors that could be correlated with IMC.

Institutions were specifically asked whether they were "achieving greater brand recognition across key target markets." Data analysis revealed a significant difference in scores between institutions that achieved the Advanced Category of IMC and those institutions in the Basic Category of IMC (t [28] = −3.613, p < .05). Thus, the Advanced Category respondents more strongly believed than the Basic Category respondents that their institution was achieving greater brand recognition across key target markets. The mean score of institutions that achieved the Advanced Category of IMC was x̄ =4.733; the mean score of institutions that achieved the Basic Category of IMC was x̄ =3.692.

In addition to examining whether differences existed between an institution's IMC Category and level of brand recognition, data analysis was also conducted to determine whether differences existed between an institution's Carnegie classification and level of brand recognition. The data analysis revealed no significant difference in scores between institutions that were classified as a national university or a liberal arts and regional comprehensive college (t [16] = .1371, p < .05). The mean score of national universities was x̄ = 4.285; the mean score of liberal arts and regional comprehensive colleges was x̄ = 4.222. Thus, while an IMC category classification *does* have an impact on selectivity and brand recognition, the Carnegie classification of an institution *does not* have such an impact. In fact, each IMC category—Basic, Intermediate, and Advanced—included institutions representing each Carnegie classification. This should be encouraging news for smaller institutions that might have concerns about not being able to attain a level of IMC effectiveness similar to larger institutions with greater potential resources.

Since there is a significant difference between the brand recognition of Basic and Advanced IMC institutions, the question then becomes, "What

steps might a Basic IMC institution take to strengthen the power of IMC to achieve greater brand equity?" Based on the interview discussions, it seems one of the initial challenges that Basic Category institutions need to address is to ensure that the concept of branding is understood across the organization. IHEs need to understand that brand equity is not simply logos or school colors, but rather as Schultz and Schultz (2004) explain, brand equity encompasses "the brand's presence, identity/image, perceived quality, and commitment among constituents" (p. 309).

Strong brand equity can translate into a multitude of positives for the organization to include increased selectivity of students. While several of the interviewees noted that the mission of the institution was an important factor related to selectivity, six out of nine interviewees stated that marketing and communications had the power to impact the selective nature of an institution. Although institutions may not be able to control the external environment, they *can* control how they effectively respond to the environment through IMC. The Advanced Category respondents seemed to be most successful due to solid leadership direction and coordinated (but not necessarily centralized) communication.

CONCLUSIONS

This research demonstrated that IMC does exist in U.S. public institutions of higher education. IMC is not just taught in the classroom; it is now practiced across a diverse range of colleges and universities. Nearly all of the interviewees expressed enthusiasm for the study and the value of IMC in public institutions of higher education. The interviewees in the Basic Category of IMC shared a hopeful view that their organizations were taking steps toward a more comprehensive and effective marketing communication strategy. The interviewees in the Intermediate and Advanced Categories of IMC exuded confidence in the power of integrated marketing communication and recognized it as a distinct competitive advantage.

The support of institutional leadership was revealed to be the single most powerful determinant of whether an IMC strategy was successful. Not only does leadership need to mandate the coordination of marketing communication efforts, but leadership also needs to visibly support the institution's marketing communication objectives.

Once leadership support has been established, the next challenge is to ensure the value of marketing is understood across the institution. Several of the interviewees recommended developing a pattern of small successes so that others start to appreciate the power of integrated marketing communication. In addition, the organization needs to recognize the value of branding and how each marketing communication action potentially increases or decreases institutional brand equity.

For IMC to be most effective, marketing and communications staff should adopt both informal and formal outreach efforts. Campus "influencers" should be enlisted to support the planning and promoting of IMC initiatives. In addition, it is critical that metrics are established to evaluate and measure the outcomes, not simply the outputs, of marketing communication.

POTENTIAL LIMITATIONS TO THE RESEARCH

The research methodology design combined both quantitative and qualitative dimensions and could be criticized by a purist in either camp because of the mixing of methodologies that has taken place (Wilson, 2005). However, as noted in the literature review, there is a dearth of IMC research relative to IHEs, which prevents replication of past research methods or use of other researchers' questionnaires.

Another potential limitation is that the research is based on a convenient and purposeful sample. As Trochim (2006) noted, "With a purposive sample, you are likely to get the opinions of your target population, but you are also likely to overweight subgroups in your population that are more readily accessible." The respondents self-reported their institutional experiences, which could be conceivably biased. Additionally, this research design is limited by the small number of interviews that could be conducted due to the time and resources involved with the interview process. Such biases may limit generalizations that can be reached.

Finally, it should be recognized that IMC is still in its infancy, both as a concept and a process. Further analysis and adoption of common metrics for performance would be required to conduct a study with greater generalizable conclusions (Strasser, 2004). As IMC's theoretical foundations continue to be debated, there are bound to be inconsistencies across the survey sample of this study as well as the general population regarding their understanding of IMC.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

As one of the first studies to research the impact of IMC on public IHEs, the findings were more encouraging than this author expected. Although a certain resistance to the concepts of marketing and branding continues to exist in higher education, such conflict is no longer as prevalent as it had been a decade ago. However, marketing and communications are still not consistently integrated in IHEs, as demonstrated by the 36 (out of 42) different responses generated for Q1, which asked the title of the senior official responsible for marketing and communications at the responding institution.

Future research should be conducted to seek feedback from both internal and external stakeholders relative to the impact and effectiveness of IMC-related initiatives.

Additional research should also be conducted on the validity of the Four Stages of IMC framework. While the framework was initially presented in 1998 as a rather linear process, this research would suggest that many IHEs proceed through the various stages at differing paces and rates of success. A proper sequence for the framework may actually be Stage 4 (strategic integration) → Stage 2 (market research) → Stage 3 (application of information technology in support of IMC) → Stage 1 (coordination of marketing communication). In fact, this may be a more ideal framework not only for institutions of higher education but for all organizations and is certainly deserving of further research. Ideally, organizations would first plan strategically, then invest in market research and information technologies and finally coordinate their marketing communication tactics. The corporate environment may be too driven to achieve immediate results for such an approach to be effective, but it could result in reducing wasteful tactics that are noncongruent with the overall organizational strategies. Developing the strategic focus at the start of the process would improve the alignment of tactical efforts and specific communications with the overall strategies.

Another important consideration is the timing of this study. During the 2006–2007 academic year there was a plethora of student applicants. Thus, many of the findings related to selectivity and branding may simply reflect positive market conditions. However, it would seem that those IHEs who will be able to sustain success as the market becomes hypercompetitive during the next few years will be those who differentiate themselves through strategic IMC.

Future research efforts should also focus more specifically on how institutions define factors related to IMC such as branding. In addition, it would be interesting to determine how IMC can assist with attaining specific institutional objectives, especially in the areas of diversity and outreach beyond traditional target markets. On a related note, future research should also focus on how we measure the effectiveness of IMC efforts and whether benchmarking is an integral part of the process. As college leaders are becoming more business oriented and outcome oriented, marketers need to be able to demonstrate the value of IMC and justify the need for resources to sustain such efforts. In addition, such research could consider how measurable outcomes should be utilized to reward and compensate staff for their efforts.

Finally, it would be interesting to examine how IMC could play a role in understanding and strengthening a student's lifetime value to his or her college or university. It is still a rather common misconception that marketing should be primarily focused on the function of admissions. Such a mind-set

fails to consider that students will often have much greater value to the institution as alumni. Thus, it is important to establish strong relationships with students before they even arrive at the college, continue to build on those relationships while they are attending college, and ideally extend the value of those relationships across a lifetime. If IHEs do not consider the entire lifetime value chain of a student and connect the links in the chain with concepts such as IMC, they will undoubtedly lose considerable opportunities to advance their institutions.

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