The Implications of a University Brand: Institutional Brand Alignment and the Experience of Honors Students Attending Clemson University

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THE IMPLICATIONS OF A UNIVERSITY BRAND: INSTITUTIONAL BRAND ALIGNMENT AND THE EXPERIENCE OF HONORS STUDENTS ATTENDING CLEMSON UNIVERSITY

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy
Educational Leadership

by
Lori Marlise Pindar
August 2014

Accepted by:
Dr. Patricia F. First, Committee Chair
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Dr. Joseph P. Mazer
ABSTRACT

In this research, the process by which honors students interact with the institutional brand and become part of their university is examined. Branding and the brand experience is the process by which institutions differentiate themselves from other competing organizations. It was assumed that the degree to which honor students consume the brand impacts not only how they understand their student identity on campus but also their beliefs about their education, their campus community, and their own intellectual and social development.

A single-site case study approach was employed to illuminate and provide an in-depth description and analysis of the effects of a college brand on honors students in their campus learning community. The case study and multiple qualitative methods used allowed for a rich description and exploration of the participants experiences, which were triangulated through focus group, photo-elicitation, and document review collection points.

In this study it was found that the participants are aware of the institutional brand and their role in maintaining and upholding the values that their university brand supports. Further, they see the necessity of the brand for their institution with regard to recognition on the national landscape. However, the participants shared the belief that the branding efforts on the part of the university do not value the academic learning community which they were recruited to as much as the efforts value athletics and social activities—the implications of which lead the participants to situate themselves between two worlds—the scholars they are and the students the university wishes to see.
DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the late Joye Marie Peguese Pindar, Robert Pindar, and Lewis Ruffian White—my grandparents who encouraged and loved me early in life. I also dedicate this to Gertrude Saxton White—my grandmother and matriarch who continually teaches me the value of patience, perseverance and the power of an education.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am thankful for the individuals in my life that have, in their own way, provided me support throughout my dissertation process.

I would like to convey my deepest gratitude and respect to Dr. Patricia First for her teaching, guidance and support throughout my entire doctoral journey. Dr. James Satterfield and Dr. Tony Cawthon have been instrumental in helping me understand the placement of my work in the field and provided commentary that proved instrumental in my development as a scholar. Dr. Joe Mazer and Dr. Travers Scott are colleagues and friends who continually challenge me to think critically about my work and the world.

I thank my family: mom, dad, aunts, uncles, cousins and extended family for always providing love, support and continued in my abilities to be successful. I thank my colleagues and friends for keeping me grounded.

The 13 students who participated in the study have my gratitude and I wish them the best for their future endeavors.

I am indebted to Mr. Jamie Williams, a mentor I have known since the beginning of my college career. Thank you for permitting me the access and resources needed to conduct this study.
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

Institutions of higher education in the United States and worldwide use images and slogans to differentiate among one another and appeal to potential and current students, faculty, staff and donors—this is called branding. In the ever changing educational landscape, institutions seek to differentiate themselves from others through the process of branding. Prospective students and families use differentiated higher education brands to assist in the decision-making process of which institution to attend. The brand, thus, communicates both the intangible and tangible markers that students and other stakeholders may value such as perceived fit, prestige, quality, and affordability.

Background

The market to remain competitive has increased for institutions of higher education. Because of factors such as reduced public funding of higher education, how colleges and universities identify and market themselves on the educational landscape. The increase in competitiveness is reflected by the amount of money institutions spend on branding campaigns. According to Luettger (2008), “since the year 2000, the amount of money spent on marketing and communications by colleges and the universities in the US has risen more than 50 percent” (Hearn, 2010, p. 207). Although institutions garner revenue from their brand, the creation and maintenance of a “unique institutional identity” that stands out is an expensive and tedious process. The brand must be conveyed and maintained consistently in the “deployment of logo, motto, tone and look” according to Porter (2008). The goals of these branding campaigns are to recruit the best
and brightest students, attract industry and research dollars, and to communicate effectively with local communities for a positive town and gown relationship (Hearn, 2010). Moreover, branding is a process that takes years to establish firmly in the public arena and requires a team of individuals working to find and test mottos, logos, and colors that work for an institution’s long and short term goals and vision. Despite competition between universities being a long-standing tradition in higher education, the brand of an institution has become central to the survival of the university. According to Wernick (2006),

The self-consciousness with which a university’s corporate image has come to be managed, the administrative prominence the task assumes, and the objectification, and indeed monetization, of academic reputation itself is a brand (p. 566).

The implications of a branded university impact all facets of university life and also contribute to the growing promotional culture surrounding institutional brands and higher education. Hearn (2010) notes that students may feel that they are customers in control of their decisions and to be served in keeping with the qualities conveyed via a college or university brand while universities see students (and other stakeholders) as a market to be leveraged for resources that impact the long-term yield of an institution in growth, funding, and prestige. Thus, it is important to know how the brand of an institution is disseminated, used and understood by those impacted by the organization.

Statement of the Problem
Branding is a process that has been in use for thousands of years. Artisans put identifying marks on their products to demonstrate quality and pride in their product (Wolpert, 1999, p. 2). As mentioned in the introduction, branding has helped institutions of higher education seek to negotiate a unique niche in the educational landscape. As educational rankings become increasingly relied upon and used as a competitive tool for funding, recruiting top students and scholars, and a vehicle for notoriety, the institutional images become increasingly important. Today, the “mark” or brand is the tool by which institutions create and maintain their niche. Today’s institutions make others aware of their services and other areas of prestige by licensing and trademarking their images and products. This practice helps promote and promulgate images of institutions to a broad audience but also impacts the college experience for those attending the institution. The brand, if authentic and true to the institution’s essence, vision and mission, should assist in creating the desired atmosphere for the learning community. However, the brand can also help an institution become more differentiated at the cost of misleading or not adhering to the university’s core mission.

**Higher Education Promotion**

University promotion and advertising dates back to the 1700s but the trend toward the “commercialization of our institutions and learning” was not fully pronounced until formal public relations offices began appearing in the early twentieth century (Cutlip, 1970, p.23). Throughout the latter half of the 20th century, educational institutions became increasingly involved in a culture of promotion through their increasing adaptation of marketing and business strategies—promoting the use of the brand as the
central representative tool of an institution (Aronczyk & Powers, 2010). The influence of the corporate world on education has driven universities to strive for what Aronczyk and Powers (2010) call “promotional capital” through ranking systems and prestige. The authors offer that institutions strive for this promotional capital
to such an extent that often the pursuit of rank and reputation completely displaces any internally generated ideals regarding independent cultural critique and pedagogical rigor; indeed, in a clear case of the tail wagging the dog, most universities explicitly use the categories for university adjudication established by these external publications as blueprints for their future (Aronczyk & Powers, 2010, p. 205).

The importance of branding to distinguish institutions in higher education provide prospective students of an institution a way to identify and, more importantly, differentiate between schools of interest. Wolpert (1999) noted the importance of branding as reducing the level of efforts on the part of the potential consumers of a product (here being a college education) by packaging various attributes related to quality, risk, and reward into a single, digestible unit.

Institutional identity and branding are distinct but related entities as one influences the other. Although branding is a recognized concept with higher education, there is limited research regarding the impact branding has on colleges and universities and, in particular, what the impact is on the students who attend these institutions. When the desired lived experience of the student differs from the brand experience being had, brand dissonance and potential brand erosion may occur. The brand erosion impacts the students through their continual negotiation and re-negotiation of their (the student’s) place and space within an institution.

**Purpose of the Study**
The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of branding programs in higher education as they are assumed to be important by the university. The second purpose of this study is to examine how an institutional brand impacts the lived experience of undergraduate students at a four-year university in the southeast. The target students in this study are those who have been specifically recruited through honors marketing strategies by the institution. A third purpose of this study is to understand the perceptions these students have regarding the institutional brand. A fourth purpose is to determine the degree to which students know and interact with the institutional identity.

**Research Questions**

The major question guiding driving this study was to discover how a university brand, discourse(s) and communication policies impact student affiliation and consumption of the university identity. The four specific research questions that will be addressed are:

Question 1. What is the perceived institutional identity?

Question 2. Where and with what is the institutional identity represented and projected to students?

Question 3. What are the perceptions/views of these students regarding the institution’s brand?

Question 4. To what extent do these students’ views influence the relationships they have with other students and members of the university community?

Question 5. How do institutional messages support or challenge the desired collegiate experience for the student?
Assumptions of the Study

This researcher assumes the research participants are all involved in the extended learning community of the university beyond their academic programs. Their involvement is assumed to be related to, in part, their understanding of and interaction with the university brand via logos, slogans, and other messages that help shape the university identity. It is assumed that, as students specifically recruited to an institution, they are aware of the marketing strategies and brands used to convey the quality of the education they will receive and the opportunities available to them. It is assumed that after arriving on campus and joining the learning community, the institutional brand is impacting the students in their individual identity development and the construction of their social world.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because information will be gathered that can improve the facilitation of successful university campaigns and understand what successful campus integration, participation and persistence looks like among student groups strategically recruited to become a part of the campus community. An additional significance is that higher education brands assist in the decision-making process for students seeking a certain type of college experience.

The results of this study will serve as a continuance of research being conducted in the realm of branding in higher education with researcher recommendations being provided in Chapter V. This study will provide necessary information for institutions and communication leaders to consider with regard to current branding trends and the
implications for the campus community.

Beyond adding to the field of scholarship regarding university campaigns and branding in higher education, the study will be one more step in illuminating how educational entities play a purposeful role in shaping more than the academic lives of students. By making institutions of higher education aware of and accountable for the impacts and consequences of their strategic marketing and branding plans, the student experience can be enhanced through evaluation of current branding practices.

This study responds to the gap in current literature about gifted and bright students in higher education by providing them a voice in which to discuss an aspect of their experience related to the universities promotional discourse. The results of this study will be useful to university marketing and communication offices, academic administrators, honors programs and to divisions of athletics and student affairs.

Limitations

In discussing one’s personal college experience, positive and negative emotions may present themselves as the students describe why they feel a particular way about the brand. I believe this will be especially true for those who have had to negotiate their own belief systems and principles that were not in alignment with the institutional brand as they tried to find a niche within the community.

As the researcher, I am accepting what the participants say as being true to their experience in the single case being investigated (Creswell, 2007). Following this limitation is that, inherent in qualitative research, the researcher-as-instrument is a limitation, as I am the lens through which information is interpreted (Alvesson, 2003).
Other limitations also include that this study is limited to honors students, specifically those belonging to a top scholarship program that were recruited to the university. Another limitation is that the study is conducted at one single university in the southeast. I do not foresee any physical, mental, or emotional risk for the participants as being able to share their stories may be a benefit. The ability to share their experience can provide a catharsis and encourage these particular students to value their experience in or around the university.

**Definition of Terms**

This section provides the definition, as used in this dissertation, for terms that may be interpreted in multiple ways.

- **Artifact.** An artifact is the representation of an institutional culture that has widely shared meanings and manifests group identifications to outsiders (Brummett, 2011, p. 13).

- **Brand.** “A label [. . .] which we experience, evaluate, have feeling towards, and build associations with to perceive value” (Rosenblaum-Elliott, Percy & Pervan, 2011, p. 4)

- **Branding.** The marketing of a product or service that clearly makes a distinction from others (Etzel, et. al., 2006, p. 259). Branding “enables a person to identify one alternative from a competitor [by] labeling it” (Rosenblaum-Elliot, et. al., 2011, p. 110).
• **Brand Culture.** The ability of a brand to build reputations for “telling a certain kind of story that addresses the identity desires of a particular constituency (Holt, 2004, p. 211).

• **Bright and Gifted.** Refers to a high achieving student whose performance is at the top or beyond their peer group (Kingore, 2004).

• **College/Campus Culture.** Culture within an institution is made up of “persistent patterns of norms, values, practices, beliefs, and assumptions that shape the behavior of individuals and groups in a college or university and provide a frame of reference within which to interpret the meaning of events and actions on and off the campus” (Kuh & Whitt, 1988, p. iv).

• **Consumption.** The act of using, interacting, and engaging with a product or brand (Brakkus, et. al., 2009)

• **Honors Program/College.** A specialized learning community within an college or university that offers “students enhanced academic challenges[s] in the form of honors courses and seminars, smaller classes, [and] more faculty contact” (Fischer, 2006).

• **Institutional Identity.** Institutional identity is comprised of the public mission of the institution and answers the question of what an institution is, what it values and where the institution is headed (Renn & Patton, 2011).

• **Learning Community.** A “purposeful, open, just, disciplined, caring, . . . celebrative” and identifiably organized group of individuals, teams, or cohorts on a university campus (Boyer, 1990; Roberts, 2011, p. 456).
• **Lived Experience.** The events in an individual’s life as a human being (Moustakas, 1994) that impact said individual’s relationship with others, an institution, and society.

• **Promotional Culture.** A society that relies on the symbolic function of signs to represent, inform, and persuade the consumer about the quality of a commodity.

• **Stakeholder.** Researchers, faculty, staff, students, community members within and around a university (Shavelson & Towne, 2005).

• **Licensing.** A “form of marketing and brand extension available to companies, organizations and institution… by granting the right to use a trademark” (Revoyr, 1995, p. 1).

• **Tempered Radical.** Individuals who are a “special class of actors embedded in multiple institutional contexts—tied both to their workplaces and to identity and/or interest-based communities associated with alternative logics” (Meyerson & Tompkins, 2007, p. 311).

• **Token.** In numerical terms, when an individual within any social group represents less than 15% of the total group (Kanter, 1977).

• **Trademark(s).** “The name, brand, logo or symbol used by and representative of an organization or institution” (Revoyr, 1995, p. 13)

**Theoretical Framework**

The theory of social construction is used in this study as a guiding framework for understanding the perspectives students taking part in this study have regarding their institutional brand as a symbolic activity as well as their role (or lack thereof) as a
participant in the learning community. Social constructionism derives from the work of Berger and Luckmann (1966). Berger and Luckmann (1966) believed in the relationship between the individual and society as operating in both directions, with human beings continually construct[ing] the social world, which then becomes a reality to which they must respond. Burr (2003) discussed this construction and reconstruction of reality, noting that a person is still limited in how he/she constructs the world around them. For this study, the researcher specifically used the work of Foucault (1972, 1976, 1979), Rose (1990), and Burr (2003). The work of these authors focuses on macro social constructionism which “acknowledges the constructive power of language but sees this as derived from, or at least related to, material or social structures, social relations and institutionalized practices” (Burr, 2003, p. 2). Central to this approach of social constructionism is the idea of power and the impact power has on the social relationships and identifications individuals have with organizations, such as a university and the university brand.

There are key assumptions that one must believe to be a social constructionist. As an assumption, one must believe that “knowledge and social action go together” so constructions of what it means to be a university student and participate in the university community shapes an individual’s understanding of what that university community is and the individual’s role within (Burr, 2003, p. 5). This construction of the individual’s identity in reaction to participation in the college community, specifically their engagement in the learning community, is key in understanding how perceptions about the university community are formed. The identity, formed by social processes, is
“maintained, modified, or even reshaped by social relations” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 173). Taking the idea that an identity such as “honors student” is a socially constructed concept, the framework of social construction is particularly useful because “identity is a phenomenon that emerges from the dialectic between individual and society” (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 174). The identity negotiation, construction and reconstruction within a social reality provides a foundation for understanding the experiences and ensuing participation, or not, of honors students within other spheres of the campus learning community and can provide clues as to why they chose this community over another institution.

As a second layer of theoretical guidance, brand culture is applied to better understand the nature and evolution of brand as related to the marketization and commodification of daily life, particularly in higher education. Brand culture is the “mechanism through which individuals construct political and cultural identities” (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 43). Lury’s (2004) work notes that brand culture forms a set of relationships between products and services that take into account the visual, textural and thought about a brand. An element of brand culture, brand experience and authenticity, is explored in this study, and Banet-Weiser (2012) provides insight on the aspect of authenticity as both a “cultural space defined by branding, and as a relationship between consumers and branders” (p. 10). Here, the cultural space is the learning community cultivated by the brand with members of the learning community as consumers.

Together, these theories work together to inform the larger strategy of an institution to differentiate and sustain a niche within the landscape of higher education.
and attract educational consumers, such as students, to said institution. The social construction of the participant’s social world, within the parameters provided by their institution’s brand strategy, informs the overall brand experience of the participant. These theorists guided the work of this dissertation.

Overview of Study Site

Founded in the late 19th century through a gift in the will of a generous benefactor, Clemson University is located in the southeastern region of the United States. Clemson U is a medium-sized, land grant research university that serves both residents of the state in which it is located and regional communities. Clemson is also ranked yearly as one of the top public institutions in the US by U.S. News and World Report. Clemson has five colleges and one school conferring undergraduate, graduate, and certificate degree programs. University athletics compete on the Division 1-A level. Steeped in tradition, the university purports the OneClemson ideal to all students as they are accepted into membership into the Clemson family. The institutional brand buy-in required of students, alumni, faculty, and staff is a source of collegiality but also the site of dissonance when values and assimilation to the family ideal is not a proper fit for certain student groups.

Demographic Characteristics of the Study Site

The university has a wealth of academic diversity with over 80 distinct majors and 75 minor programs available to undergraduate students and over 110 graduate degree programs (ww.clemson.edu/about). About 55 percent of the nearly 20,000 enrolled students are male, 45-percent female. Eighty percent of the undergraduate and graduate
student population identifies as white, six percent as black or African American, and two-
percent as Hispanic. Sixty-five percent of the student body is from the state in which
Clemson is located and 30-percent of the study body lives on-campus.

**Population Studied**

The population studied belongs to the university’s top scholarship program, which
recruits and selects students based on their high school achievement, rigor, and activities.
These high achieving and/or gifted students (the categories are not mutually exclusive)
represent students who are recruited to bolster institutional prestige. This scholarship
program is highly competitive and recruited from the general applicant and honors
application pool with only 40 applicants invited to compete from the approximately 800
honors college applicants. The scholarship awarded to each member of this group covers
tuition, fees, room, board, supplies as well as a summer study abroad experience after the
first year of college. The program employs a cohort based model in which each entering
class is involved in the same freshman seminar and summer study-abroad trip. Upon
graduation, the cohort model is used to encourage alumni participation in campus events,
donor opportunities, and mentorship. Membership in the program is not directed after the
first year and allows for a diversity of opportunities and learning experiences and
incorporates student feedback to develop new learning experiences on campus and
through study-abroad.

Being that the students are strategically recruited to the institution because of their
academic ability, the impact the brand experience has on their relationship with the
institution as a numerical minority, or token, the participants occupy a unique place within the learning community.

**Methodology**

This study employs a case study approach that involves in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information (Creswell, 2007). The multiple qualitative methods approach in developing this within site study incorporate a sequential exploratory design strategy with data collection in two distinct phases (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014). The data collection methods used are document review, focus groups, and photo-elicitation interviews. The study is rooted in the interpretive research tradition and thus, allows for the rich description and exploration of meaning multiple individuals have of their lived experiences as related to an institutional brand (Creswell, 2009). As a researcher, I seek to collect data from a select group of individuals who have experienced the phenomenon of institutional branding and develop a “composite description of the essence of the experience for all the individuals” which will consist of what they experienced and how they experienced the brand (Moustakas, 1994). In the first phase of data collection, a non-experimental survey will be distributed to faculty, staff and administrators who interact with the select honors students. This structured survey will be disseminated to those involved with the scholarship program as a faculty, staff, or administrator in an effort to capture their perceptions of the branding initiatives of the specific program and university they are working within. A non-experimental survey design will be used since variables assessed will be observed as they exist in real-time for the participants (Nardi, 2002). Also during the first phase of data collection, focus groups
will be conducted by the researcher will concentrate on a particular topic and observe the interactions among participants which enhances data quality and provides a checks and balances that will eliminate extreme views (Krueger and Casey, 2000; Patton, 2002). Individuals will then be asked to participate in a photo-elicitation interview, which is a method that inserts a photograph into a research interview (Harper, 2002). Both focus group and photo-elicitation interviews will be coded thematically during the first cycle of analyses and well suited to interviews and participant generated field notes (Saldana, 2003). The data collected from the focus groups, photo-elicitation interviews and survey instrument will be triangulated with the ongoing document review of artifacts demonstrating the institutional brand and provide a deeply saturated body of information related to the implications of branding on the lived experiences of right and gifted students recruited by the university.

**Organization of the Study**

This study will be organized into five chapters. Chapter I serves as an introduction to the study.

Chapter II contains the review of relevant literature related to the research study. Theoretical underpinnings driving the study as well as the topic of institutional identity and brand, promotional culture and discourse, honors and gifted students, tokenism, tempered radicals are discussed.

Chapter III contains the methodology and will discuss the research questions, method and design, all data collection methods, the Institutional Review Board
application, research setting, participants, ethical considerations and summary of the proposed analysis.

Chapter IV will provide an analysis of the data and Chapter V will contain a discussion section and recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Overview

The literature review critically examines prior research related to branding, higher education, and students while demonstrating the importance of research in this arena. Specifically, the review of literature describes branding initiatives in higher education, which signifies the importance of brand on an institution's reputation and status on the educational landscape, its impacts on the lived experience of the student, and why this study fulfills a gap in the scholarly literature on the topic.

The literature also reviews issues in branding and trademark licensing, theories related to the major research questions, literature about honors students and how institutional identity has been contextualized in the realm of higher education.

Contextualizing Institutional Identity

Within the literature, studies address the issue of prestige, brand, and stakeholder involvement in the formation and maintenance of school prestige and image to both internal and external university communities. Gonzales and Pacheco (2012) refocus the idea of branding and stakeholders by examining the problems created by using slogans to catalyze organizational change. These slogans were appropriated from dominant logics about university prestige and success and within this transition period, Gonzales and Pacheco (2012) found that instead of a democratizing action that included all members of the university community, all critiques were silenced which led to dissonance within the community.
When considering stakeholders and their buy-in to a university’s marketing and promotion strategies, both short- and long-term goals should be considered since organizational change can occur at different paces at different levels of the institution and within various stakeholder groups. Antcil (2008) discusses strategic marketing plans for higher education that emphasize the importance of first identifying the strengths and weaknesses of an institution, which then informs what the college/university is, whom it serves, and who the competition is (p. 94). Depending on the brand buy-in or marketing strategy, a university’s change agents must be aware of the internal and external goals and the impact of what it takes to achieve those goals, and the impact thereafter once change becomes reality.

**Internal Practices and External Outputs**

There remains a gap in the literature related to how policy and administrative movement impacts seemingly unrelated factors such as prestige, brand, alumni and community relationships, and overall satisfaction among all stakeholders. Movements have been made in the general direction of correlating organizational discourse with organizational perception within and external to the institution. Some examples of this include resolving the tensions that higher educational faculty and staff have regarding the ambivalence of the larger university toward their personal professional development, articulation policies for programs linking two-year and four-year degree programs, and even maintaining student services in areas of particular university need such as in tutoring, childcare, and disability services (Clegg, 2003).

**Promotional Culture and the University**
The higher education move toward a corporate model of branding is the result of centuries worth of tensions that have made the modern university what it is today—an institution influenced by external corporations. Thus, institutions shift their “research and pedagogical emphasis to those fields that produce the highest monetary yield [...] such as commercializable research” (Hearn, 2010). The academic mission of an institution is inherently threatened by the need to procure funds and promote research in order to make them more noticeable on the educational landscape if an institution does not stay true to its own brand. Marketing logic has infiltrated university administration as institutions brand, market and promote themselves. This leaves students, many of which are influenced by consumer culture, see an institution as providing a service. In essence, the student may see and choose an institution based on the quality of the degree in which they are paying, always keeping the return-on-investment factors in their mind before fit, educational quality, and other factors unrelated to tuition come into play (Hearn, 2010). With college rankings becoming increasingly important and pressures within the professoriate, administration, and athletics to meet the demand to be on top, institutional promotion gains an ever present seat at the table in strategic university planning.

Formal offices dedicated to institutional public relations and marketing at the university and departmental levels exist in many institutions and are becoming increasingly popular. Wernick’s (1991) seminal work, *Promotional Culture*, defines promotionalism as the “dominant symbolic language and mode of expression of advanced post-Fordist capitalism and neoliberal modes of governmentality” and that “commodity form cannot be separated from its promotional form and that consumption
activity is bound to the production of promotional meanings and brands” (Hearn 2010; Wernick, 1991, p. 182). The idea of promotion is related to branding because the brand is the representation and tool of information exchange in a promotional culture. In a culture where education has become commoditized and consumed for price that equates a particular value or quality of the product. Universities, influenced by corporations and industry, strive to accumulate promotional capital, as Hearn (2010) notes, in the form of reputation and rankings in magazines such as *U.S. News and World Report*. They do so to such an extent that often the pursuit of rank and reputation completely displaces any internally generated ideals regarding independent cultural critique and pedagogical rigor, indeed, in a clear case of the tail wagging the dog, most universities explicitly use the categories for university adjudication established by these external publications as blueprints for their future (p. 205).

In such a promotional era, colleges and universities are criticized for losing sight of the academic mission but an intuition's reputation is indubitably related to its own survival.

**Branding**

Brands have existed for thousands of years and have evolved into tools to market and promote a particular cause or identity. Branding is the process of labeling, and thus, “designating ownership” and is a process “we experience, evaluate, have feeling towards, and build associations with to perceive value (Brakus, Schmidt, and Zarantonello, 2009; Rosenbaum-Elliott, Percy and Pervan, 2011, p. 4). The basic purposes of a branding are “to make it easier for consumers to identify and remember a particular product,” and “to
strengthen the association of a product with one or more attributes of quality” (Wolpert, 1999, p. 2). Universities have advertised and branded themselves since the 1700s and installed offices dedicated to public relations beginning in the early twentieth century (Aronczyk & Powers, 2010). The evolution of the public relations offices into media relations, marketing and university brand centers is in response to colleges and universities adopting marketing strategies from the corporate world. Administrators dedicated to marketing institutions have well established professional associations, conferences, textbooks and an academic journal related to the field of university branding and promotion leading to the furtherance of a promotional culture among entities of higher education.

**Brand Experience**

The brand has become the single representation of the goods (a degree), services (academic and social life), and people (stakeholders) offered by an institution that distinguish it from other competitors. In the pursuit of reputation and prestige, colleges and universities increasingly rely on external feedback to provide a roadmap in how best to promote themselves in recruitment and retention of students and faculty, research and publishing, and the fostering and maintenance of community relationships. In some instances, universities promote themselves to such an extreme that “often the pursuit of rank and reputation completely displaces any internally generated ideals regarding independent cultural critique and pedagogical rigor” (Hearn, 2010, p. 205). For members of the professoriate, internal university departments and units, students and community groups, this evolution of university branding into today’s promotional culture is the
driving force behind contentment and affiliation or dissent with the academy and has the power to shape the overall university experience. The brand, in and of itself, is the mechanism by which individuals can identify and choose to be a part of (consume) a university community or not.

Colleges and universities, acting as corporations, continue to brand and re-brand themselves as necessary to remain competitive and differentiated and protect their brand through licensing and trademarking. Licensing is one of the most powerful tools in marketing and dissemination of the brand (Revoyr, 1995). By allowing vendors and outside entities to use the trademark, or visual representation, of the university, institutions receive a royalty fee for the guarantee that a vendor will accurately use the brand into various marketplaces. The brand becomes symbolic and protected once it is trademarked. The Trademark Act of 1946 (known as the Lanham Act) defines a trademark as:

any word, name, symbol, or device, or any combination thereof used by a person, or which a person has a bona fide intention to use in commerce and applies to register on the principle register established by this chapter to identify and distinguish his or her goods, including a unique product, form those manufactured or sold by others and to indicate the source of the goods, even if that sources is unknown (Lanham Act, 15 U.S.C. § 1127, 2006).

In the realm of higher education, these branded items are educational service marks because education is deemed a service rather than a consumer product (Kaplin & Lee, 2013). With increased competition among higher educational entities, protection of the
brand through trademark and licensing agreements has moved to greater importance and is a source of revenue for institutions in the selling and distribution of trademarked merchandise.

The brand of an institution and the reflection of the relative prestige as compared to other institutions is important as a recruitment tool through differentiation. For individuals that seek to identify and become purveyors of the brand identity, the brand must satisfy a personal or developmental need on the part of stakeholder groups, particularly students, who matriculate within these institutions. For students, the brand is beneficial for the institution through differentiation and the establishment of a niche but there are benefits for potential consumers as well. Wolpert (1999) noted that:

Brands reduce the level of effort a consumer must put into assuring a specific, desired level of quality and reducing the perceived risk of making a costly mistake. Brands also provide psychological rewards to the consumer such as prestige or status (p. 2)

For students seeking top academic programs and opportunities, higher education brands assist in the decision-making process of which institution to attend, perceived fit, and recognition—all items that factor into a final decision alongside affordability, location and other personal and practical factors.

**Trademarks and Licensing**

Higher education administrators operate in an era where strategic planning efforts encompass all aspects of technological innovation and the economic enterprises entailed. From digital repositories of faculty scholarship and library holdings to online education
and web-based learning communities, the university system is the site of integration and innovation. However, with change and adaptation come new precedents regarding control, access, and ownership within and beyond the online world. Not only are institutions stewards of the information age, they also are sites in which digital and mass mediated informational processes are continually modified and adapted to student, faculty, administrative and community needs. Institutional communication and marketing offices have the duty to assist in the maintenance of a campus community where scholars can pursue their academic interests and be home to a marketplace of ideas, they must also be keenly aware of the law that applies to their position, the people they monitor, and the task of maintaining a clearly articulated university identity to the outside world. Included in this marketing and maintenance are trademarks and licensing agreements, which can be yet another source of revenue for institutions and a source of funding that institutions must protect from infringement.

**Trademark Law**

Trademark law makes up one of the four basic legal protections of intellectual property, the other three being trade secrets, patents and copyrights (Alexander & Alexander, 2012). In the cases of colleges and universities, a trademark, name or service mark is a symbol of a product that “identifies that product, service, or institution to the general public” (Kaplin & Lee, 2013, p. 1633). Trademark law gives property rights to the user of that symbol which entails university slogans, mascots, seal and word marks. Under the law, any other individual or unit that uses a similar mark that could confuse the consumer about what said mark represents is subject to legal action for infringing upon
the trademark (Kaplin & Lee, 2013). Trademark law is governed by federal, state, and common law with the Trademark Act of 1946, otherwise known as the Lanham Act (15. U.S.C. §§ 1051 et. seq. regulates the registration of trademarks and also establishes the rights of the trademark holder and how to remedy potential infringement issues. The U.S. Department of Commerce’s Office of Patent and Trademark maintains records of all federal registrations of trademarks be they current, expires, abandoned or canceled—a task that gives notice to potential infringers that the mark is already owned (Kaplin & Lee, 2013). For institutions of higher education, many of which have existed and used the same series of trademarks for at least a century, the national registration of the trademark allows said marks to be incontestable after five continuous years of use, thus, conferring exclusivity to the trademark’s proprietor (Kaplin & Lee, 2013).

Interestingly, trademark law was developed after patent and copyright law despite the increasing awareness that an illiterate public led individuals to “identify commodities by pictures rather than script” (Alexander & Alexander, 2012, p. 692). The origins of the law in the United States stem back to a case in the mid-19th century but were not fully realized until the Lanham Act in 1946. The Lanham Act protects items known as service marks, which different from trademarks in that they are used to identify services instead of products (Alexander & Alexander, 2012). In an era where higher education is packaged as a commodity or an exchange of services for a fee, it is important to note that a school’s brand may fall under a service mark. A service mark is any “word, name, symbol or device, or any combination” that is used by a person or with which a person as a “bona fide intention to use in commerce” (15. U.S.C. § 1127, Lanham Act 45). Further,
Trade names are another class of marks protected. Trade names are those that identify the organization and the Lanham Act permits the registration of a color, sound or shape—and thus, logos, abstract images, and other mechanisms by which institutions of higher education differentiate themselves are protected under the Lanham Act. The Trademark Law Revision Act of 1988 changed protections in the Lanham Act and now permits entities to register a trademark before it is used assuming that the owner shows a bona fide intent to use said mark within a time period of six months to two years after registration (Kaplin & Lee, 2013).

**Licensing**

Within the realm of higher education, trademark law typically involves the prevention of an unrelated business from using a name of an intuition or said intuition’s name or symbol for the sale of products that have not be licensed. Thus, institutions develop programs for licensing a college’s symbols for place on products like souvenirs, clothing, and other gear for which intuitions receive revenue in the form of royalties. Licensing allows for colleges and universities to have control over their image but also provides revenue for institutions for tangible products, but the era of digital and electronic media has posed new problems for trademarking and licensure.

Cybersquatting occurs when domain names using a trademarked name or logo, or names and logos similar to an institution have been created (Kaplin & Lee, 2013). In court, domain owners then seek to have the domain purchased from them by the institution—ending in a payday for the cyber squatter and a headache for the institution. Constant vigilance is necessary to ensure that infractions do not occur that can detract
from the image of an institution of higher education and thus impact how consumers impact the quality of their product. Despite the law, the requisite registration of a trademark, licensure, and penal process, there are no safeguards for protection of an institutional mark.

Honors and Gifted Students

Honors students are those who are perceived to show excellence above and beyond their average peer, specifically in regards to academics. Those who show high academic achievement, participation in extracurricular activities, and are active in their community, are likely to be highly recruited to college honors programs.

Many differences between honors and non-honors students lie within personalities, showing them to be more dependable and motivated for academic achievements than their colleagues (Long & Lange, 2002). As a result, the retention and graduation rates are higher within honors programs (Long & Lange, 2002). It has also been suggested that honors students enter into programs with the ability to actively organize and critically evaluate information to a higher degree than their non-honors counterparts (Blythe, 2004). The students bring a higher academic caliber and academic focus to Universities and colleges making them less likely to party and drink like other students (Long & Lange, 2002). On the other hand, honors students show a greater concern over grades making them more likely to discuss grades or assignments with a professor, spending more time to prepare for class, and rewrite a paper (Long & Lange, 2002).

Distinguishing Among Students
The most important factor in the difference between honors and non-honors programs is the “serious intellectual work” (Achterberg, 2005, p. 80). Honors students are given luxuries such as smaller class sizes, more on-on-one instruction with professors, early advising, and special residence halls, that are not available to other students (Rinn & Plucker, 2004). Overall, honors classes are higher maintenance for the students and professors (Long & Lange, 2002). The content of the curriculum often includes a heavier workload and more difficult material demanding more time and attention from professors and students alike. Therefore, honors students are provided opportunities for intellectual rigor not commonly afforded to the general undergraduate population. Beyond actual courses, honors colleges and scholarship programs expand the rigor and opportunity of the classroom into the learning community. Over 60% of all four-year institutions, both public and private, in the United States have honors programs that cater to the needs of gifted and talented college students (Achterberg, 2005, Baker, Reardon, & Riordan, 2000). These programs include the curriculum differentiation mentioned above as well as opportunities to interact in inter- or multidisciplinary programing, travel, and research (Austin, 1986).

The type of students selected for honors programs are usually high achievers, gifted learners or creative thinkers according to Kingore’s (2004) delineation of the terms (Appendix A). These students are typically selected from the general group of applications and encouraged to apply via a special application or interview to an institution’s honors or specialized program (Long, 1998). As seen in Appendix A, all three types of learners excel in some capacity intellectually, but vary in how they respond
to a challenge. Given the variety of opportunities offered on a college campus, all three types of learners have the opportunity to flourish given their learning styles and areas of interest.

Despite their various abilities, the word to describe the learning style often used interchangeability and their membership in an honors program is used an overarching label to describe their place and space in the university learning community. This label is often affiliated with a certain belief that these honors students are “‘superior’ to other students in their home institution” (Cohen, 1966) and assists in maintaining a differentiated organizational structure for these students whose collegiate experience is defined in some way by an honors program membership.

**The Impact of Honors Programs**

Honors programs typically cater to the gifted, high achieving and creative learners on a college campus that have proven their talents academically and exist on the belief that academically talented students require “modifications to the usual classroom experience to fully actualize their potential” (Hébert & McGee, 2007, p.136). In actualizing this potential, these students are hoped to accomplish much and thus bolster the institution’s prestige that reflects highly on the learning community as rigorous and stimulating (Hébert & McBee, 2007; Rinn & Plucker, 2004). The recruitment of talented students plays a definitive role in bolstering the brand for competitors and prospective students, but these students also play a role in shaping how they and the brand are perceived within an institution.

There is a dearth of literature surrounding honors, gifted and high achieving
students in college but what does exists has found that there are not dramatic differences between honors and non-honors students. Astin (1993), did find that honors students did demonstrate higher gains in interpersonal and intellectual self-esteem when it came to developmental growth, but conflicting findings could be based on a variety of criteria related to the individual student characteristics, type of programming offered, institutions, or even the selection process for honors admission (Acthberberg, 2005). While it is important to note that the literature is inconclusive about uniform differences between non-honors and honors students, it has been supposed that honors students, being more attuned to their environments, may be affected by the Pygmalion effect. The Pygmalion Effect occurs when a faculty member’s “belief about a student creates the behaviors and abilities that the educator had anticipated from the student” in the form of a self-fulfilling prophecy (Shushok, 2002). Wherever the differences may be, the need to assist in the intellectual, moral, social and ethical areas of development for these students is a mission of these programs and assists universities in achieving higher prestige when their alumni achieve success.

**Tokenism and Tempered Radicals**

The landscape of higher education is a dynamic one as institutions become more varied in the populations served, organizational types and overall missions. The university, however, has always maintained an important role in society at large, both as centers of intellectual engagement and sites of socialization for those within the institution. Perkin (2006) highlights the development of universities by first explaining how these institutions were places establish and maintain a social world order in the
medieval world. Universities operate in much the same manner, albeit with different tensions and pressures that correspond to the greater pressures of society. My research interests align with this belief as I seek to understand how an institutional brand, including an institution’s policy and discourse(s), impact internal stakeholder belonging, engagement and consumption of the university identity. With my unit of analysis being the subject, particularly subjects strategically recruited or situated within a university because of their role in bolstering the institution’s identity, special attention must be paid to how they operate within the institution. By understanding their role, or agency, and how this role is mediated by institutional structures, the relationship between individual and university is further explored.

The Token

Tokenism is a social construct that describes the nature of group representation and ensuing dynamics with other group identities. Kanter’s (1977) argument, regarding proportional representation of women who worked in male-dominated jobs as numerical minorities experienced social invisibility, boundary heightening, and performance pressures (Flores, 2011). The numerical argument then follows that a shift in numbers on the part of the underrepresented group could reduce these stressors listed above, but larger numbers are necessary in the formation of “supportive alliances” (Kanter, 1977; Flores, 2011). While applied to white women professionals, Kanter “postulated these interactions were applicable to dominants (numerical majorities) and minorities who were “rare and scarce” in any work environment (Flores, 2011). Extending this tenet to university and college communities is an issue of contextual placement but applicable
given that numerical assignments based on demographic factors is done easily enough through observation or registration coordination systems. At the faculty and staff level, Offices of Access and Equity may publish ‘underutilization reports’ that note where gender and/or racial/ethnic individuals are “needed” in administrative pushes for diversity.

While these individuals may not be tokens in the sense that they are the only individuals in the departmental unit that represent a particular group, their necessity demarcates their placement as being one more susceptible to the tokenized identity. For students, programmatic efforts geared toward women or minorities in science, technology, engineering or math (STEM), first generation students, students with disabilities, non-traditional populations, student-athletes and even students belonging to specialized groups such as an honors college or scholarship program can be considered tokens using Kanter’s theory on the basis of their numerical presence.

The Tempered Radical

Meyerson and Scully (1995) define tempered radicals as individuals who identify with and committed to the organizations in which they exist within, but also as individuals who are committed to a cause, community, or ideology that is fundamentally different from, and potentially in conflict with the dominant organizational culture (p. 586). The authors chose the name “tempered radical” to describe the subject as it reflects the role, tensions, and strength of these subjects as actors within an organization. The term “radical” is used because these are individuals who challenge the status quo through acting with purpose in pursuit of their passions or ideological differences (Meyerson &
Scully, 1995). Being radical also is a reflection of the difference these individuals encapsulate, and how this difference sets them apart from the organization in both tangible and ideological ways. The authors chose “tempered” due to its multiple meanings, the first meaning being that these individuals seek moderation (Meyerson & Scully, 1995). For example, the subject is going to be different in some capacity, but not so different that their goals are not accomplished. Meyerson and Scully (1995) also use tempered to refer to the fortitude derived from their interactions within or against institutional hegemony. The final element of the multi-pronged definition and use of tempered alluded to the idea that these individuals have a temper (Meyerson & Scully, 1995). These individuals are emotive and have an agential motivation that may cause raised passions or composure depending on the situation and their feelings of agency within.

The tempered radical is an agent of organizational change and informs my work by describing the nature of the stakeholder I intend to study, giving said subject agency while simultaneously broadening and honing in on what element of tokenism I believe matters most when it comes to university identity and the individuals that operate with the purportedly inclusive domains of this identity.

**Situating The Political Body**

Multiple stakeholders are involved in constituting the university as a whole and are broadly described as students, faculty, staff, and community. For a university to be both internally and externally effective, a sense of what that university is, essentially the university identity, is key in shaping, maintaining, and controlling how these stakeholders
operate within a university and the quality of the institution overall (Jevons, 2006; Gregory, 2012). However, the institutional identity and subsequent brand, is more than just a mascot or set of school colors, it also describes the university culture and what types of people are valued within the community as well as what is non-normative. The nature of a university’s identity is constantly evolving and with this evolution comes information about the people that thrive or falter within the institution, who finds the institution attractive and who find the institution lacking, and how can said institution be the place that attracts the necessary diversity of opinion to protect the knowledge community the university is home to (Wæraas & Solbaak, 2008).

The people that provide information that help administration re-configure institutional identity and organizational purpose are tempered radicals. These individuals that have the unique position of knowing how to exist within a system that does not always or often match their ideological background, but also allows the place and space for these tempered radicals to test the boundaries of their own and institutional power and authority when it comes to instituting change for the benefit of the whole. Meyerson and Scully (1995) note that tempered radicals are not those that are measured by the amount of influence or change they make, instead, they are continually engaged in working within the organization as well as working to change the organization. Thus, their agency and efficacious enactment of this agency as they move within an organization is key in understanding the intersection of individual and organization, particularly when said individuals are historically underrepresented within an organization.

**Agency and the Token as Tempered Radical**
Before delving further into how Meyerson’s subject enables historically underrepresented groups in higher education, understanding who exactly these underrepresented groups are and what they mean to a university is key. A definition of terms is important, and I will take a moment to define and argue for why I choose to bridge tokenism to tempered radical. Historically underrepresented is a term that refers to those groups that have been denied access or have suffered historical discrimination by institutions and are thus not make up significant numbers within higher education (University of California-Berkeley, 2011). This imbalance is measured by the lack of representation of groups such as African Americans, Native Americans, Latinos, people with disabilities, veterans, or those of varying economic backgrounds within institutions of higher education. While this term is foundational in understanding the type of person that would have the motive to seek change within the institutions they study or work within, the term is limiting in its vague timeline of what represents historical and what true representation means; is it a reflection of state or national population, a numerical value that must be reached, and how far does representation extend (e.g., total university, departmentally, in student groups, etc.).

Tokenism is a term that more accurately captures elements of historical underrepresentation as well as the agency necessary to make those responsible for maintaining institutional status quo take another glance at identities that may be disrupting the norm. Tokenism is a social construct that describes the nature of group representation and ensuing dynamics with other group identities. Kanter’s (1977) argument, regarding proportional representation of women who worked in male-
dominated jobs as numerical minorities experienced social invisibility, boundary heightening, and performance pressures (Flores, 2011). The numerical argument then follows that a shift in numbers on the part of the underrepresented group could reduce these stressors listed above, but larger numbers are necessary in the formation of “supportive alliances” (Kanter, 1977; Flores, 2011). While applied to white women professionals, Kanter “postulated these interactions were applicable to dominants (numerical majorities) and minorities who were ‘rare and scarce’ in any work environment” (Flores, 2011).

Extending this tenet to university and college communities is an issue of contextual placement but applicable given that numerical assignments based on demographic factors is done easily enough through observation or registration coordination systems. At the faculty and staff level, Offices of Access and Equity may publish underutilization reports that note where gender and/or racial/ethnic individuals are “needed” in administrative pushes for diversity. While these individuals may not be tokens in the sense that they are the only individuals in the departmental unit that represent a particular group, their necessity demarcates their placement as being one more susceptible to the tokenized identity. For students, programmatic efforts geared toward women or minorities in STEM, first generation students, students with disabilities, non-traditional populations, student-athletes and even students belonging to specialized groups such as an honors college or scholarship program can be considered tokens using Kanter’s theory on the basis of their numerical presence.

Thus, tokenism bridges with tempered radicalism as they both focus on the impact
that one’s identity negotiations have in the actions and reactions one has within an organizational setting—and thus, inform how these bodies become political actors through constantly pushing against institutional norms and making small, but meaningful contributions that benefit their place and space, as well as the places of other tokenized groups within an organization (Meyerson, 2001).

Before understanding how tempered radicals/tokens operate as political actors, an understanding of the university as a political organization, and thus individuals as political bodies, will be described. The idea of tempered radicals as positioning subjects, and thus giving them requisite agency to ensure their needs are met and organizational change achieved, is key in following their agency in how they catalyze, operate and change the environments in which they exist.

**The Political Perspective**

The political nature of higher education provides a realistic and practical discussion regarding the structure and function of institutions. According to Manning (2013), the “political perspective is about relationships because this perspective accounts for interactions, connections, and exchanges among people, organizational levels, and institutional capital” (p. 68). Every institution is the site of multiple viewpoints, conflict, and goals. Recognizing the depth and breadth of institutions through the political metaphor “encourages us to recognize how and why the organizational actor is a political actor and to understand the political significance of the patterns of meaning” (Morgan, 2006, p. 205). The political perspective assumed that participants (e.g., students, faculty, staff) have fluid relationships in decision-making and action processes within an
Baldridge’s (1971) early discussions of political theory discuss how members of an organization hold certain expectations that their opinions are to be considered and that their participation expected in moving the organization toward a goal. Colleges and universities mirror this by encouraging professional development among faculty and staff, clubs, special programming, and policy making or informing bodies at every level of the institution that promote engagement and conversation. Privilege, however, is a mediating force in this structure as the more privilege one has, the more likely their opinions to be voiced and heard. Privilege, thus, assumes a particular power, authority and knowledge base within the organizational process and the framework of the tempered radical becomes a unique facet within institutional governance and identity management.

**Power and Authority**

Knowing how an institution works as a stakeholder is key in understanding ones relationships with the institution as well as knowing what parameters shape how one should or should not act within the institution. “Power is a context specific, relationship-oriented resource used to achieve goals and realize relationships,” notes Manning (2006, p.73), which make a significant contribution to the idea that subjects in conflict with the dominant ideologies of the university but still relevant social bodies within a university must somehow navigate the tensions created when power can silence or de-value their particular views. As an extension, authority is something inherent in one’s position and thus, a more formal mechanism of influence (Morgan, 2006). This influence is something that can be discursive and for a political body, something that must be dealt with in order
to properly fit within an organization whose identity may be in conflict with yours, but is necessary for your eventual success.

**Tempered radical token as political actor.** Meyerson and Tompkins (2007) work further informs and position subjects and political actors through their attempt to bridge the gap as to why institutional theory has not yet been used to articulate how and why inequalities exist and persist in higher education. The authors found that institutional constraints on potential political actors can be overcome when, in the event an institution is actively seeking change, they encourage different in identity groups, networks, and ideas to come together, thus allowing the tempered radical to act on their passions as a method to inform the architecture of an institutional identity overhaul, the architecture that maintains the power structure. The token element is key here as visible, tangible and holistic difference is often the first categorical method in which committees are formed or groups surveyed for feedback, with key stakeholders or representative groups being encouraged or mandated to participate. Tempered radicalism situates this token in a position of agency that helps them serve as a catalyst for organizational change. As political actors, these subjects exist in a world in which they understand the organization’s culture as well as the dimensions of their identity that do not align with institutional intentions. As a token, the politicizing nature is further enhanced by Niemann’s (1999) discussion of the effects of tokenism being: the simultaneously and perverse visibility and convenient invisibility, the impact of being representative of all ethnic/racial minorities and seemingly only cared about when it comes to the sake of diversity, and the idea that they have a duty to assist others (Alston, 2005). The identities
a token enacts through their tempered radical stance, including, those that appropriate or deviant with an ideology, inform the nature of the underrepresented role and how institutions can use these intersections and narratives to better inform the essence of said institutional identity, improving internal and external commitments to the brand through stronger student, faculty, staff and community relationships, which have impacts for external effectiveness, donorship and prestige.

**The Subject as Catalyst for Change.** Meyerson’s (2003) tempered radical moves the non-agentic token into a protagonist for change, not simply because they are visible, but they also use their intersectional identities to survive, thrive and question dominant institutional logics. By assisting others or forming like-minded enclaves within a system to disrupting the status quo enough to bring about a call to action on the part of administrators and peers, educational leaders are bound to find individuals that are successful and strategic in their difference an asset to informing and re-shaping the institutional identity.

Before bringing about change or creating space within the university, the student must understand what it is they are involved in and how their identity is in concert or conflict with the various branding and slogans used. As a consumer of the educational enterprise, they are thoroughly invested in the product that they have chosen, and can sue their influence and role to improve or alter the experience in the micro-experiences they live to help recruit more like-minded individuals. More importantly, by tapping into the thoughts of these individuals, institutions can identify and tailor messages to ensure their
recruitment and retention of individuals who enhance the campus environment because of their membership in various identity groups.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

Restatement of Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine the recognized importance and impact of branding programs in higher education. This study specifically examines how an institutional brand impacts the lived experience of undergraduate students at a four-year university in the southeast. The target students in this study are honors students who have been specifically recruited through targeted marketing strategies by the institution. In addition, this study seeks to understand the connections individuals responsible for articulating the brand to students have with the institution, the programming offered, and the impact that brand has on their role within an institution.

Research Questions

The major question guiding driving this study was to discover how a university brand, discourse(s) and communication policies impact student affiliation and consumption of the university identity. The five specific research questions that will be addressed are:

Question 1. What is the perceived institutional identity?

Question 2. Where and with what is the institutional identity represented and projected to students?

Question 3. What are the perceptions/views of these students regarding the institution’s brand?

Question 4. To what extent do these student’s views influence the relationships they have with other students and members of the university community?
Question 5. How do institutional messages support or challenge the desired collegiate experience for the student?

**Research Method and Design**

This study uses a case study methodology as the researcher chooses to focus on a single, bounded system with the implicit assumption that there is something to be learned from this case—here being the top honors students within an honor college at a university. The naturalistic case study suits the nature of the research as it is preferable to the study that focuses on the relationship participants have to their environment and is intensive in the inclusion of detail, richness, and depth (Flyvbjerg, 2011, p. 301). This qualitative study is naturalistic because the case takes place in a real world setting and the research is not attempting to manipulate the phenomena of interest, but observe and interview the individuals about said phenomena (Patton, 2002). Guba (1978) describes naturalistic inquiry as an approach that seeks to discover and minimizes the researcher’s manipulation of the study setting with no prior constraints placed on what the outcomes of the research will be. Lincoln and Guba (1985) proposed four criteria for evaluation, as compared to their social scientific counterparts, they are: “credibility as analog to internal validity, transferability as an analog to external validity, dependability as an analog to reliability, and confirmability as an analog to objectivity” (pp. 76-77). As researchers who believe in the social world as socially constructed, Lincoln and Guba (1985) seek to triangulate multiple perspectives instead of a singular truth, as this instrumental case study investigates.

**Instrumental Case Study**
The rationale for approaching this study as a case is reflected by the multiple qualitative strategies employed as well as the desired end product; a thick description and analysis of a contemporary phenomenon (Merriam, 2009). For this study, a single instrumental case study approach is used which allows the researcher to focus on an issue and select a bounded system to illustrate the issue (Stake, 1995). The case in this study refers to the use of branding programs at a university and their impact on the campus learning community. The boundaries of this case are delineated by the sample used to describe the case—the top honors students within the honors college at the university studied. As Stake (2000) notes, an instrumental case study is less about the case and more about understanding the issue of concern. While Stake (1995) outlines intrinsic and collective types of case studies, the instrumental case is used in this study because of the focus on understanding how branding impacted the experience of students and their relationship with the learning community they are involved in.

Case studies are distinguished by their design and the final report of their findings. Final reports are influenced in structure by the type of analytical strategies used (Yin, 2009). The approach used here will reflect an interpretive analysis of how branding impacts the lived experience of student groups in Chapter V. Interpretive case studies are used to build theory, assist in the development of conceptual categories, or to illustrate, support or challenge assumptions held prior to data gathering and analysis (Merriam, 1998).

**Unit of analysis.** The research questions of this study are addressed by a instrumental, within-case analysis of participant data that includes semi-structured
interviews paired with photo-elicitation methods and a survey. The rationale for using these methods stems first from value of the depth and thick description these methods allow for. Furthermore, the benefit of blending qualitative methods, especially an emergent method, comes with the necessity of expanding beyond and into the depths of how individuals understand and then negotiate their own identities that fall on the spectrum of full immersion or complete lack of identification with the institution. The survey instrument allows for triangulation of the data further discussed in the data collection methods. Thus, the individual is the unit of analysis in this study.

**Data Collection Methods**

This study employs the use of focus groups, photo-elicitation interviews and document review. The data collection process will involve two distinct phases. The first phase includes a document review and focus group. The second phase of data collection includes individual photo-elicitation interviews. The multiple qualitative methods employed allow for depth and triangulation of data that will help describe and understand the “essence of the lived phenomenon” of these students with rich description pulled from the interview, document and survey data (Creswell, 2007, p.78).

**Document Review**

In order to understand the overall brand and institutional identity and its impact on the individual, elements of that brand need to be assessed and described so the researcher and participants are familiar with on what scale, what objects and other items are discussed in the interview or survey setting. Elements of the institutional brand, including slogans, logos, colors and messages disseminated directly to the student body, and in
particular, honors students, will be gathered and described. Because a brand is largely visual in nature, the first component of the data collection process places importance on the visual world. Mitchell (1994) discusses the importance of the image/text as the document review will be a visual review of items that are interrelated and presuppose relationships to the idea of what the university represents.

Glesne (2011) outlines that documents not confirm other data and show other perspectives, but can also assist in telling a story and also making clear values and beliefs of the organization. The documents used for this study are analyzed using the theoretical lens of social construction that allows the researcher to focus on patterns and relationships (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). The rationales for these interpretations of the documents will be made, with special attention to the impact of social media and digital documents. Digital documents include blogs, digital stories, video sharing sites and social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook. These tools are used in the branding and marketing of universities to reach various audiences. In reviewing documents, attention to their location, intended audience, and any differences between the paper versus digital media iterations of the document.

**Focus Groups**

Focus groups with members of the scholars program will be held in locations that are power-neutral and accessible to students (Patton, 2002). The optimal size for these groups will range from 6 to 12 participants with proceedings being audio recorded (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010). The purpose of the focus group is to serve as a preliminary ground for data collection in a group that serves a social laboratory for the study of the
interpretations, perceptions and personal experiences of those involved (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010). The difference between a focus group and a large group interview lies in the idea that the researcher/facilitator offers a topic that lends to a group discussion (Acocella, 2012). Acocella (2012) further recommends the utilization of a homogenous group so participants feel comfortable enough to talk about various topics, but ensuring that it is differentiated enough to elicit varying responses and thus, stimulate discussion. The students for this study will be pulled from a cohort based environment and interact with each other in various learning community experiences—and while all honors students are not homogenous, their familiarity with each other adheres to Acocella’s (2012) recommendations.

The role of the researcher as focus group facilitator brings with it complexities such as refraining from encouraging group members to feel the need to come to a consensus (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009) or to keep group members from becoming oppositional (Acocella, 2012). In focus groups, the facilitator must prevent a single individual from dominating the group and encourage reserved participants contribute to the conversation in order to ensure balanced contribution (Fontana & Frey, 2008). Despite these potential impediments, focus groups are advantageous for this study because the interaction among the interviewees can yield the best information (Creswell, 2007). In this study, the participants already have an established rapport that can be found by the program’s effort to ensure cohort structure and support. The focus group will also serve as the site of recruitment for individual photo-elicitation interviews, in which interview
schedules of the individual photo-elicitation interviews will be revised based on the focus group data.

**Photo-elicitation**

From the focus group, participants will be asked to participate in a one-on-one photo elicitation interview. For those students that continue in their participation via the photo-elicitation interview, an interview schedule of questions will be developed based on the responses gathered in the prior focus groups. Photo-elicitation is the insertion of a photo, or group of photos into a research interview (Rose, 2012; Harper 2002). The images will be provided in part by the researcher as well as by the participant and must show an example or facet of the brand that resonates (or not) with the student. In the individual interview, a loose interview schedule will be used to allow for optimal organization and depth of interview.

There are two interviews involved in the photo-elicitation project. The first interview being the photo-briefing interview where the purpose of the photos taken, camera, and time frame for the participant to take photos. The purpose of the initial briefing in standard photo-elicitation practice is to establish initial trust and for the researcher to explain the aims of the research project (Rose, 2012). However, since focus-group interviews will occur prior to solicitation for photo-elicitation interviews, the researcher will have met and established a relationship with the prospective interviewees for photo-elicitation. Thus, the initial briefing interview will follow the focus group interview for most participants.

For those participants who will need their own individual interview, a modified
initial briefing interview will take place. For the photo elicitation interviews, all interested participants will be provided parameters for their photos that will include taking photos of where they see their institution’s brand represented and what is meaningful to them. Also, the time frame in which to take photos will be established as students will be given one week (seven days) to take photos of any instances in which the brand is represented. The information sheet given to participants will also provide parameters on the number of photos to be taken and how they will be returned (digitally) to the interviewer for development. Photographs, in photo-elicitation, are developed as prints so they can be seen together by the researcher and participant (Rose, 2012). Once the photos are developed, the photos will be returned to the participant. Returning these photos gives the participant time to remove any photos they do not wish to discuss and also allows participants time to reflect and caption each photograph prior to the photo-elicitation interview (Rose, 2012).

The photo-elicitation interview is the time in which researchers find out what photos taken by the interviewees mean to the participant (Rose, 2012). The goal of these interviews is not only to explicate the meaning of the photograph, but the process of taking the photographs as this discussion can lead to a deepening of understanding and further clarification of the role branding plays in how students become involved in their learning community.

As an emergent method, photo-elicitation has multiple strengths. The first, according to Rose (2012) is that photographs and visuals contain a lot of information and the discussion of this type of artifact with an interviewee “can prompt talk about different
things, in different ways” (p. 305). Moreover, participant-generated visual materials allow for exploration into the participant’s life that may otherwise be taken for granted. According to Rose (2012), asking the participant to “reflect on their everyday activities in a way that is not usually done; it gives them a distance from what they are usually immersed in and allows them to articulate thoughts and feelings” that may otherwise be left unsaid.

Survey

The last prong of the multiple method data collection will come from a survey distributed to program administrators and staff responsible for the educational quality and experience of these students at the university level. The survey instrument was created for this research project and adapted from a national survey of used to understand the impact and effectiveness of marketing strategies in the corporate sector.

Open-ended survey items will be used to solicit longer, more in-depth responses about the phenomenon of branding in higher education (Patton, 2002). Consideration to the nature of the questions and their impetus for being asked was taken into account as participants need to be willing and motivated to respond to open ended items which require follow-up as well as any items that use a scale index. This survey instrument regarding the perceptions of the college brand will be disseminated as a web-based survey. There are three types of Internet-based surveys according to Simsek and Viega (2001), the first type being embedded in an email message within the body of the email text. In this type of survey, the respondent replies with the answers in the email. Another type of survey would be sent in an email but as an attachment to the email. Neither of these
methods would be employed as formatting, follow-up and other errors may cause a delay in the dissemination and return of these surveys. The type of internet-based survey used in this research will employ a URL-embedded message in the email text which, when clicked, will direct participant to a web-based survey in a separate browser window (Berends, 2006).

The advantages of Internet-based surveys are the marginal costs in conducting them because of the lack of paper, mailing materials and time needed to convert these to digital format without error. Moreover, respondents can complete a web-based survey without dealing with paper and find the formats of web-based surveys more aesthetically appealing to engage and complete (Berends, 2006). Given the modern age of computers, it cannot be assumed that all participants will have access to a computer and Internet services that will enable them to complete the survey. However, given that the population sampled for the survey works in a university community, with public computers and internet available, the issue of access is not a foreseeable problem.

**Data Sources and Sub-Questions.** Table 3.1 provides a summary overview of the data sources that were used to address specific research sub-questions as the means for attending to the general research question.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Sub- Questions</th>
<th>Data Sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. What is the dominant institutional identity?</td>
<td>Document Review: University mailings from Student Affairs, Development Office, Athletics, Student handbook, Undergraduate/Graduate announcements, university website; Focus groups; Photo-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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elicitation interviews

2. Where and with what is the institutional identity represented and projected to students?
   Document Review, Focus Groups

3. What are the perceptions/views of these students regarding the institution’s brand?
   Focus Groups with Scholar Cohorts, Photo-elicitation Interviews with Scholars

4. To what extent do these student’s views influence the relationships they have with other students and members of the university community?
   Focus Groups, Photo-elicitation

5. How do institutional messages support or challenge the desired collegiate experience for the student?
   Focus Groups, Photo-elicitation

The use of multiple qualitative methods provides the opportunity to achieve saturation of data, enabling the researcher to analyze and interpret the lived experiences of the honors students as consumers of the institutional brand.

**Research Setting**

Clemson University is a public university located in a southeastern state and located along a major interstate highway system that connects the institution to major industry and transportation. The university serves nearly 20,000 students. In order to bridge the various campus elements together, Clemson introduces every university freshman to the *OneClemson* family idea beginning at orientation and permeates various facets of student and community life. Examples of this the *OneClemson* family promotion occur through traditions such as: Family Fridays, in which students, faculty, and staff
wear school colors to “show their Clemson pride and display the unity of the Clemson family” or through other university traditions.

Nestled in a small college town, Clemson University and its various units, from academic colleges, administration, and athletics, work together to present and encourage involvement in the Clemson family. Through building alumni and fan base with stakeholders, the university brand, prestige, and fiscal ties are sustained through the support of those members who have negotiated relationships with the Clemson family. Therefore, the research site is the physical campus of Clemson University, the town of Clemson, in which those affiliated through student, employee or other relationship to Clemson (both town and school) reside. These particular sites were selected because it is the primary campus of the university and the focus of the study is on the Clemson University brand. Particular attention will be paid to the relationship of participants to the university through the identification of roles, histories, and potential areas of connection that can inform the rationale for perceptions and feelings regarding the university family brand.

**Participants**

Participants are involved with the top scholars program at the university that has the mission to recruit and select the top high school students from the United States and provide a competitive scholarship that covers all tuition, fees and other required expenses. The students are provided individual and group advising that dresses and enhances the scholars’ interests and skills and preparation to help these select students excel in graduate school and on fellowship applications (Annual Report, 2010). While the
full scholarship is an important part of the National Scholars Program experience, the financial benefits of the program are matched by an equally rewarding educational experience. The education of the National Scholars begins at the top of a ropes course during the freshman Scholars retreat and ends wherever their imagination and creativity take them. The most rewarding aspect of the "program" part of the National Scholars Program is that the Scholars work closely with the NSP staff to develop educational enrichment opportunities for their peers, including educational travel opportunities, and discussions and small seminars that focus on a wide range of topics, including religion and science, leadership and entrepreneurship, and classic political thought. In summary, these students are provided educational and enrichment opportunities specifically tailored to their individual interests and needs, a unique experience not afforded to the general campus undergraduate population.

These students are purposely pulled from the undergraduate student body as well as members of the honors college, both groups they have membership in, because of the way in which they were recruited and interviewed to join the program.

Specifically, 40 scholars are currently enrolled in the program from the 2013-2014 academic school year and represent all five colleges on campus as well as various extra-curricular groups on campus. They are involved in the campus community but also distinct from the community due to their particular scholarship program requirements.

**Limitations**

The qualitative methods used in this study paired with a small sample size inhibit large generalization of the study findings. However, the focus of this case is instrumental
and grounded in the belief that this single case may provide broader insights regarding branding in higher education and its impact on student learning communities. Stake (1995) notes that single cases can provide a substantial amount of information to be learned. Thus, this single case can provide insight not only on institutional branding, but also on how high achieving, gifted and bright students understand their role in the university community and how that role is mediated by the institutional brand during their matriculation.

A second limitation is my own subjectivity as a former member of a similar learning community in a similar institution type. I recognize my admittedly strong attachment to my own undergraduate experience at an institution that mirrors Clemson University and therefore seek to understand how some individuals assimilate into a university family while others are not. Now far removed form the experience, I am aware that my engagement with a university community that mirrors my own background keeps me attuned to areas of power, privilege and difference that I may not have been developmentally aware of during my undergraduate years.

Data Analysis Procedures

Qualitative research allows for the researcher to identify, understand and, in this case, investigate the perspective undergraduate students have about their college and the experiences they have had as a student. Analysis in qualitative research allows for the opportunity to immerse fully in the data while providing a voice to the participants (or co-researchers) and thus, the researcher-as-instrument is useful in fully interpreting and making meaning of the student voice in this study (Alvesson, 2003). The raw data
collected from focus groups, photo-elicitation interviews and researcher field notes for this instrumental, within-case analysis is analyzed according to steps outlined by Creswell (2013).

1. Read through and reviewed data gathered from transcription of recordings, document review and fields notes for a general, holistic understanding and meaning of the data to sense of depth and potential uses of the raw data. During the sensemaking process that took place once the document review was complete, the focus group questions were re-evaluated and the focus group discussions were analyzed for the initial production of related themes and topics

2. Next, the transcribed data was coded using in vivo procedures to connect and hone in on various clusters of congruency that surfaced during the focus groups and photo-elicitation interviews. In vivo coding uses the participants exact words to create themes (Creswell, 2013). The resulting codes from the emergent themes were identified and a second level of coding and recoding of all the themes identified through multiple iterations of focus group and photo-elicitation transcriptions. Three overarching themes developed from the process of assessing and re-assessing emergent themes from the data.

3. Codes, or descriptive labels, for the new categories of themes were identified in order to organize data. Coding was utilized to establish a detailed description of the participants and how they spoke of their experiences and develop a connection between emergent themes.
4. Finally, Saldana (2013) suggests that Themeing the Data is “more applicable to interviews and participant generated documents and artifacts” such as a photos provided during the photo-elicitation and is sued as a final step in explicating, identifying and weaving together overarching conclusions (p. 176).

Validation strategies. In order to establish trustworthiness in qualitative research, conventional terms such as validity, reliability and objectivity are replaced by naturalistic terms such as credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability; a set of criteria for judging the soundness of qualitative inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Once themes were established, the participants, now co-researchers in the process, assess the accuracy of the themes through a process known as member-checking which involved receiving feedback from participants (Creswell, 2013, Freeman, deMarrais, Preissle, Roulston, & St. Pierre, 2007). Co-researchers were contacted and asked to provide feedback on whether the themed data was an accurate representation of their undergraduate experience. The research conducted feedback through e-mail to answer questions the co-research may have had about the researcher’s interpretations.

Another validation strategy used was the method of triangulation, which enables the research to improve the credibility (validity) and reliability of a study by have co-researchers involved in the phenomena review, provide input for and correct, if needed, data collection procedures (Creswell, 2013, Golafhsani, 2003, Patton, 2001).

The findings of this study are not generalizable to all scholarship programs that provide full-tuition or to all undergraduate students on this campus or across various
campuses. The goal of qualitative research is not to generalize findings but interpret events related to the case in hand. That said, the themes that emerged from this data may be similar to those experienced by high achieving students in honors colleges and scholarship programs at Clemson University and other institutions of higher education. In the interest of full disclosure and to attend to the dependability and confirmability of this study, the researcher has provided information about her position within the study and every effort was made to make the data collection process as transparent as possible. All data collection tools are provided in the appendices to this study and can be used to replicate a study of this nature with a similar purposive sample, in the future.
CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

This study sought to understand the impact an institutional brand had on the lived experience of honors students and their ability to identify as students of their university. A document review, focus groups and photo-elicitation interviews were used to gather data about what the dominant institutional identity and brand is of their institution and what impact these understandings have had on their experience as undergraduates. Five questions guided the development of this study:

1. What is the perceived institutional identity?
2. Where and with what is the institutional identity represented and projected to students?
3. What are the perceptions/views of these students regarding the institution's brand?
4. To what extent do these student’s views influence the relationships they have with other students and members of the university community?
5. How do institutional messages support or challenge the desired collegiate experience of the student?

From the research questions and initial document review, five focus group questions were developed to gather the thoughts, experiences, and opinions from the participants. A total of 13 students participated in three focus groups. The participants were comprised of Caucasian or White students and an Asian American student. Eight participants identified as female and four as male and all were undergraduate students enrolled full-time at Clemson University and were members of the honors college and national scholars.
program. The students represented all undergraduate academic class levels (Freshman, Sophomore, Junior, and Senior) and 11 different majors and minors across the five university colleges with the majority of majors found in the College of Engineering and Science.

Four in-depth photo-elicitation interviews were conducted with students from the focus groups. The two male and two female participants represented the freshman, sophomore and senior class cohorts, in-state and out-of-state groups and all were Caucasian or White. Student demographic information is summarized in Appendix D. A survey was distributed but no responsive were received—thus, results are not included from the non-experimental survey data.

The results of the study are presented in relation to each of overarching themes and sub-themes with an explanation of how each research question was addressed by the analysis. Rich, thick descriptions are provided through explanations of the themes, quotations and photos that give voice and value to the co-researchers. Following the in vivo coding and themeing the data of focus group and photo-elicitation transcripts, which involved a continual feedback loop that included the co-researchers, broad identification categories were developed before bringing in the co-researchers voices to create the final thematic. The broad categories of themes elicited from the initial coding process were: *Purpose and Responsibility* which encompasses questions one through four with regard to how students understand and situate themselves at the intersection of the various roles they have on and off-campus, *Personal Identity Development* which addresses questions three, four and five with regard to how the students view the brand and their response to
said institutional brand, and Social Supports and Challenges which incorporated research questions four and five related to the perceptions of the students toward their university.

Table 4.1 Thematic Findings Table

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**Purpose and Responsibility**

The first overarching theme, Purpose and Responsibility, includes two subthemes:

(a) solid springboard school and (b) academically driven, not academically focused.
Research questions one, two, three and four investigate what the brand is thought to be and how the students perceive that institutional brand. The four subthemes emphasize the visibility of the brand and how attuned these students are to the logos, symbols, phrases and institutional rhetoric that comprises the brand experience. Further, the primary theme and sub-themes emphasize student-life and experience lived in spite of the dominant institutional identity that they see expressed on a regular basis.

**Solid Springboard School**

The fourth question posed in the focus group sessions was descriptive in nature and sessions asked students to describe their institution to a prospective student. Across all focus groups and photo-elicitation interviews, students felt that the atmosphere was extremely positive with regard to student life. Academically, students mentioned coursework and programing related to their major area of study as a primary facet of their life and a reason that Clemson was a good choice for them. Marie, a senior, shared her strategy for choosing Clemson:

I think that I am happy here but it is not a place that I seek to stay, but I am getting a great education here. Going to a smaller or lower-ranked school, that has kind of been my strategy, going to a smaller school and saving up for graduate school rather than somewhere big, that has worked out for me.

Carrie shared similar sentiments:

When I first came here I was not sure I liked it and I actually was upset that I received the invitation to the weekend, however, everything changed
once I interviewed and met actual people and realized there was more to Clemson. . . I think that in addition that Clemson students are really career focused. I think the fact that so many students co-op plays into that and they are focused on what is going to lead me right into my career as opposed to what can I learn about today. Like, just more practical.

Both Marie and Anne are out-of-state students who noted receiving materials from Clemson but that it was not a top-choice for them at the onset of their academic careers. For the majority of the participants, Clemson was a top contender but never the first choice until the National Scholars Weekend. National Scholars Weekend is a weekend in which finalists for the scholarship are invited to campus for a day of interviews and other activities that serve as a screening process for the highly competitive financial award. Thus, many shared a sense of making the practical choice in coming to Clemson because of the opportunity and being surrounded by like-minded individuals focused on building academic relationships as much as they were looking for a good college experience. Anne shared:

Before I came to Clemson I know I always heard about the Clemson Family and was a little bit skeptical umm, just because it was so used that I thought it was that I thought it was something people just said umm, but being at Clemson as a student I actually believe that and I feel, from the first day, very welcomed.

Again, students shared how the academic side of the university held equal or greater importance than other facets of the university (e.g., student life, athletics) and weigh
heavily into the reason they sought out Clemson over other universities. The academic presence in the conversation was apparent when Jackson, freshman, described an image that captured a high-stress moment in his week.

Figure 4.1 “Lowry”

This symbolizes the family ties I have to Clemson. I was in Lowry till like midnight studying for the two exams I had this week. I know for a fact that my mom, she’s told me about the many that she’s spent in Lowry studying and you can ask anyone that it has not changed a bit. I think its kind of funny that we are into the second generation now, studying in Lowry.
Despite noting other relationships to Clemson prior to attending, such as hearing about the athletic team or about growing up and being familiar with the university, Jackson highlights that an important space for him is one he has in common with his mother. The sentiments shared by students about their academic life and how it shares (or is the primary) a role is a difference they articulated as making their national scholars cohort different than the “typical” student that Clemson may attract.

Academically Driven, Not Academically Focused

When connecting perceptions about the brand to the activities they, the students, were most connected in their college life all noted the strength of the athletic brand and athletics over the academic aspects of the institution. Jackson presented a panoramic scene (Figure 4.2) as a representation of his first memories of Clemson:

![Figure 4.2 The Georgia Game](image)

I think this really shows the spectacle that this game was, and really every game is. . .this is the brand that I counted on and this is what I expected.

In describing the spectacle in Figure 4.2, Jackson was asked to elaborate on the brand experience at Clemson University overall and said:
I think this is missing the academic side, which is important to me and its missing the opportunities that are available to me through the national scholars program. Because here, you just sit here and just think you are a part of a giant mass of people, you know, you’re just like another face in the crowd—which is great, umm, at least sometimes for me because it is nice to feel like you are part of a collective to which you belong but then, at the same time, as a national scholar, I know that as I sit there and take this picture, I’m not just another face in the crowd. The university has selected me to be more than just another student.

Jackson is aware of the athletic brand of the institution, including how strong and unifying it was to him prior to applying and the consistency that carried through now that he is a student. For Jackson, attending a football game is a mechanism through which he feels and is supported as an active member of the campus community. However, involvement in the athletic community does not outweigh his academic life and the responsibility he has to the university as a student. For Jackson, and others, being a student and a member of the scholarship program is the reason he is attending the university, but the institutional brand he experiences parallels what he feels is the dominant brand of the institution, athletics.

Jackson desires to have and maintain his memberships with the other campus communities that are overt (athletic, academic) and hidden (smaller clubs and organizations). Jackson shared that Clemson University was, “academically driven, but
not necessarily academically focused” which he attributed to the atmosphere of the school.

When it comes down to it, I don’t think people recognize that they are here to get an education, I feel like a lot of that comes down to being in the Clemson bubble . . . National Scholars fixes all of that [for me].

Jackson noted how problematic the bubble can be when it comes down to university recognition for academic achievements and appreciation of academic achievements. While a reason he chose Clemson was because of the brand consistency with regard to athletics and student life, Jackson sees how the institutional identity being skewed away from academics can be problematic for students being recognized for other achievements and contributions to the learning community. Danielle also noted the focus on athletics and shared:

While I feel like it's good to link our school with our sports team and link our school with good times, I feel like sometimes our branding cuts short our focus on academics that we have.

The prevalence of the athletic identity and the means by which the participants feel that it is communicated with them resonated through both focus group and photo-elicitation interviews.

Lauren, sophomore, shares similar sentiments regarding the athletic domination of the institutional identity in Figure 4.3.
In describing Figure 4.3 titled “Vicious Love,” Lauren shared:

Football is a perfect incarnation of this spirit I don’t think there’s any other time when [Clemson spirit] is more obvious. This is definitely one of those times when you can definitely point to and say that—that is the Clemson spirit.

Like Jackson, Lauren sees the athletic, particularly football, element as the essence of the “spirit” she describes with the large gathering of individuals dressed in the school colors in a single location for the unified purpose of cheering on a team. However, she juxtaposed this image with another, more important scene related to athletics but was an incorporation of her academic and student involvement. In Figure 4.4, “First Friday,” Lauren shows off a float made for the parade before the first home football game. This
float was done by the club she was a founding member of, holds a leadership position, and a club that relates directly to her academic interests.

Figure. 4.4 First Friday

This was a really big deal for us because we are a brand new club and it was so much fun to get the term agronomy out there since not a lot of people are familiar with [the term]. . . We wanted people to see the name ‘agronomy’ and see us out there and, you know, see us really love what we do.

By participating in an event in which parade floats are usually student organizations such
as fraternity and sorority life, service oriented or other long-standing organizations, an academic club, especially one formed a year-ago, set a precedent. In this manner, Lauren and other club members were able to showcase their membership in the academic community and how that academic community is an important part of the larger campus community.

It was just very comforting and very nice to be with people who love what you do and aren’t judgmental and aren’t skeptical because it’s the people that ask, “so you want to be a farmer” and I say “no, not really but I am concerned about agriculture.” It was really nice to be in this group of people and this was a part of our outward expression towards what we do.

(Lauren)

The ability to represent and share with the attendees of the First Friday parade a little known but important club that relates to the agricultural roots of the university was important to Lauren and a way to share with others a primary reason she chose to attend Clemson to start her academic career.
The sub-theme of *Academically Driven, Not Academically Focused* is further illuminated through Andrew’s experience. Andrew, a senior, is a member of an honors organization that hosts multiple events across campus and through his membership, he was offered a tour of the West End Zone of the football stadium. He posed for a photo during the tour (Figure 4.5) that captured his many roles as a member of an honors organization, fan of the football team, and his membership in an intramural softball league through his attire.

Figure 4.5 West End Zone
Andrew described his honors organization as hosting extremely formal organizational events, but it is through the informal organizational activities, such as the tour captured in Figure 4.5, that brings his peers together. Andrew shared:

> I’ve always wanted to tour the West End Zone and so this is actually explains a lot of my organizational involvement and one of my friends in Blue Key works there and offered a tour to anyone who wanted one so I thought it was pretty cool.

The interconnectedness of academic life (the honors organization) to athletics is captured by Figure 4.5 and shows how the student experience is shaped by the places and spaces that students share in both realms. Through an organization in which members are recognized for scholarship, leadership and service (http://cubluekey.org/about/), Andrew was able to tour a space that only players and coaches typically see.

In all interviews, the institutional brand was discussed in a similar manner—by relating what students perceived as a known and visible experience—athletics, to the unknown or hidden experience—academics and other club involvement. All of these students shared a central purpose in being a student at Clemson through their relationship in the National Scholars program. Being recipients of this scholarship grounds them with the central purpose and responsibility of cultivating their academic pursuits. Spiraling outward from that central academic drive are their involvements and other activities—not all of which are as celebrated as the athletic trademarks, logos, colors and slogans. This personal experience mirrors what they believe is the overarching perception of Clemson
University to outsiders in that it is a solid school academically, but athletics is the means by which most people engage with the overall institutional identity.

**Personal Identity Development**

The second theme, *Personal Identity Development*, emerged as a response to questions that dealt with student negotiation of their expectations of student life, acclimation to college life, and the opportunities for building relationships and understanding their personal growth and development. In essence, this theme deals with the brand experience and negotiation which research questions three, four and five investigated. The sub-themes of (a) conform to be family, (b) willingness to be critical and, (c) the Venn diagram support the primary theme by providing depth into the various negotiations and understandings students had of their individual roles on campus.

**Conform to be Family**

Pulled from a frequency of comments about Clemson University and via descriptions about the student body, which the participants said they were members of, but held varying associations within, the conformist concept came about in the discussion of what it means to be a Clemson student and the concept of a Clemson family. During a focus group, Katie began:

I think the branding you get as an incoming student and freshmen is definitely… its not different, opposite, its not in conflict with what Clemson is, but it is also not all encompassing of Clemson, I think it definitely attracts the average Clemson student where the people who come to Clemson are the people who appreciate the fact that we are a big
football school and have these traditions and do want this community and
want to get involved and have that kind of feel.

Katie and several other focus group participants agreed that they were aware of
Clemson’s marketing and the emphasis on the football elements (the paw, team, solid
orange) and the push to become involved (as a fan, in clubs and organizations). Katie
further described this brand as informing how she understood her role as a student:

> I think Clemson tells you when you’re coming in as a freshmen, this is
> somewhere where you’ll be interacting with other people in this bubble;
> where you’re gonna come, you’re gonna wear orange, and then you’re
gonna go home and realize, wait, my closet, I can’t wear any of my
clothes—everything is orange!

When the researcher asked Katie to explain how she was told about student life, she
explained that it was not written down in any pamphlet but presented visually through the
majority of students she saw on-campus, their activities, and what was celebrated in
student life. Carrie explained further about the visual representation of campus:

> I know that other people might see Clemson as not as connected and kinda
divided [student] life wise, mostly Greek Life wise. Like I know I have
my group of friends and I’ve met people through National Scholars and
the honors college that aren’t associated with Greek life. But if you didn’t
have that separate community, then I think you may feel ostracized and
that it is this whole separate tightly knit community that you can’t like, I
feel like its hard to dip in to, you’re either like in it or you’re not.
Visually and organizationally, Katie and Carrie expressed their feelings about the normative Clemson student and their typical student life in juxtaposition to the areas that they have carved out for themselves within the honors college, national scholars and other organizations.

Involvement in student activities resonated with the participants in both positive and negative arenas. When asked to describe their involvement, everyone as a member of at least one organization or team project and ten of the twelve were involved in more than four organizations and held leadership positions in at least one. However, involvement was also described as a mechanism by which the type of student the university wanted was shared. Andrew mentioned, “there are a ton of Clemson students whose biggest priority by far is attending Clemson football games, tailgating and stuff and being involved in Greek life” however, the push to be involved and the driving force behind becoming a part of the student community is done through a comparison. Shannon noted:

I think that the people who are the busiest and involved in the most things and do the most in different pockets of the campus are the people that the university lauds as the epitome of a good Clemson student and I think that certainly sends a message to other students, and certainly the people in NSP, who feel like they have something they owe back to Clemson for giving them a scholarship.

Shannon went on to mention that the expectation to be involved appears in places like the NSP website where involvement of cohorts and alumni scholars is published annually and how that can be a source of pressure to be heavily involved. As the discussion of
involvement and priorities continued, the idea of conformity as a way to take advantage of the opportunities available on campus presented itself. While each of the participants noted that they were involved in activities that were of interest to them, the impetus to be involved and confirm your niche came from the need to “conform to be happy, which you only have to do a little bit, but it helps put your time here in perspective.” In essence, by feigning interest and putting oneself out there to test the student activity waters, the participant cohort could find what made them happiest and a contributing member of the Clemson family. On a more tangible level, moving beyond owning the orange t-shirt but wearing that orange on a “Solid Orange Friday” as a way to show membership was, as many of the students shared, a silly but harmless way to conform since being a fan did not detract from other aspects of what they found truly important.

Near the end of the focus group discussion, Carrie revisited the idea of family by sharing her reflection on the conversation, saying, “I mentioned that I felt really included and there was a Clemson family, etcetera, etcetera, but I think that is due to the fact that I’m in the honors college and national scholars.” The honors program and NSP both being full of the people she felt most comfortable with that were a part of her individual niche.

Visually, Jackson saw conformity represented through his memories of the campus tour. In Figure 4.6, Jackson captures a view from the North Green overlooking the amphitheater, reflection pond and main campus library.
While discussing this photograph, Jackson said he took this picture because it was the last stop on this campus tour and while the tour guide mentioned that it was one of the most beautiful places on campus, all he saw was the “ugly” library and the retro building to the left (Martin Hall). During the interview, Jackson shared that the tour guide talked about this view as the “prettiest view” and repeated that sentiment throughout her concluding speech. Jackson was not in agreement with her but noted that this was an example of the rhetoric used to promote and sustain the institutional identity.
Andrew furthered this notion of the use of rhetoric as a sustaining force in promoting the identity of Clemson through the verbal repetition of common descriptive words.

[The rhetoric is] prevalent in any type of university speech or interuniversity conversation or official presentation about student life. I wouldn’t necessarily say I see it super prevalently in official commercials, maybe some in print, it’s by far most prevalent in speeches (Andrew).

Again, the participants noted that they were aware of the marketing strategies directed toward them and their effectiveness in sustaining the often referred to ‘bubble’ of Clemson’s main campus. As the participants shared their campus experience, their negotiation of what it meant to be a part of the Clemson community within the bubble represented a questioning of how they would become involved while staying true to their beliefs, passions and interests.

When asked to describe Clemson to a prospective student, Andrew shared that he would say:

that Clemson is a super friendly place. Assuming you are not afraid to conform a little bit, or not opposed to conforming a little bit. If you can find somewhere to fit in with the homogeneous structure, you'll be very happy. I wouldn't say Clemson is the place for you if you're trying to be super edgy, if you're trying to push the envelope socially or through your fashion.
The idea of conformity was less about fully becoming an assimilated member of the family through club membership or football game attendance, but more about a student’s willingness to experience a variety of opportunities to find a place where they can thrive within the dominant structure of the institution. In some cases, the participants spoke of joining and dropping out of clubs once they realized that it was not something they cared about. As mentioned earlier by Carrie, not being able to engage with the most popular or visible aspects of the campus community could lead to negative feelings and emotions. Membership in the honors community and the national scholars program assisted students in navigating the college experience by giving them a starting point and resources to call upon. Being attuned to the marketing strategies to promote the brand, and their challenges to the brand experience the university promoted versus the student experience they were actually having, are illuminated in the second sub-theme, *Willingness to Be Critical.*

**Willingness to Be Critical**

The participants described their scholar and honors communities as different from the greater campus community in varying ways. For Shannon, the biggest difference between the networks of students she belonged to and the larger campus community is:

the willingness to be critical because I feel like the idea of the Clemson family is so prevalent that you’re not a good Clemson student if you criticize the Clemson family, like you should never have anything bad to say about the Clemson family.
When asked to explore what she meant by criticizing the family concept, Shannon said that the “Clemson family often times feels superficial, like something that we throw around” and that it is “taken to the extent that people are not allowed to or supposed question things that happen at Clemson among their peers.” For Shannon, a desired part of her college experience was the ability to think and discuss critically the issues that impacted life locally and globally. However, the spaces she can do that within are limited on campus. Shannon further explores the idea of challenging the campus rhetoric by noting:

In NSP and other circles, I think that’s something people actively do— they critically think about problems with Clemson and problems with NSP and discuss those things and that’s like an accepted thing to do and that’s not so much accepted in the community at large.

In an effort to explore why there were limited pockets where the ability to challenge the status quo was possible, Raquel, junior, shared her thoughts on the demographic differences and how could attribute to the acceptance and uptake of the Clemson family ideal:

I think of NSP as being separate from Clemson. Thinking of the general demographic of Clemson, NSP is a lot more liberal and I just think about the conversations we have in the office where it can be completely intellectual and a lot of times on camps they’ll just be talking about football or something.
Raquel and other students see NSP as a distinct group while others, such as Andrew, view that group the scholars program and Honors College as having more overlaps into other facets of their life. Andrew sees “a lot of similarities between Clemson community, generally and NSP, as being a much smaller community in terms of being very supportive . . . And I do see that, not to such a great degree, but in the general Clemson community.” The third sub-theme explores the dynamic between NSP and the larger leaning community further, however, all students did agree that their selection and involvement within the honors community did increase their likelihood of feeling more distinct and/or separate from the larger learning community.

**Venn Diagram**

In order to capture the multiple communities that the participants are involved with, Andrew remarked that, “its like a Venn Diagram, you have NSP in one side, the typical Clemson campus on another, and in the middle, they meet and for different people, the overlap may be greater than others.” Danielle highlights these areas of
overlap in Figures 4.7 and 4.8.

Figure 4.7 Always Something Going On
Danielle captured two scenes that were quite common for her, the first, Figure 4.7, shows the view from her dorm room window.

This is my desk where I do my work I right here and I have the books but there's football. I have my little plant that makes me happy in my room and you look outside and people are enjoying basketball. . . there's always something going on. (Danielle).

Both the academic and social realms of Danielle’s college world are shown in Figure 4.7 with textbooks, a snapshot with a friend, and community residents. The images captures how varied and involved the student experience can be but that the athletic brand is still
present in the academic and residential setting. Danielle’s second photo, Figure 4.8, is taken on campus in the amphitheater.

That’s my feet and you can see my homework that I'm working on and I just love the idea that you can be sitting here working and you look out and you see this beautiful campus all around you. So it's like, if you're studying all day which sometimes I am because I'm just a studious person, why not study in absolute beauty all around you? (Danielle).

Similar to Figure 4.6 and the idea of the center of campus being the most beautiful visually, the image captures a place with heavy student traffic and where organizations host many different events throughout the year. After the photo was taken, Danielle shared that she was pulled onto the stage to participate in the dancing on stage. Danielle’s photos present the intersection of student life and NSP life as she is studying but that studying is not happening in a void but in an active environment where things are continually going on.

Both Andrew and Danielle shared images of an event called the International Festival, an event that Andrews describes as “undervalued by a lot of students.” Figure 4.9 shows a table at the International Festival and the goulash sampled by Andrew and his friends. For Andrew, the “festival is near the top of [his] favorite traditions” and he has participated every year. Andrew’s affinity for this event is due to his curiosity about different cultures, which he defined as “culturious.”

Culturious is still surprisingly not a real word and it's not something that's accepted outside of Clemson. But for the people who came in around my
time to Clemson and had to presentations and stuff about culturiousness. People still use the word culturous, which is very surprising in my mind. I think [the International Festival] is one of the most culturous things you could do in Clemson.

Figure 4.9 Goulash
The event features performances, one of which was by the dance team that Danielle is a member. Figure 4.10 shows the team performance during the International Festival.

Figure 4.10 International Fest 2014

And there's my dance team which is kind of impossible not to include I feel like. I love spending time with them and it's a big ... a big part of what I do at Clemson, I guess which is just being active in student groups which I think a lot, a lot of students are active in student groups here.

Danielle’s involvement in this group is unrelated to her academic pursuits or membership in National Scholars and exists in the realm of her other activities and memberships on the other side of the Venn diagram described by Andrew. Danielle has navigated her
student activities to find a space for the “work that [she] loves doing so much.” Danielle also discussed the image in terms of diversity, both culturally and organizationally. While campus life for many, as the participants note, revolves around college athletic events, the participants in this study have found other outlets to explore their passions and develop relationships beyond the athletic world. Figure 4.10 demonstrates the activities that students find themselves participating in organizations or groups that may not be widely recognized or as popular as Greek Life or athletics, but are a passion for the participants.

The single most important area of attachment to the university for the participants was scholarship, academics and career goals. However, the academic brand that drove the institution could also become problematic as Andrew noted in the discussion of the photo in Figure 4.11.

Figure 4.11 Senior Project
Andrew shares an area of his academic life that he compares to his NSP experience in the discussion of Figure 4.11. The wooden construction pictured is what Andrews describes as something that is, “supposed to be the pinnacle of [his] mechanical engineering education here, sadly I think my particular project is not the most stimulating or interesting.” This culminating senior project for his major is lacking in comparison to his NSP and Clemson experience, which has allowed him travel, enhanced academic opportunities and involvement in activities that he believes have helped prepare him better than the senior project. In his own words, Andrew shared:

I'm slightly less pleased with my mechanical engineering experience than with my overall Clemson experience . . . We don't have- for being the largest engineering department in the state, we don't have any decent classroom facilities just for mechanical engineering. We borrow rooms that are not well equipped from other departments. Parts of it are frustrating, large class sizes. Overall I'm still pretty happy.

As a senior, Andrew is nearing the end of his academic career but continuously referred to the scholarship program and his other student activities as being the sites that he has spent most of his time and energy working to become an active and engaged individual. Andrew’s open critique of his program is another example of the scholar’s willingness to be critical of the normative structures that sustain the present idea that engineering as an academic program without failings.

This willingness to be critical is demonstrated by many of those in the focus groups and all photo-elicitation participants through their discussion of their photos and
the issues that came up during their discussion of various aspects of the institution and their role as student. The final overarching theme, *Social Supports and Challenges* emerged following students’ discussions of institutional culture and finding their place within the culture.

**Social Supports and Challenges**

The third and final overarching theme, *Social Supports and Challenges*, addressed research questions four and five that dealt with the relationships students build and their desired college experience. Two sub-themes emerge which examine the impact of the institutional identity described and the role that the scholarship program played in assisting students in acclimating to college life at Clemson University.

**National Scholars**

The population sampled are all members of the National Scholars Program (NSP) and in focus group and photo-elicitation interview discussions, the scholarship program was mentioned repeatedly as a comfortable, connected social space that each participant felt comfortable within. NSP, however, holds varying meanings for students. Marie described (NSP) as “there when [she] needed it to be” and alluded to the fluid nature of the program to be a solid foundation from which students could explore opportunities in and around campus. For other students, NSP goes beyond a foundation and is an organized group of individuals that some participants feel most connected to. Andrew described NSP as being distinct from the dominant institutional culture.

NSP does not fall within that conformist Clemson culture at all. That where I feel most comfortable. I have lots of friends outside of NSP but
my best friends are all within NSP and have been all within NSP since I got here. I think 1 is because we are all close to this organization. They do a good job of helping us bond. But 2, the people in NSP are a lot more open minded.(Andrew).

Structurally, NSP has a physical location on campus in an academic building where the scholarship recipients are allowed key-card access to lounge, eat, discuss and interact with one another and the program administration. However, the people of NSP are not limited to the one physical building but take classes with a faculty fellow, travel on NSP directed study abroad opportunities, and have a variety of other offerings that can keep students as involved or uninvolved as they choose to be during their undergraduate experience. Andrew’s comment touches on the bond that national scholars have to the program and each other which. The relationship building begins during the NSP Interview Weekend and continues for the new scholar cohort during the freshman retreat.

Beyond the programmatic activities, Andrew and other participants mention that the students in NSP are more open-minded—which is in contrast to previous statements in prior themes about the conformist nature of the institution. Andrew shares that he feels that he can be himself “around there more than [he] could around people in other organizations” and that he is able “to speak freely” to fellow national scholars.

Students also compared the idea of the Clemson family to the NSP family. As David explained, “[Clemson talks] about the Clemson family but I feel like a lot of it is more about the NSP family, being supportive and special opportunities that you get as an NSP and not necessarily the school as a whole.” Andrew described one such special
opportunity in his discussion of Figure 4.12. The image is actually a picture of a graphic design done by Andrew for the NSP weekend for orientation ambassadors that assist during the weekend. The shirt design came about as a result of the “culture, of NSP,” as Andrew described:

- the loose informal nature of a lot of our interactions and our friendliness and everyone knows everybody and [Carter] knows that I like this sort of stuff. I've done it before the retreat and for other things. Everyone was appreciative.
Carter (pseudonym) is a program administrator and allowed Andrew to design the shirts for the weekend. Being allowed to have a hand in the visual representation of a weekend that involves the next selection of scholars was important to Andrew but he also notes that he felt appreciated for his design skills being acknowledged and for his contribution.

The idea of support and acknowledgement also came up during Jackson’s photo-elicitation interview. For Jackson, a freshman, NSP has provided opportunities and relationships that have helped him in his first few months as an undergraduate:

As a National Scholar I feel like I'm getting attention. I feel like I'm not just another student walking the halls. I feel like I'm important, probably more important than I actually am. I feel I have a support system. I have these friends, my cohort. I have [Carter]. I have [Leslie]. That's really important to me. Also the fact that money isn't an issue is something that I'm grateful for every day.

Jackson’s comments allude to the label of NSP providing access and opportunities to him as a college student that help in multiple arenas.

Throughout the interviewing process, the label of NSP distinguished itself as a brand that students developed a relationship with distinct from the Clemson University institutional brand described by the students. Whether NSP was a safe space socially or intellectually, or a springboard to other opportunities, the participants noted their appreciation of the program and scholarship opportunity provided. As an organization, NSP supports students academically and socially through the provision of resources and
opportunities that enhance the college experience for the students.

**Finding Our Niche**

The final sub-theme that emerged from the interviews, *finding our niche*, emerged from the conversations regarding the places within or beyond NSP that the student’s pointed to as a crucial developmental piece of their social lives and overall identity. Shannon explained the challenges in negotiating her multiple identities in the following excerpt:

> When I used to row, I had a lot of conflicts with my identity. I was the only one who was in NSP and wanted to be successful academically and involved in things that I thought really mattered but also someone who the university would be proud of as a student athlete.

While Shannon could, as an individual, be involved in both of those realms, she mentioned an institutional and social pressure to choose:

> Clemson and my peers did not care about being academic or being involved in anything outside of rowing and I think it was a very hard space to navigate because on the one hand you want to be really competitive and [. . .] often times I was concerned that people in the NSP and honors community didn’t think that it was what I should be doing because it wasn’t advancing my career or my education.

Shannon describes the tensions she experienced that pulled her in two different directions and her eventual drop from the rowing team. In order to avoid these tensions, some students do not make their academic affiliations known.
Katie discussed her interaction with other students during a focus group and shared that she never mentions being in the “honors college or an NSP and stuff just because [she is] trying to connect with these people like another Clemson student.” For Katie and others, they found that connecting to others outside of National Scholars or the Honors College could be difficult because they are not sharing a facet of their identity. Other members of that same focus group shared that their identity negotiation became easier as they made the decision to “hang out less or stop hanging out” with people who were not accepting of their academic interests.

Lauren shared her involvement in the sorority, Gamma Sigma Sigma, which she joined in the fall and is in Figure 4.13 posing with members of her pledge class.
when you think Greek life, you think like picture-perfect, like, we have the best makeup and hair, but this is just us, honestly, being “derpy” is the way I can describe because we're all just like, “wait, what?” A lot of us were new, we just pledged last month. We really don't know the hand signs or anything.

Lauren mentioned that she was skeptical of fraternity and sorority life and joined her current sorority because it “breaks away from the stereotype” of sororities. Lauren says she found her “niche within her [Gamma Sigma] family.” While Lauren’s memberships in her academic clubs and organizations are important, being involved in a service oriented sorority that is focused on making differences in the community have helped her build friendships beyond the NSP and honors community.

Friendships within the NSP community are also important for the students. Jackson shared a photo that, while very recent, he already noted feeling a bit of nostalgia toward in figure 4.14. Jackson shared his thoughts about the photo and the importance of his scholar cohort and said:

If I see anyone walking on campus and homes at Harcombe, we'll sit down and talk. I'm totally comfortable with all of them. I think a lot of it ... After the experience of going through the interview process and knowing that you're going to be ... This is another person that's having a very similar experience to yours.

Jackson went on to discuss how he appreciates the members of his cohort being involved in different things and that they are his smaller network within the NSP and Clemson
As a freshman, Jackson noted that starting with a network of peers was helpful and made the transition as an out-of-state student and first-time college freshman easier.

**Summary of Themes**

The broad categories of themes that emerged from the interview data were: *Purpose and Responsibility, Personal Identity Development and Social Supports and Challenges*. Through in vivo coding and thematic analysis, sub themes for each category emerged which help illuminate and explicate the meaning behind each broad thematic category.

*Purpose and Responsibility* helped understand how students situate themselves in the university community and understand the institutional identity. The sub-theme, “solid
springboard school” highlighted their appreciation of Clemson’s solid academic foundation and ability to meet their needs as an undergraduate student. The sub-theme of “academically driven, not academically focused” articulated the perceptions of the dominant institutional brand and their experience as scholars within an institution that is not focused on its academic priority. The comments that emerged in this theme highlight that athletics, primarily football, was the most promoted segment of the university and trumped any academic marketing and promotion.

Personal Identity Development addressed the student response to the brand purported by Clemson University and was supported by three sub-themes. “Conform to be family” exposed the participant’s personal negotiations in being who they are and identifying areas in which they had to sacrifice or hide in order to be considered members of the university family. The second sub-theme, “willingness to be critical,” highlighted the differences between the NSP group and the learning community at large. Finally, “the Venn diagram” showed how participants structured their world as being a place where distinct identities and realities exist with some areas of overlap where possible.

Social Supports and Challenges identified areas in which the students’ relationships are developed and shaped by institutional dynamics. “National Scholars” emerged as a sub-theme as it was commonly referred to as a place, organization, and community that provided an escape and social support necessary to thrive as an undergraduate. “Finding our Niche” emerged as a sub-theme as it highlighted group memberships that were important to the participants that are distinct from other relationships across the university.
Final comments regarding the institutional brand and their experience, many students noted that the brand of NSP and Clemson University were distinct, but their brand experience was more fluid. Danielle shared her sentiments during her photo-elicitation interview:

I really didn't associate with the Clemson brand. It didn't click for me, but part of that I think is being here you kind of learn to appreciate that brand a little more and you learn to appreciate that style because you like what it's associate with. So it's hard for me to separate it in my mind as to if the Clemson brand embodies my experience or if I just associate the Clemson brand with my experience.

Much in the same vein, Pauline shared a recent debate on whether or not to order a university ring with a roommate. According to Pauline, her roommate said, “I don’t even know if I really like Clemson or if I just love NSP” to which Pauline replied, “Well, NSP is my Clemson experience.”

The 13 students who participated in the focus groups and the four who participated in the photo-elicitation interviews provide a large amount of data about their perceptions and realities in their current college environment. The conversations provided insight into the important elements of their experience and their passions, as well as the issues they faced as students on a social level related to their campus involvement. While many of the students are deeply involved in the campus learning community and have had a rewarding experience, they have called upon the supports of their scholarship
program to address developmental challenges related to their academic, social, and personal worlds.
CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study was to examine the impact of a higher educational brand on the lived experience of undergraduate students within an honors program. Five research questions guided this study in order to discover how a university brand, and discourse(s) around said brand impact student affiliation and consumption of the university identity. Through a document review of institutional branding policies and guidelines, focus group and photo-elicitation questions were developed and interview were conducted with 13 students from the National Scholars program. The following discussion is presented with an overview of the thematic findings as they relate to the conceptual framework and literature reviewed in this study, recommendations for future research and implications for practice.

Discussion of Findings

The rich, descriptive data provided by naturalistic investigation into the phenomena of institutional brand and the impact a brand experience has on the lived experience of students fell into three major thematic categories: Purpose and Responsibility, Personal Identity Development and Social Supports and Challenges.

Overview of Major Themes

Based on the conceptual frameworks used for this study, the major themes present insights into the social construction of the students’ experience and identity within or while experiencing the brand of their institution. Two theoretical frameworks were used
to ground this study: social construction and brand culture. Each theme and sub-theme is discussed in relationship to the theoretical frameworks.

**Purpose and Responsibility**

The theme of *Purpose and Responsibility* relates to the students’ development of their role as students attending the institution as well as how they negotiate their role. The lens of social construction is useful here as this identity is emerges through the relationship between the individual and society and these students respond to their social reality—college life (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Through their continual identity negotiations, dissonance between their desired social reality and their actual social reality, often referred to by students at the Clemson “bubble” became apparent. The sub-theme, “conform to be family” emerged from the narratives that provided details on this brand experience and the dissonance that came bout.

**Solid springboard.** Given the nature of NSP and the scholarship, study abroad, and learning opportunities therein, many of the participants noted that they made the pragmatic decision that ended up being the wisest decision for them in attending Clemson University. The reason for hesitation was due to the brand experience they first encountered as prospective students from the university. As educational consumers, they sought an institution with academic programming and undergraduate opportunities that would provide the greatest return on their investment, but the immediate brand experience they encountered was not focused on the items they attempted to ascribe value to (Wolpert, 1999). The implications of the brand experience had by the participants and the undervaluing of the academic facets of the university led many of the participants to
mirror the promotional experience through appreciating their undergraduate institution as a springboard to success instead of a place where the larger campus community appreciates their successes. Wernick (2006) discussed the courting and exploiting of students in the promotional era of the university and the sub-theme corresponds to this idea if one perceives the students as consumers. For example, each participant was “courted” by the institution through the scholarship offer and, in turn, they are “exploited” by the university by providing intellectual prestige through the work that they do. The students, in turn, use this exploitation to their advantage academically by recognizing and capitalizing on the specialized attention and advising they receive that can propel them into top tier graduate and professional programs.

Through the social constructionist lens, the participant’s experience as discursive subjects through understanding, defining and organizing their social world within the brand parameters of the institution begins (Foucault, 1976). The influence of the brand experience and areas of brand alignment come into play early on as the participants understand their role in the institutional history and discourse(s) of their learning communities.

Academically focused, not academically driven. Further sentiments regarding the motivation of Clemson to support a brand that focused more on athletics and downplayed the academic elements of the institution helped the second sub-theme to emerge. As honor students, the participants value the academic opportunities available. However, the dominant institutional identity promotes athletic slogans and symbols which are readily recognized on and off-campus.
The emphasis on ideas and images unrelated to the institution, while still being an institution of higher education is something the participants recognized as a point of contention that also aligns with the current practices of “limiting, homogenizing and flattening effects of promotional discourse” (Hearn, 2010, p. 208; Wernick, 2006). The participants saw deviating from the primary function of the institution, to provide an education, as a dysfunction and a limiting attribute to the overall university brand, particularly since the participants valued the educational aspects of the institution. Lury (2004) notes that the experience of branding is conceived as relationship conceived of as “exchange” instead of a “stimulus-response” (p.24). The brand erosion of the academic purpose of the institution through the student-institution relationship is informed by the information exchange that occurs as students construct their social world but also note areas of dissonance in which their constructions encounter dissonance in one they value and what is valued by the institution.

**Personal Identity Development**

The second overarching theme addressed the identity negotiations scholars dealt with through their college experience and how they navigated the various realms in which they interacted as involved students, leaders, and scholars. The three sub-themes address various aspects of these negotiations with respect to the institutional messages that the participants receive from the university.

**Conform to be family.** Each student interviewed is a member of a scholarship based program and were recruited to compete for this scholarship because of his or her academic success in high school. As honors students, they differ from their non-honors
counterparts due to their likelihood of being more invested in their academic program and co-curricular opportunities (Long & Lange, 2002). The interest in academics was apparent among the participants in this group and they recognized that their increased focus on academic activity made them different than their non-NSP and non-Honors College peers. While participants were actively involved in other facets of the university world, those involvements did not outweigh their academic work where they saw their campus peers investing more time and energy into extra-curricular activities. Thus, the idea of conformity presented as students discussed joining (and soon leaving) clubs and activities due to lack of interest or not sharing their honors membership because of the tension it could potentially cause in meeting new people and maintaining relationships. The idea of “family” is promoted by the university and all participants said that they do feel like they are part of a family, but their experience is shaped by their membership as a National Scholar, first, and Clemson student, second.

The continued negotiations of self and student identity running counter to the experience valued by the institution illuminates the issues of power in the discourses within and around the learning community. Foucault (1972, 1976) noted identity formation was related or a function of discourses and the students arrange their experience and understanding of place and space in relation to the identities that they had the most positive affective response to (e.g., National Scholars). Within these sites, the dominant institutional messages like the “Clemson Family” are challenged and contested through a meaning-making process that places their identity constructions in conflict with the messages about who and what they are supposed to be and do as Clemson students.
Lury (2004) sheds light on these constructions and the impact of the brand having a greater impact on shaping these constructions since the brand culture works to structure and cultivate daily life for the individual.

**Willingness to be critical.** The second sub-theme emerged from the comments by the participants that described their NSP world and the intellectual differences the people of NSP had in relation to the larger campus community. Being part of the university community, particularly the learning community and representing less than 15% of the student body, the requirements to being a token (Kanter, 1977), brought about a heightened awareness of the issues the participants had with the institutional identity and the overwhelming majority of peers that did not see or were not concerned with these issues. Although small in number, the ability to openly critique their experience as a college student and discuss issues that are of concern to them, they are able to make the meaningful contributions that challenge the institutional identity, thus, opening the path for them to become tempered radicals (Meyerson & Scully, 1995). By openly critiquing the institutional identity, they are legitimizing their place and space within the institution and become the political actors, described by Meyerson and Tompkins (2007) that work to bridge the gap or create spaces between their reality and the negotiated existence they have as national scholars, honors students and undergraduates at Clemson University.

**The Venn diagram.** The final sub-theme to emerge pointed out the relationships that participants developed in order to categorize their social world. For the participants, in order to involve themselves in the learning community and negotiate the differences or issues they may have through engaging with their learning community, they are forming
their identity through these social processes (Berger and Luckmann, 1966; Burr, 2003). These social processes allowed the participants to distinguish between their varying levels and areas of involvement as a student while helping them negotiate where and how engaged they will be in the communities as well as what matters most to their development. The participants are all undergraduates and various stages of their mental and social development as an undergraduate student, however, their NSP and honors label plays a significant role in the perceptions they have and the contributions they make to the university community.

**Social Supports and Challenges**

The final thematic category, *Social Supports and Challenges*, addresses the brand negotiations and areas of fit within the learning community that were illuminated by the participants through the sub-themes of national scholars and finding our niche.

**National scholars.** The title of the program evolved for the participants as a site of belonging and a term that encompassed the academic community in which they felt most a part of and had a connection within. For honors students, expectations of their program to provide “long range academic value” and “student support” are reflected by the emphasis participants had on the scholarship program fulfilling the academic and community need (Hill, 2005, p. 106). By offering support beyond the financial coverage, the NSP program meets the holistic needs of the student in the social and developmental arenas. Given the prior findings about the lack of focus on academics and the under-appreciation of the participant’s contribution to the academic community, the ability of NSP to fill that void moves NSP as a player in the brand experience of the student.
Finding our niche. For scholars who are involved in extracurricular activities that are unrelated to the academic program, group memberships and affiliations that provided for the well-roundedness of the student were important. While NSP was used as a mechanism by which to find clubs, organizations and other activities around campus through the scholar network, not all scholars successfully found and maintained a place in the greater learning community, especially when their academic priorities were in direct competition with their extracurricular activities. However, the maintenance of relationships beyond the scholars program was important to the participants. While certain participants discussed the difficulty in balancing the variety of activities and viewing each as valuable, they all were readily able to identify areas in which they felt challenged or supported.

The brand culture of the university is, as Banet-Weiser (2012) illustrates, the culture of the university that encompasses “competing power relations and individual production and practice” (p. 13). Further, Burr (2003) outlines the idea of the construction and re-construction of an individual’s social world that parallels the participant’s development as a college student and scholar, among other identities. Through the brand experience and the relationship negotiations on the part of the participants, the values of the institution are delineated and the participant’s experiences are supported or marginalized according to how well the experience of the participant aligns with the valued brand ideal of the institution. The constructive power of the valued relationships, social structures and intuitional practices and purported through the brand
experience has, for the participants, impacted their lived experience (Rose, 1990; Burr, 2003).

**Insights from Literature**

This study validated the discussions in the literature regarding the promotional culture of higher education and impact of brand experience on consumers of the commodity of a degree. Moreover, the erosion of the academic brand and the flattening of the institutional identity (Weirnick, 2006) is further supported through the participants’ active negotiation of their academic role in a learning community that is continually undervalued. The impact that the brand erosion has on the brand experience is problematic for the type of student seeking an institution that fully supports their scholarly endeavors (Long & Lange, 2002). As the students negotiated and socially constructed their own identities, they worked to legitimize their academic selves at the cost of coming into conflict with the brand experience they felt the institution promoted (Aronczyk & Power, 2010; Antcil, 2008).

Further, the participant’s academic selves confronted tensions and dissonance—areas they negotiated as political actors due the multiple contexts they existed within and the relationships they used to reduce dissonance and achieve their goals (Manning, 2013). As institutional tokens in the numeric sense, the continual engagement with brand experiences in opposition to their desired experienced pushed these students to create or find places and spaces in which they could flourish. By doing so, the participants became tempered radicals that, through their affiliation to NSP, had a site to disrupt the institutional status quo and resolve experiential tensions via the smaller learning
community (Meyerson, 2001). This study builds on the present literature regarding tempered radicals as it develops the concept from the student perspective. By understanding the tempered radical and political body in an institutional setting, future work on how these individuals develop their abilities to cope and manage tensions between their private and public selves can be developed.

This study found that the trademarks and logos of the university were not as important to the brand experience as what the brand valued via visual images and institutional rhetoric. The prevalence of an athletic trademark like the university paw did not cause visible problems for the students—instead, they noted the rules and regulations in how it should and should be used (Alexander & Alexander, 2013). The more impactful elements of the brand existed in the social and operational structures of the institution. For example, the idea of a “family” only partially resonated with the students and was off-putting to others due to the insinuation that in order to belong, a student had to assimilate into something that did not value the whole student—only the involved and socially engaged student. On the other hand, the interconnected aspect of the family and the smaller networks there-in were seen as useful conceptual tools for understanding the intent of the family.

**Limitations**

Given the nature of this case study, the findings are not generalizable across institutions but can prove valuable information for the site described. Moreover, the participant population was ethnically homogenous so the viewpoints of historically underrepresented or international students were not presented. A third limitation of this
study was the limited participation in the web-survey which did not provide an administrative perspective on the services and efforts of honors program faculty and staff and their role in understanding and enhancing the student experience at the university.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

Current research on honors students in higher education focuses broadly on their academic and social needs, the benefits of honors programming and developing an accurate picture of what an honors student looks like in higher education (Long & Lange, 2002; Blythe, 2004; Astin, 2009; Rinn & Pucker, 2004; Backer, et. al., 2000). However, there is a lack of research on the thoughts of honors students on their experience within institutions of higher education. This study seeks to extend the conversation about who these students are into the realm of how institutions can improve the recruitment of high achieving students. By understanding these students and their negotiations in concert or conflict with dominant institutional identities, particularly of those students attending striving universities, improved branding and marketing strategies can be used a tool to increase prestige through strategic recruitment of students.

As a second recommendation, the brand erosion of an institution’s academic identity in today’s promotional society is an area of research that would extend conversations about promotional culture and authenticity. In an era where differentiation and competition among institutions of higher education is increasing, the ability of schools to create and maintain a dynamic, all encompassing brand aligned to the institutional essence presents difficulty, especially when that brand is used as a tool to influence institutional culture. Further research into the causes of brand erosion, the areas
in which brand erosion occurs most frequently per institution type, and the impact of that erosion on institutional culture would develop the literature on brand culture and experience.

Research on schools that have re-branded themselves and the student culture, honors students or otherwise, would also be a realm of future study that could inform student identity development and relationships in the promotional realm of higher education.

A final recommendation would be a longitudinal study on an honors cohort to examine the experiences prior to enrollment, their experience as an undergraduate, and their experience post-matriculation to find what, if any, measurements of loyalty to their alma mater could be assessed.

**Implications for Practice**

Within the realm of higher educational media relations, information officers and others responsible for communicating message about the university to students and external populations can use these findings to better understand how their messages are interpreted by various audiences. The noted brand erosion can be combated by the findings here in ways that incorporate a large student voice that can attest to the benefits of Clemson’s academic quality. Since this study used honors students, communication strategies to prospective students can come directly from this population to provide an authentic view of academic life at the university. For high-achieving prospective students to the university, hearing about academic and student life from the student, or, at minimum, incorporating the words of the students who first seek academic success, can
aid in the recruitment of those high-achieving student cohorts.

Honors programs administrators can use these findings to advocate for a seat at the table when it comes to institutional conversations about marketing and promotion, particularly in the realm of recruitment of top students to undergraduate programming. Moreover, these honors administrators can use this and similar studies to build a case for striving institutions to increase institutional resources that support high achieving students and families. In this capacity, those resources could be the difference between that institution being thought of as a “springboard” to an alma mater that honor graduates will feel a sense of loyalty and commitment to their school—not just a particular program.

Further, institutional assessments of campus climate and culture can be assessed and incorporated into discussions of brand identity and experience—bridging all academic units and requiring advocates to join the discussion about the goals, mission and vision of the university as a whole. Within these discussions, how the institution and various colleges, departments and other units are actualizing the institutional identity and influencing or shaping the brand can be discussed. The impacts of these discussions can help all administrators better understand their institution’s role on the higher educational landscape.

**Conclusion**

High achieving and gifted students, often referred to as the best and the brightest in higher education lingo, have been actively recruited to institutions of higher education as an institutional tool to create and sustain academic prestige. The maintenance of an
institution’s prestige and overall brand, however, has changed and the current educational landscape demands higher educational institutions to differentiate and market themselves to a particular niche. Understanding the impact of the brand experience, and potential brand erosion, of the academic entity on the academically focused students attending an institution provides insights into how institutional culture and essence shape the desired collegiate experience for a student.

The challenge of providing opportunities for high achieving students in an era where honors programs and their contributions are undervalued within the promotional materials and institutional rhetoric makes it difficult for honors program administrators to advocate for continued or increased resources for their student body. With regard to student life, institutional branding that limits and undervalues their desired experience can create sites of dissonance in which they rely on their honors programming or academic co-curricular activities instead of experiencing the full gamut of activities promoted by the institution.

Students want to be involved and will experience developmental challenges in order to experience growth. The burden of feeling minimized in their contribution or tokenized because of their intellectual contributions to the university community has implications for their potential alumni loyalty to the institution at the benefit of increased alumni loyalty to the scholarship program. During their undergraduate experience, students learn to capitalize on their unique position within the institution and hone these skills in navigating an institutional culture that may or may not recognize the full potential of these students. Honors and scholarship programs alongside institutions can
work to better understand this dynamic in order to increase resources and ensure that the idea of a well-rounded student is not to the detriment of their academic purpose.

These students are cognizant of the nature of their social world and seem aware of the areas of dissonance and tension that appear when their academic and social worlds interact in various areas. By exploring and understanding how students work to reduce or engage these tensions, institutions can work to provide a more inclusive learning community and institutional supports to ensure that these and other student segments make the most out of their college experience.
Appendix A

High Achiever, Gifted Learner, Creative Thinker

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A High Achiever…</th>
<th>A Gifted Learner…</th>
<th>A Creative Thinker…</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Remembers the answers</td>
<td>Poses unforeseen questions</td>
<td>See exceptions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is attentive.</td>
<td>Is selectively mentally engaged.</td>
<td>Daydreams; may seem off task.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generates advanced ideas.</td>
<td>Generates complex, abstract ideas.</td>
<td>Overflows with ideas, many of which will never be developed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Answers the questions in details</td>
<td>Ponders with depth and multiple perspectives.</td>
<td>Injects new possibilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Performs at the top of the group.</td>
<td>Is beyond the group.</td>
<td>Is in own group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responds with interest and opinions.</td>
<td>Exhibits feelings and opinions from multiple perspectives.</td>
<td>Shares bizarre, sometimes conflicting opinions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learns with ease.</td>
<td>Already knows.</td>
<td>Questions: What if…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comprehends at a high level.</td>
<td>Comprehends in-depth complex ideas.</td>
<td>Overflows with ideas—many of which will never be developed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enjoys the company of age peers.</td>
<td>Prefers the company of intellectual peers.</td>
<td>Prefers the company of creative peers but often works alone.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grasps the meaning.</td>
<td>Infers and connects concepts.</td>
<td>Makes mental leaps.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Completes assignments on time.</td>
<td>Initiates projects and extensions of assignments.</td>
<td>Initiates more projects that will never be completed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is accurate and complete.</td>
<td>Is original and continually developing.</td>
<td>Is original and continually developing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is a technician with expertise in a field.</td>
<td>Manipulates information.</td>
<td>Improvises.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memorizes well.</td>
<td>Guesses and infers well.</td>
<td>Creates and brainstorms well.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is highly alert and observant.</td>
<td>Anticipates and relates observations.</td>
<td>Is intuitive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Get’s A’s.</td>
<td>May not be motivated by grades.</td>
<td>May not be motivated by grades.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is able.</td>
<td>Is intellectual.</td>
<td>Is idiosyncratic.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure A-1: Adapted from Kingore’s (2004) three-way comparison of a high achiever, a gifted learner, and a creative thinker.
Appendix B

Focus Group Interview Schedule

1. What class year are you and what are your various programs/colleges?

2. What does it mean, to you, to be a student at Clemson University?

3. Do you identify as a Clemson University Student?
   a. What other groups do you belong to on or off campus? Why?
   b. How would you describe the learning community/communities you are involved in?

4. How would you describe Clemson University to a prospective student?

5. How would you describe the Clemson University brand?
   a. How do you feel about the Clemson University brand? Is it accurate? Why or why not?
   b. What feelings come up for you when discussing Clemson University?
      i. Can you give me an example?

Supplemental Questions to be added based on loose questioning above. Per the recommendations of Jones, Torres and Arminio (2014), only four to give “good questions are needed” because of the emphasis of focus groups to exchange ideas (p.140).
Appendix C

Photo-elicitation Interview Schedule

**Demographic Questions**

1. Where are you from, originally?

2. What major/degree program are you in? What is your academic classification?
   a. Do you live on or off campus?

**Student Choice/Perception Questions**

3. What factors influenced your decision to come to Clemson?
   a. How did you learn about Clemson? Your degree program? Other activities?
   b. What institutions did you decline?
   c. Through what channels
   d. When did you first visit Clemson University? What was your first memory? What is a lasting memory?

4. What activities are you involved in? Why?
   a. Do you hold any leadership roles in your organizations?
   b. Describe your involvement in the honors program? National Scholars Program?

5. [Photo Elicitation] – Describe your experience as a student at Clemson University.

*photos will drive the interview with supplemental questions asked for extension or clarification.*
6. Describe the institutional identity of Clemson University?
   a. Describe the perception of the Honors College/National Scholars Program?
   b. Do you feel like you are a part of the learning community? Why/Why Not?

7. How do you feel about the institutional brand?
   a. Do you believe the brand represents your student experience in your learning community?
   b. Is the learning community supportive? How so? Who facilitates?
### Appendix D

**Participant Demographic Information**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Academic Classification</th>
<th>Home State</th>
<th>Major/Minor</th>
<th>Photo-Elicitation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pauline</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>Wisconsin</td>
<td>Language &amp; International Health</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Danielle</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>South Carolina</td>
<td>Mandarin Chines &amp; International Trade (1) &amp; Anthropology</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lauren</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>Soils &amp; Sustainable Crop Systems/ Plant Pathology</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>Mathematical Sciences</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katie</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>South Carolina</td>
<td>Political Science (1) &amp; Economics</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrew</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>South Carolina</td>
<td>Mechanical Engineering</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Joey</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>Electrical Engineering (1) &amp; Philosophy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Carrie</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Florida</td>
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<td>Jackson</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Freshman</td>
<td>Maryland</td>
<td>General Engineering</td>
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<td>Marissa</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Sophomore</td>
<td>Tennessee</td>
<td>Mathematical Sciences/Financial Management</td>
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<tr>
<td>Marie</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>Virginia</td>
<td>Bioengineering/French</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Shannon</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Senior</td>
<td>New Mexico</td>
<td>Political Science/Communication Studies</td>
<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Raquel</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Junior</td>
<td>North Carolina</td>
<td>Biochemistry (1) &amp; Genetics/English</td>
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Appendix E

Web Survey for Program Administration

Perceptions of the University Brand Survey Instrument (online)

Contact Information

1. Gender _________
2. Title: _______________________
3. Describe Role: _______________________________________
4. Number of years at Clemson University: _____
5. Number of years in current position: _____
6. Number of years working with National Scholars Program: _____

Institutional Brand: Answer Choices – Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree. These questions are followed by comment boxes (in italics) – For paper form please circle appropriate answer

1. The brand of your institution is clear and consistent to the students in the learning community.

   Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Neither Agree nor Disagree    Agree,    Strongly Agree

   How would you describe the brand? (use space below)

2. The institutional environment is guided by the institutional brand.

   Strongly Disagree    Disagree    Neither Agree nor Disagree    Agree,    Strongly Agree

   Does the brand influence administrative decision making? In what ways
does the brand influence administrative decision making? (use space below)

3. Honors students easily identify and relate to the brand created and purported by the institution.

   Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Neither Agree nor Disagree   Agree,   Strongly Agree

   Do you in any way facilitate the articulation of the brand to these students?
   How so?

4. Your institution educates students and personnel on the importance of the brand and branding.

   Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Neither Agree nor Disagree   Agree,   Strongly Agree

   In what ways are you informed about the brand?

5. The brand of your institution is prevalent in recruitment, solicitation, and other communications encouraging involvement and participation.

   Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Neither Agree nor Disagree   Agree,   Strongly Agree

6. There are trademarks, logos and slogans on your campus that reflect the institutional identity.

   Strongly Disagree   Disagree   Neither Agree nor Disagree   Agree,   Strongly Agree
Agree

Where can these marks be found? Are they prominent?

7. All members of your institution take pride in the institution’s identity.
   Strongly Disagree  Disagree   Neither Agree nor Disagree  Agree,  Strongly Agree

8. The brand of your institution has had a negative impact on the learning community.
   Strongly Disagree  Disagree   Neither Agree nor Disagree  Agree,  Strongly Agree

9. Your institution’s brand is authentic.
   Strongly Disagree  Disagree   Neither Agree nor Disagree  Agree,  Strongly Agree

10. Branding has been effective at increasing your institutions rank and prestige on the educational landscape.
    Strongly Disagree  Disagree   Neither Agree nor Disagree  Agree,  Strongly Agree

11. Please comment on your experience with Clemson University branding, perceived benefits or risks, and the relative impact the brand has had on the learning community.

*Adapted from the Perceptions of Branding in Higher Education Survey Instrument (Lamboy, J.V., 2011)
### Appendix F

**Overview of Thematic Findings**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Sub-theme</th>
<th>RQs Addressed</th>
<th>Relevant Lit</th>
<th>Theory</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Academically Driven, Not Academically Focused</td>
<td>1 and 3</td>
<td>Hearn, 2010; Wernick, 2006</td>
<td>Brand Lury, 2004</td>
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<td>Personal Identity Development</td>
<td>Conform to be Family</td>
<td>3, 4, and 5</td>
<td>Long &amp; Lange, 2002; Wernick, 2006</td>
<td>Social Construction &amp; Brand Foucault, 1972, 1976; Lury, 2004</td>
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<td>Venn Diagram</td>
<td>3, 4, and 5</td>
<td>Hill, 2005</td>
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Appendix G

G.1 – Student Focus Group Consent

Information about Being in a Research Study
Clemson University

The Impact of a Branding Program at a University: How Institutional Brand Impacts the Lived Experience of Honor Students

Description of the Study and Your Part in It

Lori M. Pindar, under the direction of Dr. Patricia F. First, are inviting you to take part in a research study. Dr. First is a faculty member in the School of Education at Clemson University. Lori Pindar is a graduate student at Clemson University, running this study with the help of Dr. First. The purpose of this research is to understand how an institution’s brand impacts the college learning community.

Your part in the study will be to participate in a focus group with the investigator involved in the project. In this focus group, you will be asked your opinions about the university brand, your understanding of what it means to be a student at your institution, and what impacts the institutional brand has had on your college experience. Your focus group will be audio recorded.

At the conclusion of the focus group, you may be invited to participate in a one-on-one photo-elicitation interview. The interview will follow a similar format with questions about your thoughts and experiences with the institutional brand. This interview will also be audio-recorded.

Risks and Discomforts

We do not know of any risks or discomforts to you in this research study.

Possible Benefits

We do not know of any way you would benefit directly from taking part in this study. However, this research may help us to understand how to better serve the interests of high achieving students at your university.
**Protection of Privacy and Confidentiality**

We will do everything we can to protect your privacy and confidentiality. We will not tell anybody outside of the research team that you were in this study or what information we collected about you in particular. All interview data will be coded to remove any identifiers and securely stored in a locked file cabinet in the primary investigators office. All data will remain locked until the conclusion of the study, at which point it will be destroyed.

**Choosing to Be in the Study**

You do not have to be in this study. You may choose not to take part and you may choose to stop taking part at any time. You will not be punished in any way if you decide not to be in the study or to stop taking part in the study.

**Contact Information**

If you have any questions or concerns about this study or if any problems arise, please contact Dr. Patricia First at Clemson University at 864-656-0328

If you have any questions or concerns about your rights in this research study, please contact the Clemson University Office of Research Compliance (ORC) at 864-656-6460 or irb@clemson.edu. If you are outside of the Upstate South Carolina area, please use the ORC’s toll-free number, 866-297-3071.

A copy of this form will be given to you.
G.2 – Student Photo-Elicitation Consent

Clemson University
The Impact of a Branding Program at a University Research Study

Photo-Elicitation Information and Release Form

I, _______________________________ am participating in a research study conducted by Lori Pindar under the direction of Dr. Patricia F. First. Dr. First is a faculty member at Clemson University. Ms. Pindar is a doctoral candidate at Clemson University and is administering this study with the help of Dr. First.

The purpose of this study is to use photography to document your experience as a Clemson University student. The results of this research, including some photographs, may be included during conference presentations and in publications to academic journals.

By signing this document you agree to participate in the photo-elicitation interview which will be voice recorded. The five (5) photos you bring to the interview will be chosen from the images you take during the week of __________ to ________.

By signing this document you also are aware that you are to ask permission to photograph individuals as well as tell them that your photos will be used in an interview and may be used in a research setting such as a publication, conference presentation or academic journal. Once consent is granted, you may choose to include the photos of individuals in your photo-elicitation interview.

Your name or any identifying information will not be used during the discussions or be revealed in any publications or presentations. However, someone who sees the publications or presentations may recognize you. Remember, your willingness to be photographed or use the photographs of others is completely voluntary and you or others may decline at any time.

All images collected during this process will be stored in a locked cabinet to which only the investigators have access to. All digital images will be stored on an external hard drive that will also be placed in a locked file cabinet in the office of the principal investigator. All identifying information will be removed from the file and codes will be used to link interview transcription data.

Contact Information.
If you have any questions or concerns, please contact Dr. First or Ms. Pindar at any time.

By signing this form, I give permission to have my picture taken and for the photographs to be used in presentations and publications about this project.

Signature: ___________________________ Date: __________________

Print name: ________________________
G.3 – Employee Consent

Information about Being in a Research Study
Clemson University

The Impact of a Branding Program at a University: How Institutional Brand Impacts the Lived Experience of Honor Students

Description of the Study and Your Part in It

Lori M. Pindar, under the direction of Dr. Patricia F. First, are inviting you to take part in a research study. Dr. First is a faculty member in the School of Education at Clemson University. Lori Pindar is a graduate student at Clemson University, running this study with the help of Dr. First. The purpose of this research is to understand how an institution’s brand impacts the college learning community.

Your part in the study will be to participate in a web-based survey conducted by the investigator involved in the project. On this survey, you will be asked your opinions about the university brand, your understanding of what it means to be a faculty/staff member at your institution, and what impacts the institutional brand has had on your role as a faculty/staff member working with the honors program.

Risks and Discomforts

We do not know of any risks or discomforts to you in this research study.

Possible Benefits

We do not know of any way you would benefit directly from taking part in this study. However, this research may help us to understand how to better serve the interests of high achieving students at your university.

Protection of Privacy and Confidentiality

We will do everything we can to protect your privacy and confidentiality. We will not tell anybody outside of the research team that you were in this study or what information we collected about you in particular. All survey data will be coded to remove any identifiers and securely stored in a locked file cabinet in the primary investigators office. All data will remain locked until the conclusion of the study, at which point it will be destroyed.
Choosing to Be in the Study

You do not have to be in this study. You may choose not to take part and you may choose to stop taking part at any time. You will not be punished in any way if you decide not to be in the study or to stop taking part in the study.

Contact Information

If you have any questions or concerns about this study or if any problems arise, please contact Dr. Patricia First at Clemson University at 864-656-0328

If you have any questions or concerns about your rights in this research study, please contact the Clemson University Office of Research Compliance (ORC) at 864-656-6460 or irb@clemson.edu. If you are outside of the Upstate South Carolina area, please use the ORC’s toll-free number, 866-297-3071.
G.4-Email Employee Consent

Dear______:

You are invited to take part in a research study conducted by Lori Pindar, a doctoral candidate in the Educational Leadership program. Ms. Pindar is administering this study under the faculty guidance of Dr. Patricia F. Frist.

The purpose of this research is to better understand how an institutional brand impacts the college experience for students belonging to the honors program, specifically, the National Scholars Program.

Your part in this particular study will be to participate in a web-based survey. On this survey, you will be asked your opinions about the university brand, your understanding of what it means to be a faculty/staff member at your institution, and what impacts the institutional brand has had on your role as a faculty/staff member working with the honors program.

It will take you about 15-20 minutes hour to complete the survey.

Detailed information regarding the study and your rights are included in the attached Consent Form. If you have any questions or concerns about this study or if any problems arise, please contact Dr. Patricia F. First at Clemson University at pfirst@clemson.edu

Sincerely,

Lori Pindar
REFERENCES


