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TUFTS

REPORT ON BRAND STRATEGY

AND COMMUNICATIONS RECOMMENDATIONS

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I – INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

This report presents findings and recommendations regarding Tufts University communications. The research on which the report is based was conducted between February and August 2005. Research consisted of:

- Review of university and school strategic planning documents
- Review of quantitative research from Tufts Institutional Research
- Review of brand and communications strategy of key competitors
- Benchmarking of communications operations against key competitors
- Approximately eighty interviews with administrators responsible for academic priorities, admissions, advancement, communications and student life in central administration, A&S, Engineering and each of the professional schools
- Twenty three focus groups with students, faculty, and alumni for each of Tufts' schools
- Internet survey of Tufts undergraduate inquiries, admitted, and enrolling students (approx. 3,000 responses in total)
- Eight focus groups of high-ability high school students in four significant target markets

All interviews were conducted with the understanding that identities would be kept anonymous, so those quoted in the course of this report are only identified by status as student, faculty, alumnus, etc., and not by name.

The Existing Communications Environment at Tufts

There is a general perception among faculty, students, prospective students, and alumni of Tufts that the university does not excel in the area of communications. Those who are external to the institution, such as prospective students and alumni, measure the quality of Tufts' communications, such as the university's website or printed communications, against those from other institutions and find them relatively modest.

In large part, Tufts is a victim of its own success – and of its substantial ambitions. Thirty years ago, Tufts was not generally counted among nationally prestigious universities. Its reputation was regional and its undergraduate programs were grouped more with liberal arts colleges than with research universities. Today, however, the situation has changed dramatically. The leadership of the university maintains a list of “peer institutions” against which it measures its progress. All of these are nationally prestigious universities, and all have larger endowments than Tufts. When compared to communications from these institutions, with whom the

public increasingly associates Tufts, the university's communications appear unimpressive.¹

This observation about Tufts' communications is not in any way meant to imply that Tufts is not a productive, substantial, and distinctive academic institution. Tufts boasts many devoted constituents and is the site of a great number of exciting, challenging, and important academic endeavors. But many who are fond of Tufts also understand that self-promotion is not its strongest suit. For example, this is the ranking that newly enrolling students gave to Tufts' admissions communications:

Students rating an information source as "very positive"

	Enrolling
Campus visit	58.4%
Encounter with current or recent Tufts undergraduate	50.8%
Conversation with Tufts alumnus/a	44.2%
Input from parents/relatives	44.1%
Guidance counselor at your high school	31.2%
Description of Tufts in 3rd party guidebooks	31.0%
Input from friends	30.6%
*Tufts website	26.3%
*Information sent by Tufts (viewbook etc.)	21.5%
Tufts reception in your area	17.1%
Meeting with Tufts representative at your school	15.7%
College fair in your local area	5.5%

Newly enrolling students are the cohort among all prospective students who are most drawn to one's institution. But as one can see, even this group gives a relatively low ranking to Tufts formal admissions communications – its website and its admissions publications. This response contrasts with the situation at many colleges and universities, where the admissions publications and website are ranked most highly by enrolling students as sources of information.

The relatively low quality of communications when compared to peer institutions does not apply only to materials prepared for external audiences – those who operate outside the institution such as prospective students and alumni. It also applies to communication with internal audiences – those who attend or work at Tufts such as undergraduate, graduate, and professional school students, faculty, and staff. A complaint that one hears at Tufts is that people at the university know little about what is going on at the rest of the institution. This is true whether one is working or studying at one of the downtown professional schools, the veterinary school, or on

¹ The complete list of peer institutions is Boston College, Brown, Columbia, Cornell, Dartmouth, Duke, Georgetown, Johns Hopkins, Northwestern, University of Pennsylvania, and Washington University in St. Louis.

the Medford/Somerville campus. For example, one newly arrived researcher at the medical school said:

Recently, I was doing a job search and when I was applying to Tufts the program sounded very appealing. But I wanted to know the context the program resided in. Who else would be there besides the folks in the program itself. And it was a fairly major undertaking to find out who's there and what they do and how it relates to what I do and what sort of collaborative resources would be available. So essentially I ended up doing two trips just to meet people who hadn't been identified in my first trip.

One indication of shortcomings in the internal communications environment at Tufts is how non-official, student-run vehicles have stepped in to provide functions served at other institutions by official communications. Staff and faculty at Tufts rely on the *Tufts Daily*, the student newspaper, for news about what is happening at the university. Many offices use *www.tuftslife.com*, an unofficial university website developed by students, to provide timely information about events at Tufts. As will be observed at other points in this report, it is emblematic of the Tufts student body to surmount administrative hurdles and address quality of life issues in their own community. They are not a group that passively accepts an institutional *status quo*.

Repercussions of the Tufts Communications Environment

The most obvious repercussion of Tufts' communications environment is the relative frequency with which one hears from people outside the institution the comment, "I've heard good things about Tufts but I don't have a very good sense of it."

The public has a short memory. It does not recall that thirty years ago, before it was listed as a national university in *U.S. News and World Report* and before the arrival of Jean Mayer, Tufts was a regionally-known, teaching-oriented institution with a small set of relatively autonomous professional schools. (The public also does not remember that thirty years ago several Ivy League institutions were not considered places of great academic seriousness or prestige, that there was a concept of the "bottom of the Ivies.") Many people, certainly in New England and the tri-state area around New York City, now know of Tufts as a "hot" school. But because Tufts communications apparatus has not kept up with its rise in prestige, some have little definite sense of Tufts' points of distinction besides the fact that it is "hot."

There are other important repercussions of Tufts communications practices: One common theme in many people's experience of Tufts – both students and alumni – is that individuals love or loved their particular experience at Tufts, but their feelings do not necessarily translate into strong identification with or loyalty to the broader institution. The May, 2003 *Final Report of the Task Force on the Undergraduate Experience* states:

Although students identify themselves with various groups within the Tufts community – a co-curricular organization, a sports team, a group of friends from a Tufts program abroad – they lack a sense of identification with Tufts as a whole.²

Focus groups conducted for this project added support for the Task Force's observation. For example, one current Tufts student said:

I'm on the Tufts campus and I don't really know what it means to go to Tufts. There is no sense of a Tufts identity. Our sports programs aren't particularly prestigious. The buildings don't look the same. When you go to Harvard, you go to Harvard, whatever that means. It's an identity.

These feelings about Tufts directly impact generosity toward the institution. After making the comment quoted immediately above, this current Tufts student made the following comment about his likelihood to contribute to Tufts in the future:

When I look back and decide how much or whether to give money, I'm going to say, "I went to Tufts. What does that mean to me or what does that mean to my future?" I participated in the Institute for Global Leadership. That was valuable and I would want to contribute money to them. But, rightly or wrongly, I don't really attribute that to Tufts.

Several current students make similar comments: they could imagine in the future contributing to one or another program at Tufts, but not to Tufts as a whole:

After I graduate I am going to give money to NerdGirls or directly to the mechanical engineering department, but not to the general university.

Recent alumni also made similar comments when asked about contributing to the university. For example:

I might give to the engineering school, but I don't think I'd give to the university. I'm not sure I could trust what they would do with it.

If I'm successful, I'd like to give to my program. They definitely need the resources. I don't know if I'd give to the university.

As the *Task Force on the Undergraduate Experience* report notes, there are many factors responsible for the atomization of the Tufts student experience and lack of identification with the broader institution. Many of these, such as undergraduate housing arrangements, are concrete and can be addressed with new investments in bricks and mortar or reform of administrative practices. However, it is clear from a review of Tufts communications practices, that one factor in the lack of identification with a broader Tufts is the lack of excellent communications. Starting from the time students and their parents first hear about Tufts, and are prospects for

² *Task Force on the Undergraduate Experience: Final Report to the Tufts Community*, May 2003, pp 1-2.

undergraduate, graduate, or professional school programs, through their time on campus, to their time as alumni, Tufts fails to convey a strong sense of institutional identity. Some factors in this are as seemingly insubstantial as the lack of clear and consistent application of the school colors – light blue and dark brown – on signs, publications, stationery, etc. Such gestures, though seemingly insubstantial, contribute to a sense of identification with an institution as a whole. Two Fletcher alumni who I met in the course of this project had also attended professional schools at the University of Virginia and at Dartmouth. Both remembered the school colors for these institution and not those of Tufts, although the professional schools they attended (Tuck and the U.VA. Law School) are not necessarily more strongly embedded in the general school culture of their institutions than Fletcher is at Tufts.

Building a stronger identification among students and alumni with a broader concept of Tufts is an important reason for greater investment in communications. For example, even if the admissions office has adequate raw numbers of prospective students from which to make its class, Tufts is nonetheless missing an important opportunity with its admissions communications to plant the seed of a broader identification with Tufts University as a whole that could potentially last a lifetime and lead to broader alumni support in future years. The same is true for communications up and down the line – from the signs that grace various parts of campus to the institutional website. As one can see from the comments quoted above, one important outcome of such communications work is improved institutional fundraising. Currently Tufts maintains the alumni giving rate of 29% which is lower than that at some peer institutions. Investment in communications to build a greater sense of broad institutional affiliation is one tool for strengthening lifelong relationship with alumni and building the donor base that will carry Tufts into the future.

The question needs to be asked whether the importance of identifying with the larger whole of Tufts applies to the constituents of the Tufts professional schools as much as it does to prospects, students, and alumni of Arts and Sciences.³ Students and alumni in truth do not affiliate with an institution as a whole; they affiliate with one part of it. Tufts has a tradition of relatively autonomous professional schools. One still hears claims, sometimes in unexpected quarters, that this or that professional school is perfectly fine, or even better off, without a strong bond to a larger image of Tufts.

Interviews with faculty, students, alumni, and administrators at Tufts professional schools make it clear that, in virtually every case, identification with a broader concept of Tufts will definitely benefit the professional schools as they move into the future.

³ Throughout this report, I will generally adopt the shorthand convention of grouping the Engineering School with the Tufts professional schools unless there is a particular instance where it makes more sense to group it with the School of Arts and Sciences. The Engineering School was recently administratively separated from the School of Arts and Sciences and without question possesses its own communications issues and audiences. However, those with long experience at Tufts may still be accustomed to the previous grouping together of Arts, Sciences and Engineering.

For example, we hear from many quarters that at one time the reputation of the Tufts dental school in the local area exceeded that of Tufts undergraduate or graduate programs. It is said that in the 1940s and '50s, if you told someone in Boston that you were going to Tufts, they would ask if you were planning on being a dentist. Since that time, the composition of the dental school student body has changed dramatically. In the '40s and '50s, the student body was overwhelmingly local and regional; today only 22% of dental school students come from New England. A larger percentage (27%) comes from the West Coast. Those new students obviously have less attachment to the traditional regional reputation of the Tufts dental school. They are much more likely to be buoyed in their selection process by a perception of Tufts as a major national university. The same is true for students at the other professional schools.

This is not to say that professional school students' primary focus is not the reputation of their particular school and/or program. These are students pursuing professional training. Their first priority is the reputation of their particular program. But most students in the professional programs, as do most administrators, believe that the broader reputation of the institution is helpful to their individual professional school's reputation among new students.

The test case for the above comment is the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, which sits, along with Columbia's School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA) and Johns Hopkins' School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) at the pinnacle of foreign relations programs. Within its circle, Fletcher's reputation is secure and exceeds the reputation of Tufts as a whole. When one speaks to administrators at Fletcher, they will point out that they often work in international contexts where Tufts has no reputation to speak of and where it can be counter-productive, or at least distracting, to attempt to convey a sense of Tufts broader identity.

I believe it is reasonable to grant that international circles are a valid instance where it is relatively difficult and will take a long time to build higher visibility for Tufts as a whole. However, in speaking with Fletcher alumni living in the United States, it is clear that there are other instances in this country where stronger perceptions of Tufts as a whole adds value to the Fletcher experience:

I would say that my view of Tufts has changed since my graduation from Fletcher quite a bit. I view it much more positively now and I get sort of a nice feeling when I see someone in a Tufts sweatshirt.

I would say the same thing. It's not particular to the UN where I work. You just hear more often that Tufts is a very good school.

The point, even in the case of Fletcher alumni, is that there is not a zero sum game between the reputations of the professional schools and the reputation of the broader university. Sometimes individuals at the professional schools talk and act as if they are in a contest with the broader university, and that enhancing the reputation of one

will cause a diminution in the reputation of the other. But in every case, with the possible exception of internationally domiciled patrons of the Fletcher school, this does not appear to be the case. Students, alumni, faculty, and staff generally understand that it improves their overall prospects to be associated with a prominent national university. A rising tide of awareness of Tufts University raises the boats of all the professional schools as well as the individual undergraduate, graduate programs, and overall advancement prospects. A stronger, universal identity for Tufts is in the interest of all who work for the university.

Project Overview

This project has three components:

Make recommendations on the major messages that Tufts should use to promote itself
Recommend and prioritize a series of projects to improve Tufts communications
Recommend changes to Tufts communications operations to facilitate more effective use of communications resources.

An important reason for designing the project in this way involves considerations of efficiency and economy. When benchmarked against the communications efforts of peer institutions, such as Georgetown University, or institutions toward which Tufts aspires, such as Johns Hopkins University, University of Pennsylvania, Duke University, or Brown University, Tufts communications efforts are modestly funded. It is not practical or realistic to expect that this gap can be closed overnight. Institutions such as these just mentioned grew their communications capacities over extended periods of time, and all have endowments that exceed Tufts'.

It should also be observed that, generally speaking, university communications are by nature inefficient. The non-hierarchical, decentralized administrative style of universities is not conducive to streamlined communications. All universities have communications structures that are duplicative, wasteful, arbitrary and not correctly scoped to narrowly tailored communications goals. Universities as a general rule waste money on communications.

The rationale behind this program is that Tufts can catch, and even surpass some of its peers (since that is the true goal) by striving for a level of efficiency and strategic integration which is not necessarily practiced at other institutions. For this reason, the current project includes three major components: design of an overall messaging strategy, recommendation and prioritization of a few hallmark projects to implement the strategy and recommendations on improvements in the communications apparatus to arrive at a more efficient and strategic deployment of resources. A combination of all three activities will lead to the most efficient use of scarce resources.

II – BRAND STRATEGY FOR TUFTS

The project of framing a central marketing message for Tufts University does not start from a blank slate. Tufts is currently operating under a strong strategic vision articulated by President Larry Bacow in his document, *A University Poised*.⁴ There are other critical elements to the current strategic direction, such as briefs prepared by Provost Jamshed Barucha for presentation to the Tufts Board of Trustees, the previously cited *Task force on Undergraduate Education* and strategic plans developed by Tufts various schools and programs.

Moreover there is a backdrop of accepted wisdom about the university that dates back to the Mayer era and before. The idea of applying the formal tools of marketing to universities is relatively new, but this does not mean that universities have not for some time framed messages and used communications to present themselves to their various publics. By all reports, and as clearly evidenced in alumni accounts from that era, President Mayer was an extraordinary instinctive marketer who built a strong vision for Tufts University.

Arriving at a large, unifying message (what is referred to in marketing parlance as a “brand concept”) for Tufts needs to be an iterative process of trial and error – of deriving from strategic documents, surveys, and interviews potential messages and then testing them with various audiences both within and outside the university. We also examine messages and claims put forth by competing institutions. The major criteria for a successful strategy is that it distinguishes Tufts from similar institutions and that it provides a definite image that various public audiences can buy into. The goal is not to alter the stated strategic direction of the institution, but to support it. The essential contribution that marketing makes to discussion of how universities should present themselves is its attention to the perceptions of external audiences. The university has a strategic direction. Our role is to craft recommendations for how the university can best deploy communications to accomplish its objectives by examining the perceptions and responses of various audience communities.

The following sections of this report will review important messages about Tufts which were critically appraised for how well they could contribute to the large, unifying message. That discussion will conclude with the recommended strategy.

Special Areas of Strength

One important section of President Bacow’s *A University Poised* features an enumeration of distinctive institutional strengths. This enumeration has been picked up and amplified in other strategic documents such as the Provost’s *Preliminary Academic Strategy* (May 2004) and the briefing document currently being used in a series of capital campaign consultative dinners.

⁴ Published in *Tufts Magazine*, Spring 2004.

The original discussion of institutional strengths in Bacow's *A University Poised* is detailed, taking up a series of paragraphs. Subsequently, the strengths were boiled down to three bullet points:

Internationalism
Life Sciences and the environment
Active citizenship

The claim has been made, and the following discussion will evaluate the marketing viability of the idea, that these three bullet points define something special about the nature of Tufts – that these three bullet points can comprise a major part of the “elevator speech” with which the university is defined at a core level.

From the perspective of the marketing exercise in which we are engaged, the very boiling-down of the President's original points into three bullets is instructive. Because a number of administrators wanted to take action based on the President's mandate, they wanted to distill the President's thinking into a series of talking points that could be easily and quickly communicated. This is the same exercise that we are involved in. However, in the very process of boiling his original thinking down into bullet points, confusion was introduced. Currently within Tufts there are some who criticize the talking points based on what may result from little more than misunderstandings that arose from extreme elision. This shows the danger of boiling something down that is best expressed at greater length.

The problem is that the three phrases do not naturally form a list; they are categorically different. The second bullet point, “life sciences and the environment,” one assumes refers to two broad areas of academic activity. The first term, “internationalism” is ambiguous. Read in the context of the second bullet point, one assumes that this term also refers to an area of academic activity. (As we shall see, when prospective students are confronted with the phrase “internationalism” many assume that you are talking about a particular major, such as international relations.) In fact, that is not the way the term is intended. The intent of the term is to suggest that at Tufts, all areas of academic study are informed by international perspectives and pursued in international contexts. But this is confusing. My understanding is that the third term, “active citizenship” is a neologism coined by administrators at Tufts to describe an institutional ethos that is turned outward to the world and focused on social problems.

The confusion in the list itself means that some further work needs to be done if these concepts are going to be crafted into a marketing message for Tufts. As we shall see, the concepts contained in the bullet points all find their way into the ultimate marketing recommendation but not in the precise form enumerated above.

The list raises another important question: To what extent does it make sense to define an institution based specific academic strengths? Tufts' goal, broadly stated, is

to advance within the first tier of highly selective American universities. It maintains a list of aspirant peer institutions, such as Duke University, the University of Pennsylvania, and Johns Hopkins University against which it measures itself. Within the broad public mind, as opposed to the world of academia, most of these institutions are not associated with particular academic strengths. Universities such as Duke, Princeton, or Brown are generally known among the broader public simply as very good schools. There are exceptions: the entire Johns Hopkins University is associated with strength in biomedical sciences because of the reputation of its medical school. Georgetown University, like Tufts, is known for the strength of its international relations program. But generally speaking, curricular strengths are not the first thing that comes to mind when most people think of top-tier universities.

A series of focus groups of highly able high school students were conducted for this project. Most of these students had vague, contradictory, and factually incorrect ideas of the academic strengths of particular institutions. The focus groups made clear that the students were drawn to an institution, at least initially, because of more general traits – location, size, social environment, and an overall sense of academic quality and style – but not in most cases because of awareness of a particular academic strength.

In fact, in some quarters Tufts is already associated with a particular academic strength: this is international relations. Dating back to the time of President Mayer, there has been a concerted effort to promote Tufts strength in international relations. One can see the fruits of these efforts in the following chart:

Self-Reported Intended Major of Accepted Students in the Tufts 2005 Entering Class*

	Enrolling Students	Accepted Student
International Relations	32.1%	22.6%
Political Science	19.1%	19.3%
Biology	18.8%	18.0%
Economics	15.7%	16.2%
Psychology	13.4%	8.4%
English	11.9%	12.3%
History	10.2%	9.7%
Bio-Chemistry	8.0%	10.1%
Philosophy	7.5%	5.8%
Chemistry	7.3%	6.8%
Spanish	7.3%	5.3%
Mathematics	4.9%	9.0%
Music	4.7%	6.9%

*Students could indicate up to three fields in their response so percentages total more than 100%.

Fully one-third of the students who matriculated at Tufts as undergraduates this past year said that they intended to major in international relations. Moreover, there is a substantial gap between the percentage of enrolling and non-enrolling students who expressed an interest in international relations. This chart suggests that an interest in international relations is a strong factor in whether a student accepted at Tufts will or will not enroll.

Focus groups with high schools students in the middle of the college selection process illustrated the ways in which a university reputation based on international relations plays in the thought process of high ability students. These high school students were presented with a series of descriptions of an unidentified university. One of the descriptions read:

This school is known for its international orientation. A ton of students come here to study international relations. Study-abroad is big. And the whole curriculum has an international flavor.

By intention this paragraph both mentioned the specific major of international relations and a more general concept of “internationalism” as a starting point for discussion. The wording in a paragraph such as this is crafted so that one can explore through discussion student responses to a variety of phrases and concepts.

Certain students in the focus groups were strongly attracted to this description:

That’s what I’m really interested in. I have a friend who lives in Tokyo and I’ve visited him a lot. And his dad is in the Foreign Service. That seems like a really interesting career choice to me.

International relations is pretty important to me and pretty attractive to me.

This paragraph is very attractive to me because this is something I want to study. It is one of the major things that I am most interested in.

But a much larger group of students were not especially attracted to this paragraph. Most wrote off international relations as not being a field they were interested in. They focused on the section of the paragraph mentioning study abroad and said that they planned on studying abroad but it would not be a deciding factor in where to attend college. They viewed study abroad as a secondary factor. The students were not drawn to the closing sentence of the paragraph discussing the international flavor of the curriculum. Here are a sampling of student comments:

I’ve never been that interested in international relations. This sounds like it would interest people who are.

I’m going to college to improve me and that’s not really what I care about at all.

It’s attractive to me, but it’s not really something on which I’m going to make my college choice.

Yeah, I mean the study abroad program is nice. I mean it'd be cool to study abroad maybe for a semester depending on which school I go to and whether I play sports or not. But it's not really important. I don't really care. I think every school has a study abroad program.

It's not something I'm really focused on. I don't really care about these things. I think it's moderately attractive. It's nice that a school offers this, but it's just not something that I really care about when I'm looking at college.

I thought it was moderately attractive because I think studying abroad would be fun. But other than that I don't really care about international relations.

Because the students did not spontaneously focus on the third element in the quote – that subject areas at institution X were taught from an international perspective – the moderator directed students' attention to this point to see how they would respond:

Moderator – You said that you were interested in engineering? Let's imagine that this quote referred to an engineering school and they said, "We're going to focus our education internationally. So our students are going to study engineering in international contexts, for example water projects in Africa," Does that appeal to you?

Not really. It seems sort of random to me. I mean, why Africa?

Moderator [to another student] – You said that one of your top picks was Princeton. What if I told you that Princeton just revolutionized their economics department so that all of their case studies are international. Princeton did this because they feel that the most important context for economics in the future is international. Does that matter to you?

No. I don't think it matters that much. I mean, the context of . . . like whatever you said . . . I don't think it's going to affect how I learn or anything. I'm mostly focused on what I want to learn.

Another students volunteered a response to the idea of a pervasive international focus:

Moderator – Was there something about this description that turned you off? One word or phrase?

Yes. That the whole curriculum has an international flavor.

Moderator – What about it turned you off?

I really like the idea of a school where I can dabble in a bunch of different things because, like, I'm only sixteen and I don't really know what I want to do for the rest of my life. I have some idea now but that might change. I don't really want a school that is focused on just one thing.

At this point, it probably needs to be clarified that the students assembled for these focus groups were highly able students from core feeder markets who in most cases will end up matriculating at highly selective universities and colleges. The focus groups were conducted in close collaboration with the Tufts admissions office. In assembling the focus groups, a great deal of attention was paid to the precise sort of high-ability and intellectually lively student that Tufts would ideally like to recruit to its community. When these students are quoted verbatim, they do not always sound so intelligent.

As one can see, among such a group of high-ability students, the appeal of internationalism was limited. Regardless of how the benefit was phrased, students tended to respond that it was either something they were not interested in, or of secondary interest on which they would not base their college decision.

Thus with regard to its admissions effort, Tufts finds itself in a situation where it is already strongly identified with strength in the particular curricular area of international relations. With a certain subset of students, this identification is a major asset and should not be discarded. But at the same time there is a much larger group of high ability students who are not primarily interested in international relations. If Tufts is to continue its admissions ascent, it needs to attract the very best students interested in the fields such as chemistry, biology, economics, philosophy, music, drama, languages, literature, engineering etc. regardless of whether they are interested in international relations or not.

What the focus groups taught was that the topic of internationalism does not hold strong general appeal for high ability students if they are not specifically oriented toward the field of international relations. If they are not predisposed toward international relations they view the topic of internationalism as a secondary concern and remote from their primary interest. This observation needs to be taken into account in framing the general marketing message for Tufts University.

The broader point is that it is probably rarely, if ever, best for a highly selective university or college to be identified with a particular subject area. The most successful institutions have a general image of pre-eminence that warrants in the public's mind their trust and affiliation. Rightly or wrongly, students and their families assume that all programs at one of America's stellar institutions are good. And indeed, institutions with narrower images, such as Johns Hopkins University, are currently involved in concerted marketing efforts to move beyond their narrow niche. A platform that will be more suitable for Tufts as it evolves is one that speaks to a general distinctiveness and preeminence of the entire institution. This is not to say that it should dispense entirely with discussion of curricular strengths – it should not – only to say that a stronger image vis-à-vis the broader public is one that presents a distinctive personality for the whole institution rather than one based on particular areas of strength.

Tufts as a Hybrid of a Liberal Arts College and a Research University

Within the university community – mainly among faculty and staff – you often hear that Tufts’ particular strength is that it is a hybrid of a liberal arts college and a research university: it is small enough, and the faculty are sufficiently devoted to teaching to give it the best qualities of a liberal arts college, and it is large enough, and the faculty are sufficiently engaged in original research, to give it the qualities of a research university. Many members of the Tufts community with the longest and deepest experience of the institution frame it in this way.

The Provost, Jamshed Bharucha, wrote in a memo to the Board of Trustees (October, 2004):

Tufts has always been student-centered (a quality typically associated with a small liberal arts college) while also being strong in research (a quality typically associated with a large research university). This dual quality puts us in a leadership niche and gives us a rare opportunity for distinction.

As the last sentence of the Provost’s statement suggests, it is reasonable, and on first impression seems realistic, to claim that Tufts’ point of distinction among America’s premier educational institutions is its mix of small college and big university characteristics.

As part of this market research project, this formulation, which will be referred to subsequently as the hybrid formulation, was assessed for its viability either as the foundation of the comprehensive presentation of Tufts or as a component in it.

The primary way in which the hybrid formulation was tested was in focus groups of prospective undergraduates. One question raised by the hybrid formulation is how well it works in the context of Tufts professional schools. It is obvious that allusions to a liberal arts college environment are largely irrelevant to students in graduate professional school settings. It would be necessary to adapt the hybrid model to apply to the professional schools. (In fact, all the Tufts professional schools, like its undergraduate and graduate programs, are marked by a warm community feel and close collaboration between students and faculty.)

But before one even gets to the question of the professional schools, one needs to evaluate how effective the hybrid formulation is with prospective undergraduates, since this would need to be an audience most attracted by this presentation of Tufts.

High school students in the focus groups were presented with the following paragraph referring to an unidentified institution:

This university has the perfect combination of research and teaching. At some of those big-time Ivy League universities, the professors mainly focus on their own research and their graduate students.

You can tell they don't really care about you as an undergraduate. But at this place, the faculty make teaching a top priority and they are good at it, even the ones who are world-class researchers.

They were asked to rate the paragraph for its attractiveness to them and then discuss its distinctiveness as a characteristic of an institution.

The vast majority of students in the focus groups found this paragraph attractive:

I think a balance of teaching and research are very important. You need to have a balance between them.

Students were aware that some of the institutions that they were considering were major research universities and they had heard accusations that the faculty did not teach and that classes were taught by graduate students and teaching assistants.

The problem arose when students were asked to hazard a guess as to which institution was referred to in the description. They expressed skepticism whether the description actually referred to a single institution since statements such as this were bandied about so commonly in the course of their admissions tours:

I feel like a lot of schools in their information sessions try to stress how most of their classes are taught by professors, very few are taught by TAs. I was just at Georgetown and they were talking about how a lot of people were involved in research in their sophomore year. I feel like a lot of schools are trying more to do this kind of thing.

This statement sounds like a lie. A lot of schools say things like this.

A lot of schools do say this and I don't think there is any way you can measure.

This was kind of pounded into my head at Brown.

There are four or five schools in my head that this fits.

They all say this, about the professors are willing to help you and stuff but you never really know.

Moderator – Do you think this description refers to a particular school?

No.

I haven't been to one school that hasn't said this.

Moderator [to another group of students] – Is this a distinctive characteristic of some schools?

Yes, like Brown, Wesleyan and a lot of schools that just really have small graduate populations.

Of all the schools I visited, Princeton seemed like they paid most attention to their undergraduates and Harvard has the reputation of not at all.

It is possible to sort out two broad categories of responses to the descriptive paragraph about an educational institution where faculty both care about their teaching and research. Some students were entirely confused about what institution this might refer to. Indeed, some had such a vague sense of research, or how research impacted their education, and so they were not certain what the paragraph was discussing. These focus groups were conducted of students in the late spring of their junior years. It is supposed that some of these students will learn more about the real workings of educational institutions as their college selection process advances.

A second group of students understood that there were different categories of institutions that might be more or less devoted to undergraduate teaching. They grasped that there was a class of institutions known as research universities where teaching might not be a high priority and a second category of institutions with less central research missions that would have stronger teaching. One example of this perception was previously quoted:

Yes, like Brown, Wesleyan and a lot of schools that just really have small graduate populations.

It is really quite impressive for a high school junior to have a sophisticated enough grasp of university structures to accurately associate smaller graduate populations with a stronger commitment to undergraduate teaching.

But even in the case of the second group of students, including the student quoted immediately above, the paragraph about an institution devoted to both teaching and research was thought to define a category of institution rather than a single institution. Students generally viewed the definition as applying to smaller, less research intensive universities such as Brown, Dartmouth, Georgetown, Emory, and, of course, Tufts in contrast to larger research universities. And many students did not even get to that level of understanding because messages about the primacy of research and teaching are so pervasive in university marketing. Many students were just as likely to associate the hybrid formulation with Princeton or Columbia as with Brown or Tufts.

Thus the drawback of the hybrid formulation as a key element in the marketing strategy for Tufts is clear: many students are not able to distinguish the claims made by competing institutions and even at best the hybrid formulation is perceived as defining the category in which Tufts resides rather than as a distinctive attribute of Tufts in particular. Thus the hybrid model might potentially serve as one aspect of a

Tufts presentation, but is not suited to being the foundation of the core message about the institution. There might also be other reasons, involving the communications goals of the professional schools to be cautious about excessive reliance on the hybrid argument. Its shortcoming however becomes clear even before one gets to the point of considering those other reasons.

Tufts as a Forward-Looking, Socially Engaged Institution

In the course of holding conversations with Tufts faculty, staff, and students, I started to pull together the threads of another potential comprehensive marketing message for Tufts. This marketing message was built on the concept of “active citizenship” articulated in Bacow’s *A University Poised* and reiterated in a point made by the Provost in conversation – that his vision for Tufts involved lowering the walls of the conventional “Ivory Tower,” so that Tufts would be a less isolated and theoretical institution and more engaged on multiple levels with the outside world.

The other inspiration for this marketing message was the energy and enthusiasm of the Tufts’ student body. One thing that a new visitor to Tufts hears from administrators and faculty trying to convey the energy of the institution is “you have to meet our students. They are not like students elsewhere.” Tufts students are not known as a group that is socially passive or introverted. They are engaged and active. Part of the thinking going into this potential marketing message is that the institution might reflect the energy of the students back on itself as part of its institutional image.

The marketing concept that I composed had two elements – that Tufts core personality as a university was that it was:

1. forward looking and entrepreneurial
2. engaged at every level with serious social challenges beyond the confines of the ivory tower

The thinking here was that Tufts could distinguish itself from chief competitors through the oppositions implicit in these two concepts:

Concept

Obverse

Forward-looking ←————→ Hide-bound

Socially engaged ←————→ Ivory tower

In a nutshell the claim would be that in contrast to a widely-perceived aspect of Ivy League institutions – that they were weighted by tradition – Tufts was a more nimble, forward-looking and socially engaged community. This would position Tufts as being different from those institutions.

The original context for developing this theme was focus groups with existing students. For example:

Moderator – Let me tell you about a marketing idea I've been toying with. If you don't like it you have to tell me. This is very early in the process. I am trying to come up with a high-level concept that seems to encapsulate the entire university. So I've come up with this concept, talking about Tufts as a very forward-looking, entrepreneurial institution. Not weighed down by tradition like some other schools in town, but really nimble and interdisciplinary and focused on the challenges of the coming years.

I like that.

It sounds good to me.

Yeah, but not to everybody. It is not for everybody. I don't agree with the idea that Tufts is for rejects from other institutions. We have a very different student body. The people at Harvard are not the same as the people at Tufts. It is different. I came to Tufts for a reason. It wasn't SAT scores or anything holding me back. This is what I wanted, where I wanted to be. Marketing in the way you've suggested is marketing to the people sitting at this table [a group of student leaders]. I like it.

This last response is exactly what would be desired. The student quoted here perceived the marketing concept as defining a point of distinction from other institutions. He liked the concept because it suggested that Tufts had its own personality and was not simply a back-up to other institutions. It is also striking that he took the statement to be speaking about the distinctive style of the undergraduate student body although when I presented the concept to him, I had not said anything specifically about the Tufts students.

The marketing message was tested with prospective students employing the following paragraph:

This school has a definite style. The students are socially committed and involved – they’re doers. That’s not to say the kids aren’t also great students. Virtually everyone here was an overachiever in high school. But they are more than just great students. They are involved. The school is always talking about “active citizenship” and you actually see it in the students. They definitely plan to use their education to improve society.⁵

As with some of the other quotations used in the focus groups, student responses tended to fall in a few categories. Some students read this quote as implying that the students were active in community service. Mainly students said this where they themselves had this interest:

The phrase “improved society” made me think of community service.

Right, and that’s important to me.

This suggests that there are lots of opportunities for service, which is very attractive to me.

A lot of the things I’m currently involved with are like leadership oriented, like service things. I really enjoy doing these things. I like that at this school students are really involved and they are doing things outside of school and like outside of their own social environment.

Other students, whether involved with service projects or not, had a strong personal identification with this paragraph.

This is definitely the kind of person I am. It is definitely what I want to do with my education and in my life.

In some cases students took the paragraph to suggest that the student body was active beyond the classroom, that they were not passive or introverted. This was viewed as a positive characteristic:

I didn’t see it [the paragraph] as so much socially committed as involved with the people around them. Especially like in Boston, if you’re socially committed and involved you’re probably friends with kids from other colleges.

⁵ The inclusion of the phrase “over achiever” in this paragraph probably needs some explanation. During the focus groups with current undergraduates on the Tufts campus, many self-identified as over-achievers in high school. The phrase was included here to see the way current high school students would respond and to provoke discussion. The lesson was fairly straightforward and does not require long elaboration: Though once in college students can look back upon their high school over-achiever status with a certain ironic detachment, students in high school find no pleasure in the concept, ironic or not. Most will not admit to being over-achievers and the phrase conjures for them some of the more distasteful and competitive aspects of their own high school cultures.

I do like this phrase “active citizenship” because there are kids that I know . . . I’ve got a friend who has completely lost himself in his room. He doesn’t really participate in school activities. A lot of my other friends are good academically but they also like to perform on sports teams. I think this school would be for the kind of people who are dedicated to academics but not so much that they don’t have time for other stuff. I like that.

I read it about being involved in general.

Some students read the quote as implying that the school possessed substantial school spirit:

I want to get a good education first, but like school spirit and active citizenship are just a bonus.

As with all of the quotes, there were some students who were less favorably disposed. Those who did not respond positively to the quote had two significant complaints: one that they felt that the campus thus described would have a uniform student culture that they would not like:

Moderator – What hit you the wrong way about this?

I guess it was the tone. The school style. I felt like it was just annoying to me. I have always wanted to be able to improve society but at the same time I felt like I don’t want to be surrounded by people doing the exact same thing. I don’t know. I just didn’t like this.

The other negative comment was that this feature of the school environment was not of primary interest:

This is not something I would specifically look for. It sort of is really important but I can do community service even if my college doesn’t. Even if the other kids don’t want to.

Yeah, like it’s not that important that it would really sway my decision in going to a college but when you think about kids that want to improve society and get out there and make a difference, that would be a really cool atmosphere to be around.

One of the more optimistic responses to the paragraph was that of students who found the statement relatively distinctive. As we saw when examining the hybrid formulation, many students found the idea attractive but they did not view it as distinctive. They said that this was something that many colleges mentioned. This same perspective was not shared by students in discussing the paragraph about an active, engage campus community:

Moderator – Do you think this is something that differs from college to college?

I haven't really heard this a lot [referring to "active citizenship"].

In terms of weighing the potential of this marketing concept as a point of differentiation with other elite educational institutions, the following quote is a positive sign. The student quoted below begins by saying that the characteristic is not on her radar screen. Yet, as she talks about the concept, she becomes more attracted to it. By the end of her comment, she appears to have been won over:

This is not something I look for. I don't think that I personally have heard of a lot of schools like saying this as their big selling point. I took it as just being involved, doing things, always being active, and just like filling up your time with different things and not just letting time pass you by. So that was appealing. I definitely think that improving society is a great plan. You know, using these four years to do something.

The Major Negative Consequences Associated with the Positioning Strategy of Tufts as Especially Forward-Looking and Socially Engaged

Any claim of substance regarding an institution inevitably contains a negative consequence since you cannot say something distinctive and forceful about an institution (or about anything for that matter) without in the same breath implying the exclusion of something else. From a marketing perspective, it is not enough to avoid the explicit articulation of unwanted negative traits. One also needs to explore the connotations of what one is saying since in the buzz of ideas in the public marketplace, one's explicit intention can be easily misunderstood.

In the case of the strategy currently under discussion – which is to depict Tufts as particularly forward-looking and socially engaged – there is one significant and widely perceived negative connotation. One of the first students with whom the strategy was discussed put his finger on it:

I have two very competing responses to that brand presentation. On the one hand, I'm very aware that the aspects of Tufts that I've benefited from have very much been engineered in the last twenty years or so. So I am involved and have benefited from many of the forward-looking aspects of this university. At the same time, I'm very taken with notions of tradition and history and in the end (I feel guilty about saying this) with romanticized social traditions. I like old buildings and verdant greens and the connotations of prestige that go with them. It's a sense that you're part of a tradition.

As this student says, and as many others said in the course of the research, the idea of an institution which is forward-looking and socially engaged seems to imply, even if it is not explicitly stated, that the institution is not grounded in history and old

traditions. And history and old traditions are identified for many with prestige. Therefore to say that an institution is forward-looking and socially engaged has the potential implication of somehow lessening its prestige.

Although Tufts' Medford campus clearly has the appearance of an old established institution, and although in fact the medical and dental schools are among the earliest and most well-established in New England, the current situation at Tufts is that it is not particularly aware or prideful of its history. Many members of the Tufts community quote the judgment of former Provost Sol Gittleman that prior to the coming of Jean Mayer, Tufts was a relatively undistinguished, grey regional institution. Even those who are proud of its earlier incarnations, such as more senior alumni, seem to have relatively little knowledge or attachment to the major chapters in the institution's history.

The lack of a strong historical awareness of Tufts likely results from a combination of generational trends common to institutions of higher education and rapid changes in the make-up of the Tufts student body. Over the course of 30 years, Tufts went from being a regional institution to one with a more geographically diverse enrollment. Those newer students do not necessarily have a connection to old school pride elements such as a school fight song, colors etc. Added this are the generational patterns: Students of the early 1970s were still countercultural and cynical about traditions. By the time school traditions came back into fashion in the 1980s, there was not a very good institutional memory of the older traditions nor a way to frame them that was relevant to students of the 1980s and 1990s.

However, as one Tufts alumna said in the course of the interviews, a sense of an institution's history is important to school pride:

I think knowing the history is of the utmost importance. The more history you know, the more you feel a part of something. Like your family: you know the stories and you have the tradition. It's the same with the university. If you feel like a part of that group or a part of that community, you're going to feel like you want to give back. You want to stay in touch. You want to be part of it still.

The recommendation that will follow is that Tufts actually adopt the positioning strategy of speaking of itself as a particularly forward-looking and socially engaged institution. When it does so, it should also speak more pervasively and at greater length about its history and traditions than it does currently. This will be essential to countering the implication of the positioning strategy that Tufts is less historical and thus less prestigious. In truth, Tufts can do much better in articulating and taking pride in its history than it does currently. This can be an important element in the presentation of the institution.

The theme of Tufts as forward-looking and a sense of Tufts' history can be combined by employing the theme that "Tufts was founded with a progressive spirit and has been progressive since its founding." This is a way of grounding the central message

about the character of the institution moving forward in a sense of history and tradition. An excellent example of the integration history, pride, and a forward-looking institution is contained in President Bacow's 2005 Matriculation Address (August 31, 2005):

Class of 2009, you have not come to just any university. Tufts has a rich tradition and history, one that continues to influence how and what we teach, and what we expect of our students, our graduates, and ourselves.

Tufts was founded in 1852 by the Universalists. At the time, most colleges belonged to some degree to a particular faith, having usually been founded by a particular denomination to educate their young people. Even those colleges that accepted students from outside their faith typically required faculty and trustees to belong to the institution's founding church. Tufts was different. Not only did our founders object to this policy at other institutions, they also stipulated that there would never be a religious test for employment or admissions at Tufts, a radical notion at the time.

Writing in the leading Universalist paper of the day, a church elder said, "We go for universal education of the people - the poor and the rich - the farmer and the mechanic and the seaman, as well as the lawyer, the physician, and the clergyman. Let all the people be educated. The universal diffusion of knowledge is the only safeguard of our republican institutions."

These principles still guide us. We continue to embrace diversity in every possible dimension. We still believe that education and the generation of new knowledge are fundamental to a free and just society. And we believe that with education comes responsibility - responsibility to make the world a better place. At Tufts, we embrace active citizenship as one of our core values. We expect each of you to get involved, to work for the benefit of others - not just here and not just now, but throughout your lives.

This kind of knitting together of the themes of social engagement, progressivism, and history serves as an effective counter to the connotation that because Tufts is forward looking and socially engaged it is somehow less grounded in tradition and thus less prestigious.

The Application of the Institutional Positioning More Broadly and to the Tufts Professional Schools

A crucial step in developing the marketing message for Tufts was working with a broad range of constituencies to explore how effectively the message would work across the institution. There are a few clearly defined primary external audiences for Tufts: prospective students and alumni of all of its undergraduate, graduate, and professional school programs. There are also internal audiences who need to be carefully considered as part of the process: current students, administrators, and faculty. All were engaged in the process of developing the message for Tufts.

In each case, the conversation needed to be different. For example, it is perfectly reasonable for faculty to be cynical about the boiling down of complex ideas that is involved in marketing a university. Their own work involves high levels of complexity and nuance. Nor do they normally write for general public consumption. When one approaches a group of faculty with a marketing concept, it is unrealistic to expect consensus and wholesale approval. But one needs to know whether something in the marketing strategy raises such hackles among faculty that it could become a political problem for the administration. One of the best known positioning blow-ups of the 1990s involved Wesleyan University's attempts to promulgate a marketing strategy which did not meet with approval from the faculty or current students.

That being said, most faculty with whom I met were reasonably comfortable, and some were positively energized, by the idea of presenting Tufts as a forward-looking, socially engaged institution. The major concern they raised was that discussed in the previous section: that the strategy would imply that the institution was less grounded in tradition and thus less prestigious. Here is an excerpt from one conversation to give a sense of the tenor of the conversation:

One way of thinking about this would be to imagine if I had a college-age kid, fifteen years from now. Would I want a forward-looking university? No I wouldn't. I'd look for a university that first has a bright faculty, where bright researchers are likely to be and second that teaches well. And that's the only criteria I would look for. So the idea of forward-looking wouldn't sell me.

Innovation is an important thing in a university because a lot of people, depending on who you are, look for these sorts of things.

Well, I like the word "nimble." Especially when I look down the road to Harvard and MIT. It's certainly what we are going to try to do. We're going to do something that different and that's nimble and that doesn't require the mega-millions that they are going to throw at it and we're going to have a specific and aggressive way of dealing with some issues. I like that.

We're in a new century and the 21st century problems need to be looked at with fresh perspective.

But that makes it sound like it's just going to be a bunch of spaceship people or something.

But that's how it has to be. I am trying to think about how these words strike me. They give you a perspective and make you aware of institutional differences and how good Tufts is. When I travel to another part of the country and I mention Tufts and they don't know what it is, it makes me sad. When I go to China and they don't know what Tufts is, it makes me sad. We already know how great Tufts is, but other people need to know that.

Responses from Tufts alumni to the idea of presenting Tufts as especially forward-looking were varied. Many alumni liked the presentation:

To me the phrase that really caught my ear was active citizenship. I feel like that to me does encapsulate my conception of people going to Tufts in a real positive way that differentiates Tufts from a lot of different places.

I think Tufts is in a position where it is redefining itself. I think it is changing and trying to evolve. Maybe that phrasing will help it get there and get away from the old.

Others liked the phrase but were concerned that it left some important quality out:

I think the forward-looking approach is good. But to me trying to encapsulate a whole university in very tough. I'm not sure this sums it up.

The most prevalent concern voiced about the positioning was the same voiced in other circles about the tendency of the concept to drop out a sense of history:

Tufts lacks a sense of tradition and cohesion that keeps all the graduates together. That [concept] doesn't necessarily accomplish that bit of the task.

I worry that in pushing forward you're saying that there's nothing to hold onto so you might as well cast all of that away.

Responses from alumni of the Tufts professional schools were quite revealing. Many responded favorably to the concept of being forward-looking and socially engaged, but had difficulty thinking beyond their particular school to a sense of the whole university. What the focus groups of professional school alumni revealed was the great extent to which they had little formed image of the larger Tufts University whatsoever. If they did have a vision of the larger university, it was because a child considered or enrolled in the undergraduate college. Generally alumni of the professional schools had difficulty responding to questions about the marketing message because they had thought so little and had such a scant grasp of a larger concept of Tufts. For example:

Tufts Dental is Tufts Dental. I don't think the reputation of the university affects our practice [as dentists] one way or the other.

The school of nutrition is pioneering and risk-taking. I think it is engaged with the outside world. I think it is global and forward looking. I don't know about the rest.

The conversations with alumni of the professional schools indicated the university has some way to go to build any sort of generally awareness of the university. They were not opposed to the positioning concept. It was simply difficult to tear them away from their school-centric perspective. An extreme example of this was the

conversation with Fletcher alumni: when they were asked to discuss the relationship of Fletcher to the broader university, they veered into a ten minute discussion of the relationship of Fletcher to Harvard. As a general matter, younger alumni of the professional schools were more likely to understand the importance of a relationship between their professional school and the broader university than older alumni.

The Recommended Tufts Brand Strategy

The result of all of the conversations with alumni, students, faculty, administrators, prospective students was to arrive at a concise set of statement that Tufts should use in describing its with all audiences. Before presenting the brand strategy itself, a few comments are in order about how one employs such a strategy.

The first thing that needs to be said is that what is presented below is not a tagline or set of taglines. A brand statement is a strategic document that instructs one on the major themes to employ in communications. A particular communication should reflect the themes and priorities of the brand statement, but it does not necessarily do so by quoting the actual words of the brand strategy themselves. The brand strategy stands prior to authorship of any particular text, just as it stands prior to the determination of a graphic design style or use of photography. A tagline, for example, might be one outgrowth of a brand strategy, but it is not contained in the strategy itself.

There is much talk these days in the political realm about “framing” – that politicians need to make their own positions palatable and persuasive by framing them in narratives that resonate with target audience. The theory of brand strategy is similar. When one employs a brand strategy, one is attempting to tie all of one’s myriad and many activities back to an overarching theme or narrative that research has suggested will appeal to target audiences. One reason to employ brand strategy is that listeners cannot necessarily keep track of myriad individual activities. You build “mindshare” in the minds of your target audiences by tying all your individual communications back to a continually reiterated major theme.

In most cases, this activity boils down to presenting individual accomplishments or facets not in their own right but as outgrowths of the core brand personality. For example, here are a series of statements about Tufts:

Tufts’ medical school has a noble and well-established tradition of preparing excellent clinicians.

Nearly 40% of Tufts’ undergraduates study abroad.

Tufts has adopted a major research emphasis on environmentalism.

Tufts has a beautiful campus set on top of a hill.

If one adopts as a positioning strategy that Tufts points of distinction are that it is particularly forward-looking and socially engaged, here is how one might tie these individual statements back to the overall theme:

Tufts' medical school has a noble and well-established tradition of preparing excellent clinicians *evidence of Tufts founding commitment to addressing pressing social needs beyond the walls of the institution.*

Nearly 40% of Tufts undergraduates study abroad *because Tufts students have energy and drive and understand that active citizenship requires one to experience the world beyond the campus.*

Tufts has adopted a major research emphasis on environmentalism *because Tufts has always had an institutional ethos of addressing major societal challenges, and environmentalism poses one of the greatest challenge of the world today.*

Tufts has a beautiful campus set on top of a hill *because the founders of Tufts wanted the institution to shine as a beacon to higher education, calling it to an idealistic, progressive, and socially-engaged purpose.*

The brand strategy does not so much dictate particular communications as tell you the way to frame all communications, whatever their particular topic might be. When one operates within a brand strategy, one views every communication, from the most mundane to the most elaborate, as an opportunity to reinforce a central message. This applies not only to formal communications, such as the university magazine or website, but to informal communications, such as campus tours and press cultivation practiced by the public relations office.

The other essential component of a brand strategy is to remember that ultimately one is trying to build an impression of a personality in the mind of the audience. Each brand has a certain style, akin to the way a person might dress or speak. Therefore part of conveying a brand personality involves not simply the content of communications but their style. One good way get at this point is to ask yourself the question: "How would an institution that is forward-looking and socially engaged speak?" Some answers that come to mind are that it would not be shy, pedantic, provincial, or arcane. It would be engaging, cosmopolitan, unpretentious, and enthusiastic. Building a brand personality thus involves not only the content of one's communications but the style. If one were to write a tagline in keeping with the brand strategy, one would not only want its content to reflect the major themes of the brand strategy, but one would want the choice of words to convey the appropriate style.

With those preliminary comments out of the way we can now present the Tufts brand statement:

TUFTS BRAND STATEMENT

Tufts is a university focused on new leaders for a changing world

Supporting points

- We draw on traditions of innovation and progressive thinking going back to our founding in 1852
- We are pioneering and entrepreneurial
- We are engaged with the outside world – promoting active citizenship
- We are focused on the great challenges of the new century
- We are global in our perspective
- We are educating the next generation of leaders through genuine collaboration of faculty and students
- We possess special strengths in international affairs, life sciences, and environmental sciences and engineering

The Brand Personality

We are . . .

- enthusiastic, eager, and flexible
- forward-looking
- spirited, exuding enthusiasm for Tufts
- intellectually substantive
- committed to genuine diversity, conveyed through voice, tone, and style

We are not:

- Verbose or pedantic
- Pretentious or hide-bound
- Defensive or apologetic (never comparing Tufts to others)

III – KEY PROJECTS FOR IMPLEMENTING THE STRATEGY

A brand strategy combines aspects of an organization that are grounded in current reality with aspects to which an organization aspires. On the one hand, if the brand personality were so far-fetched as to be unbelievable, the strategy would fail. A great deal of the research that was conducted for this project was to insure that the brand concepts of forward-looking and engaged with the outside world would be accepted as plausible by key audiences.

Yet a good brand strategy should also be aspirational, as it should indicate a direction for future development. The efficacy of the brand strategy over time depends upon the extent to which the institution can come to more completely embody the identity posited by the brand.

Embodying a brand strategy goes beyond matters of communication. For a position to be secured in the marketplace of ideas, it is not enough for an organization to simply reiterate its points in its communications. It also needs to work to have the brand strategy seep into the day-to-day life of the institution, to inform such basic issues as administrative practices and priorities.⁶

Communications function in this context as a way to get the ball rolling. The success of the Tufts brand strategy will depend upon the participation of many staff and faculty who are not themselves professional marketers and perhaps cannot intuitively grasp how to implement the strategy. Communications that manifest the strategy are an important tool in demonstrating to both internally and externally the direction an institution wants to move. The communications themselves are not sufficient to implement the strategy, but they are an essential component in shaping perceptions, especially at the beginning of a campaign.

The following four projects have been identified as critical components for implementing the brand strategy. Of course, they are not the only ones. It is assumed that all projects that the university undertakes from this point forward should embody the principles of the brand statement. These are four high-profile projects that the university should focus on as primary ways of conveying the strategy:

- Institutional logo and identity system
- Admissions publications
- University magazine
- University website

⁶ I am indebted to Tufts Board member Abby Kohnstamm for making this point in reviewing an early draft of this work.

Institutional Logo and Identity System

It is extremely common for people to confuse an identity system with a brand strategy. A brand strategy is a theoretical document that informs you of the messages, points of emphasis, tone, and style of all communication. It sits as the foundation for particular creative projects, such as a new website, a redesigned magazine, or a logo. An identity system is a set of designs and guidelines that insure that the identity of an institution or organization is consistently presented in all its formal communications, whether in print, T.V., or on the web. Normally an identity system will include the design of a logo, which is a distinctive, trademarked way of presenting the name of an organization, as well as guidelines on color and accompanying typography. The goal of such a system is that all the various communications from an organization will be clearly identified or “branded” as coming from that organization, and there will not be any confusion about their institutional origins.

The design sensibility conveyed in an organization’s logo should certainly reflect the tone and style mandated by a brand strategy. It would make no sense, for example, to use finely wrought Gothic letter forms to present an organization that was supposed to be modern and forward looking. However, it is easy to overestimate the role that an identity system plays in building a brand. The design elements employed in an identity system are relatively few – a few letters, color, and typography – and one overreaches if one claims that an identity system is the major element in building public awareness of a particular image.

A better way to think about an identity system is as a prerequisite for good communication rather than as the communication itself. If an organization does not maintain a clear identity system, if the institutional name is presented in varying, inconsistent designs, with different colors and typefaces, audiences perceive the organization as disorganized, and have trouble immediately perceiving various communications as stemming from a single source. Developing a good identity system is normally the first line of attack for improving communications, but it is not in itself sufficient to implement a brand strategy.

Tufts is clearly in need of improvements in its identity system. There is a system, promulgated in a design manual in the late 1990s, which mandates an institutional logo, colors, and accompanying typography. The system is employed, more or less the way it was designed, on most publications prepared by the Tufts publications office. However, the system is not employed in many of the most high profile communications from the university: It is not employed on institutional stationery nor on the signs around campus for example. It is also never printed on sweatshirts, coffee mugs, window decals or on other memorabilia. It is employed incorrectly in a number of contexts, for example on the cover of the university magazine and in past annual fund publications.

With the benefit of hindsight, it is relatively easy to see that the design of the current Tufts logo was never adequate to meet the communications needs of a nationally

ranked university such as Tufts. The logo is constructed from a typeface, Adobe Caslon, that was not intended for display but for setting large blocks of text (a “text font”) in books and brochures. The Tufts logo draws its distinctiveness from an exaggerated spacing between the letter forms “t” “u” “f” “t” and “s”. In order to reproduce the logo accurately one must render this customized spacing accurately, although many offices simply try to rebuild the logo themselves, by tracking out the letter forms manually and get the spacing wrong. Also the current identity system mandates that the same typeface that is used for the school logo should be used for headlines and type treatments throughout the university. This invites all sort of modifications of the university logo which detract from its distinctiveness.

As Tufts increasingly competes for attention among major national universities, it needs an identity system that can be more universally applied and build greater recognition for the institution. Such a system should be applied to the website, all school publications, signage, memorabilia, etc. Although such a system is not sufficient to build the Tufts’ reputation, its role should not be underestimated. Early in this report, an Fletcher alumnus residing in New York City was quoted as saying that he gets “sort of a nice feeling when [he sees] someone in a Tufts sweatshirt.” The goal of an identity system should be to give those outside as well as inside the institution as many opportunities as possible to take satisfaction and pride in their affiliation with the institutions.

Admissions Communications

Admissions operations at major universities are run with different philosophies. Some, such as the University of Chicago and the University of Washington, St. Louis, place a large amount of stock in the purchase of inquiry lists and use of large direct-mail campaigns. Others, such as Johns Hopkins University and the University of Pennsylvania put more emphasis on traveling to high schools to meet prospective students. All, however, use some combination of essential activities – traveling to high schools and fairs, encouraging visits to campus, communicating via direct-mail and the Internet – in their recruitment efforts.

Prior to the appointment of Lee Coffin as Dean of Admission in 2003, the Tufts admissions operation directed relatively little effort toward the printed materials or the website intended for prospective students and their families. The budgets at Tufts for producing such materials are modest. They are produced by in-house design teams without assistance from outside design or writing talent. Historically, the writing for the admissions publications is done by the admissions office itself.

Tufts is not alone in taking this approach to admissions publications. The following chart gives some sense of the relative standing of some prominent and peer institutions when it comes to admissions publications programs:

*Colleges and universities with
modest, relatively
old-fashioned admissions
publications programs*

Johns Hopkins University
Princeton University
Tufts University
Washington University in St. Louis

*Colleges and universities employing
a greater expenditure on art, design,
writing, and photography*

Columbia University
Duke University
MIT
Swarthmore College
University of Pennsylvania
Wesleyan University
Williams College
Yale University

It is significant that two of the other institutions on the list with Tufts have similar recent historical trajectories. Johns Hopkins and Washington University are, like Tufts, medium-sized private highly selective universities located in fairly large metropolises. They, like Tufts, have experienced impressive admissions selectivity growth over the course of the past twenty years. In the context of such impressive expansions in undergraduate selectivity, some schools are tempted to view the quality of their publications as of relatively little importance and as an area for economizing.

However, the lesson of admissions marketing for highly selective institutions is that the marketing programs – the publications and the website – are not simply about maintaining or enhancing selectivity, although they certainly are about that. They are also about “shaping the class:” recruiting for certain traits that one wants to bring to one’s community and for building an emotional bond over the course of the admissions process.⁷

Tufts is at a point now in its admissions selectivity where, to optimize its admissions operation and achieve its goals, it needs a communications program that can engage the best students in America and is on par, if not exceeds, that of peer institutions. This program needs to be deployed both on the web and in print. This will require a significant expenditure of time and resources beyond what is currently employed. Such a program is essential not so much for to bring the raw numbers of students needed in the admissions operation, but within that overall goal, to bring the kinds of students who are ideally suited to the Tufts environment and can help take the university to the next level.

⁷ One result, for example, of Tufts lack of investment in marketing efforts to build this emotional bond, is that the yield (percentage of accepted students who matriculate) among the regular decision pool has been relatively low in comparison to some peer institutions.

Admissions communications is also a prime tool for building a brand image. Generally speaking, the admissions marketing effort is the most costly and elaborate communications program that an institution of higher education engages in. Although the effort is targeted directly at prospective students, because of the cultural and class background of most families considering highly-selective national universities, these communications programs can be an important tool for shaping impressions with important attitude-shapers. Moreover, one finds that in building a brand identity, younger audiences, such as those considering a university, are a superb audience to target because they are much less likely to carry baggage from older, outdated impressions. As Tufts builds its brand as “a university focused on new leaders for a changing world,” younger audiences such as prospective and current students will be the easiest to sway in the short terms. Older audiences, such as alumni and opinion-shapers in the Boston area, will take longer to get on board. Thus one finds that investment in admissions communications has secondary impacts that go beyond the mere recruitment program to general impressions of a university as a whole.

The University Magazine

The university magazine is the most substantial communications piece that alumni of Tufts or of any university receive from their *alma mater*. The situation at Tufts regarding the resources devoted to the magazine is similar to the situation with the admissions communications: when compared to the magazines of peer institutions, the Tufts magazine is a relatively modest effort. The design, writing, photography and illustration unfortunately fail to make a compelling case for picking up the magazine and reading it. Alumni offered these comments:

I don't like it. I can't tell you why. It doesn't capture what I like about Tufts. It's dowdy and I don't like the design at all. I can't even bring up an image of any article I've read.

It's a presentation issue. Basically it ends up competing with everything else I like.

When proceeding with the implementation of the brand strategy, the alumni magazine should be viewed as a central tool for shifting alumni perceptions and building a greater sense of affiliation. Fortunately, at the time of this writing, the advancement communications office responsible for the production of the magazine has developed a business plan and engaged a designer to substantially improve the magazine.

Sometimes, one hears from Tufts alumni that the university does not do a particularly good job at staying in touch with them and that the only time that Tufts gets in touch is when it wants money. It is predictable that as the university heads into the public phase of a capital campaign these feelings could be exacerbated. Alumni might feel in even greater numbers that Tufts only interest in them is

fundraising. The alumni who were interviewed for this project were circumspect about this:

I would caution the university about being too aggressive with its alumni, especially the younger ones. Don't reach out to them only because you want something. Reach out to them because you want to stay in contact with them.

The university magazine is an important tool for maintaining a connection with alumni separate from the idea of fundraising. It arrives four times a year as something of a gift from one's *alma mater*. Given the sentiment stated above, it is particularly important that the *Tufts Magazine* maintain the posture of editorial independence that is the industry standard for magazines at educational institutions. It will be most effective for the institution when it focuses on stories of genuine interest to the readership and can compete, as the alumnus quoted above said, with all the other magazines that come into one's home. Advancement oriented stories should be relegated to a minor place in the new university magazine.

As the advancement office develops the magazine, it should be viewed as a primary vehicle for advancing the branding strategy. Because the branding strategy mandates that the institution focus on the world beyond the ivory tower, it will be especially important to document the impacts that faculty, alumni and students are having beyond the confines of Tufts. There is certainly no shortage of potential topics. However, the magazine will be challenged to find the proper visual materials to illustrate many of these stories that take place around the globe. It is not consistent with the standards of a first-tier university to employ snapshots taken by a student or faculty member as the major images to accompany an article. It will be a substantial challenge to find photography for stories that must take place around the world.

The University Website

The Tufts website is a major tool for shaping the culture of university through the dissemination of information between schools and to faculty, students, administration, alumni, and various external audiences. The historic situation regarding investment in the university website is similar to that for the admissions publications and the magazine – a lack of past investment in the level of expertise necessary to build and maintain a functional web presence has left Tufts behind the web capacities of many of its peer institutions. For example, when the web service group develops a web site for an internal client, they re-use text produced originally for print brochures, since there is no budget or internal mandate to employ a writer. As a result many of the web pages have overly long text which is not correctly scoped to the on-line medium.

The lack of web capacity is particularly noticeable in the case of the web sites of most of the professional schools. (The exceptions are Fletcher and Friedman both of which

have good, operative web presences.) Because of the historic lack of support from central web services for the professional schools, these schools have had to go out on their own to develop their websites. Most are very modest, and do not reasonably serve the needs of core constituents, such as school alumni and prospective students. Moreover, because the professional schools have developed their own websites, their web pages lack a consistent identity. Navigating through the existing homepage of the Tufts professional schools reveals a wide range of styles and presentations. In some cases, the professional school websites do not reflect favorably on Tufts' rising status as a highly selective national university.

Over the past two years the Office of University Relations has made significant strides in the appearance of the Tufts website. First it completed a redesign of the university homepage. It is currently involved in a project to develop standardized templates for the professional schools which will upgrade the appearance and functionality of these sites. It will also create the positive family resemblance to the Tufts identity. These school pages and templates will be an important tool in conveying the brand strategy.

The observation that needs to be made here is that these steps, though valuable, will not by themselves be sufficient to correct some of the long standing and fairly deeply engrained practices that limit the effectiveness of the Tufts web presence. We shall put off this discussion until the following and final section of this report, which presents recommendations on the reengineering of communications practices at Tufts. So much of a vital, effective web site involves ongoing administrative practices to keep the site lively and up-to-date. The steps that the university relations office has taken are important, but they will not result in a substantially improved web capacity without cultural changes in practices and assumptions.