

2013

# A Linguistic Perspective on Higher Education Branding: A Case Study of Vassar College

Andrea Fahmy

Follow this and additional works at: [http://digitalwindow.vassar.edu/senior\\_capstone](http://digitalwindow.vassar.edu/senior_capstone)

---

## Recommended Citation

Fahmy, Andrea, "A Linguistic Perspective on Higher Education Branding: A Case Study of Vassar College" (2013). *Senior Capstone Projects*. 246.

[http://digitalwindow.vassar.edu/senior\\_capstone/246](http://digitalwindow.vassar.edu/senior_capstone/246)

This Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Window @ Vassar. It has been accepted for inclusion in Senior Capstone Projects by an authorized administrator of Digital Window @ Vassar. For more information, please contact [library\\_thesis@vassar.edu](mailto:library_thesis@vassar.edu).

A Linguistic Perspective on Higher Education Branding:  
A Case Study of Vassar College

Andrea Fahmy  
Independent Program  
May 2013

Senior Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Bachelor of Arts degree in the Independent Program

---

Adviser, David Tavárez

---

Adviser, Janet Andrews

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acknowledgements.....	2
Introduction.....	3
Conceptual Framework: The Linguistics of Branding.....	6
Higher Education Brands.....	15
The Vassar Brand.....	28
Conclusion: Revisiting the Branding Framework.....	105
References.....	117
Appendices.....	126

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I am grateful for my family and friends, who have been unconditionally supportive throughout this year-long journey. I would also like to extend my appreciation to everyone who participated in my research--whose contribution made my thesis possible. Finally, I would like to thank my two advisers, Janet Andrews and David Tavárez for all their help, feedback, and insights that ultimately framed the development of this thesis.

## INTRODUCTION

Consumption constitutes a dominant element of people's daily practices. People will grab a cup of coffee on their way to work, pick up a new bottle of laundry detergent at the store, or buy a bus pass to travel across the city. These common, everyday actions draw on a dynamic network of sociocultural, experiential, symbolic, and ideological factors, which influence what people buy and why they buy it. As the structural vertebrae to the modern economic exchange system, consumption reflects not only broad cultural trends, but also social norms and inherent psychological tendencies.

Brands, typically thought of as company trademarks, have become a central component of this system, and thus have inherited the multilayered dimensions that typify late capitalist consumerism (Wengrow, 2008). Marketing, which fundamentally aims to promote consumerism, no longer exclusively focuses on selling a product, but on selling a brand. Constructing a strong brand identity predominates modern marketing strategies. "Brand building, which was traditionally so much taken for granted that most manufacturers were not even conscious of it, has become high on the corporate agenda of manufacturing companies. It is becoming the only way that they can demonstrate differentiation...branding makes the difference between success and failure" (Schultz, Hatch, & Larsen, 2002, p. 59). As demonstrated by Schultz et al.'s (2002) assertion, brands are strongly associated with the corporate world. The branding framework, though, has expanded far past this bounded

conception and is now utilized by non-profit organizations, municipalities, individuals, and universities to express a storied identity.

This paper specifically studies the implications of high education branding. Higher education institutions can be thought of as branded competitors that sell education, and the consumption of these brands fits into the larger theoretical framework of consumption practices. Not much attention has been devoted to this topic in the literature, despite its growing importance.

The task of university branding is handled by each school's Office of Communications; branding is essentially conceptualized as a process of communication, of translation. Institutions establish an identity by communicating a certain image to a consumer audience. This understanding of branding lends itself to the use of a linguistic lens to study the construction and maintenance of brands. Branding is achieved through linguistic performance, which frames and perpetuates brand meaning. In this way, language and communication make up the fundamental cornerstones of branding. Employing language as a conceptual frame enables both an intimate and comprehensive study of how brand meaning is conveyed, shared, and amalgamated.

This thesis hinges on two main objectives: 1) to present an argument for the theoretical value in applying the branding framework to the higher education model through a linguistic approach, and 2) to address the following question: how is higher education branding a function of language? Using the brand of "Vassar College"--a small liberal arts school in the Northeast--as a case study, the linguistic construction, circulation, and reproduction of brand identity will be

investigated; additionally, the theoretical potential of the branding framework for higher education will be demonstrated. A diverse number of methods will be employed, including historical research, interviews, focus groups, and both lexical and media analyses; these methods will be aimed at providing both a global overview and a ground-level examination of how brands are formed through relational and overlapping discourses.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: THE LINGUISTICS OF BRANDING

According to Saussure (1995), language consists of a relational system of signs. Saussure's sign model entails a relationship between what he calls the signifier and the signified. He uses the term signifier as the psychological impression of the sensory input of the sign--the sound pattern. The signified, on the other hand, represents an abstract concept. Saussure emphasizes the arbitrary relationship between the signified and the signifier: "The Saussurean legacy of the arbitrariness of signs leads semioticians to stress that the relationship between the signifier and the signified is conventional--dependent on social and cultural conventions which have to be learned...a word means what it does to us only because we collectively agree to let it do so" (Chandler, 2007, p. 28). The classic example of the sign is a tree, where the physical tree is signified by the word "tree." Nothing about a tree, though, implicates the referential word associated with this particular type of plant. Word meaning derives from collective association, not from an intrinsic, referential bond to materiality. The signifier and signified are connected by a conventional, arbitrary link; together, they make up the sign (Saussure, 1995). For brands, this same dual-sided relationship applies. The brand name functions as the signifier for the signified instantiation of the brand reality, a concept which will be further explored later.

As mentioned, Saussure's signs exist within a relational system. Signs acquire meaning in relation to other signs; differences between words contribute to relational meaning. "Difference between signs defines meaning rather than

some essential, internal meaning in the sign or external referent” (Lowrie, 2007, p. 992). In this manner, the linguistic meaning of higher education brands is relativized by a broader semiotic system. The brand identity of a small liberal arts college, such as Vassar College, is directly contextualized by its similarities and differences with immediate competitors in the market: peer institutions. The brand is further relativized by categorical distinctions with other market sectors, such as alternative types of tertiary institutions. “...the articulation of identity will continue within the antagonistic relationship: inherently unstable, undecidable and for ever ‘positioned’ in terms of other identities” (Lowrie, 2007, p. 997). This constantly shifting relational dynamic leaves brand identity open to reconstruction.

Relativization gives shape to brands within a mutable system of meaning.

The logics of equivalence and difference offer a useful framework for this relational system, which underlies the articulation of brand identity. “The logic of equivalence includes while the logic of difference excludes what language users name into the identity” (Lowrie, 2007, p. 994). The logics of equivalence and difference draw from the discursive environment, a broad landscape of plural and conflicting discourses, which fundamentally leads to the heterogenous and antagonistic instantiation of identity. This instantiation of brand identity further relates to the retroactive process of naming.

The retroactive effect of naming the signifier, the articulating and performative dimension of naming, gives identity to an object. Moreover, the empty signification is the naming which gives identity to a discursive unity. Similarly, an Oxbridge or an Ivy League does not express the identity for the best that higher

education can offer but rather language practice names the best into an Oxbridge or an Ivy League. An affective investment in a particular name as an empty signifier constitutes a whole way of identifying the best (higher education) in such a way that brand identity does not pre-exist the articulation of the relational complex but rather identity occurs through the naming. (Lowrie, 2007, p. 992)

The logics of equivalence and difference jointly inform this retroactive process, ultimately shaping the articulation of brand identity within a relational system of similarities and differences. These logics provide a theoretical understanding of the linguistic construction of brand identity.

Beyond relational meaning, identity is also defined by the associations it evinces. Paradigmatic interdependencies, the associative network evoked by words, shape linguistic understanding and identity construction. These associations, though, are not stable. As new associations arise and as conceptualizations are revised, signs becomes redefined. Brand identity, in this way, is subject to the fluctuating meanings of the signifier and signified.

“Language leaves identity open, contingent and antagonistic” (Lowrie, 2007, p. 997). The discursive casting and recasting of identity leads to continual shifts. Language articulates identity within a reconstructive framework; identity resists the constraints of a fixed, one-dimensional definition. For this thesis, the implications of the paradigmatic interdependencies for higher education brands will be examined through an investigation of the associative framework that defines Vassar.

Furthermore, the meaning of identity is contextually contingent; meaning is fluid, and context determines interpretation. "In short, understanding becomes a constructive process in a social world in which knowledge and experience are differential, not an interpretive one in an epistemologically unitary and transparent thought world, in which ideal speaker-listeners trade messages whose meanings are determined once and for all by their common grammar" (Hanks, 1996, p. 86). Consequently, context critically supplements standard meaning and provides a linguistic frame: "...named identities occur in the exchange of discourse...named identities may mean differently according to the language used" (Lowrie, 2007, p. 991). Language is based on a sequential combinatory paradigm: "What precedes and follows gives rise to meaning" (Lowrie, 2007, p. 992). Syntagmatic interdependencies structure linguistic context and thus provide a filter for interpretation. The context in which people discuss Vassar and thus how the Vassar identity is linguistically positioned is in constant flux.

Saussure's dyadic model for the linguistic sign has thus far structured the discussion of the relationship between brand identity and language. However, an alternative approach manifests in the triadic model proposed by Peirce. Peirce's model of the sign brings new insights to bear on this relationship.

Peirce sets up three levels--firstness, secondness, thirdness--upon which signs operate, respectively the representamen, object, and interpretant. In this case, the representamen assumes a mediating or representative role for the object. For example, the representamen could refer to an advertisement featuring

a beverage product, the beverage product being the object. Similarly, with a university as an object, the branding platform functions as the representamen. The level of thirdness, also known as the interpretant, takes on a more abstract role: "More than a mere sign, the interpretant is like an ideological horizon, a background of evaluative 'glosses' that actors in a social group apply to any sign" (Hanks, 1996, p. 43). This interpretive framework includes dominant ideological discourses, which will be explored later within the context of higher education branding. Peirce's three levels inform the study of brand meaning by structuring a theoretical backdrop upon which signification operates. These levels will later frame the linguistic analysis of the Vassar brand.

Universities mold the representation of their product to fit the discursive ideologies of the higher education market, while simultaneously shaping those self-same ideologies. This reproductive cycle constitutes a dynamic and ever-changing relationship between the producers and consumers involved in market exchange. DuPuis stated:

The analysis of representative images, and how these images change over time reveals a great deal about the society where these images occur. It tells something about the author of these portrayals...as well as something about the audience for these images, since an image is used frequently only if it successful with its intended audience. (2002, p. 99)

The give and take between author and audience results in an evolving discourse of dominant trends. Universities develop branding strategies based on these

trends, creating brand meaning in the communicative space between producer and consumer.

University brands embody a multifaceted, multilayered representation that surpasses the simple, material product. The construction of this representation hinges on mediums of communication: social networking sites, television commercials, websites, media publications, posters, radio broadcasts, and so on. Keane (1997) explains the significance of representational mediums: “A medium of representation is not only something that stands ‘between’ those things that it mediates, it is also a ‘thing’ in its own right...As a result, it works at the unstable boundary at which the ‘symbolic’ and the ‘material’ meet, reinforcing or undermining one another” (p. 8). As Keane points out, communicative mediums actually convey symbolic meaning. The coded meanings of representational mediums for higher education institutions will later be examined.

By utilizing these symbolic communication channels to link the brand with targeted associations, universities develop a branded representation. Through the repetition of certain linguistic identity markers, higher education institutions carefully construct and perform a brand identity based on the citation of dominant cultural discourses. In this way, universities sell an ideological identity, not just a product. Brands serve as a representational mediation of reality, garnering meaning from the different levels of Peirce’s model--the representamen, object, and interpretant. The interaction of these three levels exhibits the dynamic and nuanced nature of representation and branding.

## What is a brand?

With the linguistic framework now in place, the term “brand” must consequently be unpacked. Similar to other complex conceptual terms, “brand” resists the confines of a strict, black-and-white definition. However, a brand can most simply be related as the culture of a product: “...‘a brand is a distinguishing name and/or symbol...intended to identify the goods or services of either one seller or a group of sellers, and to differentiate those goods or services from those of competitors.’...[A brand] is something that exists more in the minds of consumers than in the product or organization itself” (Wæraas & Solbakk, 2009, p. 451). In this instance, education essentially serves as the product, which is being sold to a consumer base of students. Each college and university strives to differentiate themselves and their product within the educational marketplace. These efforts to achieve differentiation result in brands--identifying markers encompassing a symbolic understanding.

As cultural artifacts, brands “acquire meanings--connotations--as they circulate in society” (Holt, 2010, p. 2). Brands derive from the amalgamated cumulation of discourses surrounding the product; how people talk about and perceive the brand, in conjunction with how the brand represents itself, builds brand identity.

Branding means to ‘make known the attributes of the organisation’s identity in the form of a clearly defined branding proposition.’ In order to do so, the organization must first define for itself the essence of ‘what’ and ‘who’ it is, and what it ‘stands

for' in terms of values and characteristics. It is believed that this definition should be as precise and consistent as possible, and communicated very consistently.

(Wæraas & Solbakk, 2009, p. 450)

This thesis aims to apply the branding framework to higher education institutions as a means of opening new avenues of study.

For example, brands can be conceptualized within the identity construct.

From an anthropological perspective, an individual's identity represents a coherent, unified sense of self as stable throughout time. Conversely, identification, where social positioning is performed as a context-relational process, results in a fluid and constantly re-negotiated sense of self. This understanding of personal identity scales up to a larger sense of brand identity. Vassar constructs a fixed identity as an educational institution, subject to the process of identification (Brubaker, 2000). Fragmented and sometimes conflicting versions of the brand identity manifest in different contexts or through different consumers. The brand identification promoted by the administration may contrast with that substantiated by the students, alumni, media, etcetera.

Brands perform identity along a number of planes. At the most expansive level, brand identity embodies a fixed set of values; on a more basic level, brand identity is constituted by contextual experiences. To illustrate, the mission statement of a school--in this case, Vassar--acts as the core of brand identity. However, the students' daily interactions with brand, in the form of talking with a teacher after class or participating in an on-campus event, also affect the brand identity. These experiences ideally align with the values of the institution, but

brands often encompass conflicting, discordant accounts (Pinar, Trapp, Girard, & Boyt, 2011).

While the core brand identity represents a valuable topic of focus and does indeed anchor the essence of the brand, the brand's perceptual identifications also make up a significant part of what the brand actually is and how it is experienced. Despite the diversity, complexity, and discrepancies of such experiences, their discursive constructions play a crucial role in building a holistic picture of the brand. Consequently, the perceptual perspective will also be analyzed as part of this linguistic case study on Vassar.

### **Background Conclusions**

The linguistic dimension of branding has largely been ignored. To address this lack of attention, a linguistic analysis of the Vassar brand has been conducted in order to examine broader issues of higher education branding. By unpacking the complexity and plurality of the Vassar brand identity through its historical and cultural context--as well as through interviews, focus groups, and lexical and media analyses--this thesis will attempt to answer the following questions: what theoretical potential does the branding framework offer for higher education? and how are higher education brands linguistically constructed and positioned?

## HIGHER EDUCATION BRANDS

### Historical Context

The study of brands is framed by context; an understanding of the relevant social architecture, cultural context, and ideological horizon grounds the deconstruction of brand identity. In this case, linguistic brand formation is rooted in history, culture, and society. The development history of the educational market sets the stage for higher education branding, beginning with the establishment of higher education institutions in the eighteenth century.

The American education system was born of Christianity, initially established for training future ministers. Originally, the student population consisted almost exclusively of young, white men (Hofstadter & Hardy, 1952). In 1856 the first African American university was opened, and later in the 1960s racial integration in higher education commenced (“Milestones in African American Education”, 2007). After the Civil War, women gained access into universities. The history of education access is fraught with battled entry; social minorities have historically struggled for admittance into the upper echelons of education.

As a result, an ideological discourse of equality and diversity has emerged in higher education (Archer, 2007). Affirmative action, financial aid packages, and need-blind policies manifest as active attempts to foster a diverse socioeconomic

student population (Smith & Bender, 2007). The modern ethos of egalitarianism promotes an ideology of open accessibility in higher education.

The late eighteenth century hearkened the revolutionary advent of the university (Hofstadter & Hardy, 1952). This new branch of higher education paved the way for many to come: vocational school, community college, and online programs. The development of these alternative education systems changed the landscape of the educational market; liberal arts colleges not only compete with similar liberal arts colleges, but also with the diverse options of the whole market.

The modern education system has expanded far past the original model. The present university is not merely substantiated by a teaching faculty and a student population. Universities have evolved in response to the changing market conditions. With the complexity of admissions processes, for instance, the admissions office demanded staff increases. The advent of financial aid also required the installment of additional staff and even a whole new administrative department--same with student employment. Residential life similarly necessitated a team of deans, directors, and advisers to deal with housing issues and dormitory management. Deans abound within the university setting, overseeing extracurricular activities, academics, and so on: "...in its complexity [the university] resembles the government of a large town..." (Barzun, 1968, p. 97). Universities encompass this vast network of employees, a testament to the development of expectations regarding tertiary education.

This trend of expansion relates to the university's quest for constant innovation, responding to an impetus to stay ahead of the curve. In addition to meeting "standard" expectations, universities feel pressured to offer unique opportunities, strong academic programs, and specialized courses in order to lure students. "Columbia University offers courses in fifty-eight languages altogether, including Urdu, Korean, Iranian, Turkic, and many others not commonly available. The demand for them is genuine but fitful...The result is that this lavish offering, or a large part of it, is that familiar burden, a necessary luxury" (Barzun, 1968, p.30). This competitive focus structures the discursive self-presentation performed by higher education institutions. Take, for example, the popular section of university websites that promote all the top reasons to enroll. Washington State University, for instance, advertises its "top academic programs" with "groundbreaking research" and "top rankings and recognition" as an answer to the question "Why WSU?," additionally citing its "renowned professors," "students who make a difference," "community that bridges cultures," and "great neighborhood" ("About WSU," 2012). This branded representation operates along the first level of Peirce's model, a mediated image framed by the modern market ideology--Peirce's third level.

This brief historical overview provides a referential frame for both the broader study of higher education brands and for Vassar's brand in particular. The historical impetus driving higher education toward high levels of competition can be pinpointed as a critical stimulus for the adoption of the branding framework among higher education institutions, which will be further discussed in

the next section. For Vassar specifically though, this historical timeline serves as Peirce's third interpretant level. The ideological discourses that emerged from this diachronic account, especially those privileging equal opportunity and diversity, strongly impact the Vassar brand. Valuing its history as one of the first higher education institutions for women in the United States, Vassar inherently incorporates a rhetoric of equality and accessibility into its mission statement, which will be seen later. Furthermore, Vassar's dedication to diversity, also investigated later, derives from historically-valued cultural discourses. So, this historical sketch serves the dual purpose of this thesis: to investigate the trend of higher education branding and to demonstrate the value of the linguistic perspective through a case study of the Vassar brand.

### **Adoption of the Branding Framework within Higher Education**

In the 1980s, the conceptual positioning of education shifted. Education became integrated into the market, and students became consumers. Previously viewed as a public good, education came to be understood as a private commodity, a personal investment made available for purchase (Smith & Bender, 2008). "Student consumers choose (frequently private) colleges and universities that they calculate are likely to bring a return on educational investment and increasingly choose majors linked to the new economy, such as business, communications, media arts" (Rhoades & Slaughter, 2004, p. 1-2). This most

recent shift sets the stage for the revolution of the higher education system, renegotiating the societal positioning of higher education.

‘During the last decade, technology, globalization, and competition have caused the ground to shift under higher education worldwide, defying national borders and calling into question honored traditions, sacred myths, and previously unquestioned assumptions...They interact with each other, so that technology intensifies competition as well as enables globalization; similarly, globalization fosters competition.’ (Kizilbash, 2012, p. 1)

The shift toward increased competition was introduced in the last section; Kizilbash (2012), though, points to the compounding factors of technology and globalization. These three elements ground the ideological basis of branding.

In an effort to adapt to this new market, many universities and colleges have adopted the branding model. The University of Texas, for instance, publicly acknowledges the need to follow dominant market trends:

And, to [fulfill our goal], we must embrace a new framework for how we think about and communicate about the university...we have conducted extensive research with all of our key internal and external stakeholders to develop a set of tools that will help us unify our communications. These include: 1) Positioning Statement 2) Supporting Positioning Messages / Screening Questions 3) Target Mindset 4) Brand Personality 5) Brand Identity. (“Brand Overview: The University of Texas at Austin,” n.d.)

The University of Texas represents only one of many schools that have recognized the potential of branding. Harvard University has similarly targeted

branding in order to manage the university's public image. The school launched a recent campaign to reconstruct Harvard's brand identity in a three-step process: 1) identify brand perceptions, 2) responsively re-shape the brand image goal, and 3) strategize to reduce the gaps between perceptions and the ideal brand identity (Zhou, 2012).

The recent trend of international student mobility also provides a strong impetus for university branding. Increasing the institutional market share of international students leads to an increase of valuable diversity, but also of financial gain. "International students more often than not pay their institutions exorbitant tuition fees, regularly double to triple home-student tuition fees" (Kizilbash, 2012, p. 2). The competition to attract this lucrative sector of consumers motivates institutions' attempts "to differentiate themselves in the marketplace of higher education" (Kizilbash, 2012, p. 1). Branding offers the operative opportunity for differentiation, and so universities adopt the branding framework in order to maintain a competitive edge.

### **Brand Commodification in the Linguistic Market**

So, education has become commoditized by the cultural market, but commodification of the brand extends beyond this basic trend. At the end of four years, students receive a graduation certification branded with the "Vassar" name; students are paying not only for an education, but essentially for the symbolic capital associated with the college. "Symbolic capital" references any

resource imbued with cultural value. The relational hierarchy of brand identity commodities hinges on an economy of cultural goods and symbolic capital, established by college rankings (Appadurai, 1986).

College rankings, a dynamic hierarchy of colleges and universities, dominate as the one of the most influential media sources in the higher education context. Consumers place high stock in these rankings and oftentimes base their decisions to apply to certain schools on such evaluations. The U.S. News Ranking, in particular, prevails as one of the most popularly-referenced site by prospective students and families comparing different institutions. In an interview, Vassar's Director of Media Relations and Public Affairs Jeffrey Kosmacher referred to the U.S. News Rankings as "the gold standard by which people measure the excellence of the college." The rankings reportedly express a quantitative measure of relative institutional quality, established through the evaluation of a number of factors: freshman retention, graduation rates, strength of faculty, and indicators of academic excellence (Morse & Flanigan, 2012). Admissions selectivity, though, emerges as the major factor upon which U.S. News bases its mathematical criteria.

Kosmacher critiqued this evaluative standard, voicing his disagreement regarding exclusivity's validity as a measure of overall quality. He also pointed to the self-perpetuating nature of rankings in general. He argued that a high-ranking school within this relational hierarchy naturally attracts a higher number of applicants: "Now, it's kind of a self-fulfilling prophecy, it feeds on itself. It's easier to apply to more schools who have built-in reputation, end up attracting more of

these frequent appliers” (Kosmacher). The frequent appliers Kosmacher referred to are high school students who usually apply to several “safety” schools, several “realistic” schools, and several “stretch” schools; these school categories are devised based on how students personally perceive themselves as measuring up to the institution’s ranking, acceptance rate, average accepted GPA, SAT, and ACT scores, and so on. Because of their desirability, “stretch” schools draw in high application numbers.

As Kosmacher indicated, institutions with long-standing history gain an advantage within such a ranking system. Historical reputation plays a critical role not only in brand meaning, as seen earlier, but also in establishing relational value. In this way, Vassar’s 150-year history serves as a key factor in reinforcing its reputation and its high-ranking value (“National Liberal Arts College Rankings,” 2012). For Vassar, this “gold standard” measurement invokes associative symbolic capital that becomes encoded within the brand.

Fundamentally, symbolic capital is grounded in collective recognition and requires a cultural distribution of shared knowledge in order to build value (Bourdieu, 1980). Prestige is built and reproduced along a temporal plane; history shapes and defines reputation (Silverstein, 2008). Vassar has been historically established as a top-ranking school, one of the best in the country. Institutions that have achieved such status represent the “luxury brands” of the higher education world, embodying the attributes set out by Appadurai (1986): restriction, complexity of acquisition, semiotic virtuosity, specialized knowledge as

a prerequisite for their 'appropriate' consumption, and a high degree of linkage of their consumption to the body, person, and personality.

The selectivity of the school fulfills the first requirement of restricted access; the Vassar admissions process filters the application pool down to a select intellectual elite. Secondly, the application process itself proves highly demanding of temporal, financial, and intellectual resources. Writing college essays, filling out application forms, and completing the necessary standardized tests take time, as well as money. Colleges impose application fees, and tests like the ACT and SAT similarly incur monetary charges. The acquisition of admittance into these selective institutions thus proves highly complex.

Furthermore, each of these brands are imbued with a network of complex social meanings. As a brief example, Vassar sends a particular social signal as a sister school to the Ivy League and as a pioneer all-girls school; the deeper semiotic implications of the Vassar brand, though, will be explored later. While "specialized" knowledge might not be necessary per se, knowledge of such schools' high rankings would be important in appreciating the high degree of luxury implicit with consumption. Finally, such brands indeed prove strongly symbolic, communicating a powerful message about the user as a function of the brand's well-known reputation (Appadurai, 1986).

The primary comparison between top schools and luxury brands resides with symbolic capital and the economic significance of distinction. Symbolic capital translates into an economic resource (Bourdieu, 1980). Similarly, the process of commodification invests an object intended for exchange with

economic value. Here, education is not simply being exchanged for tuition; tuition also pays for the symbolic capital of a higher education “luxury” brand. Students pay to put the Vassar name on resumes as their alma mater, capitalizing on what the brand signifies. The commodification of the Vassar label leverages the intersection between language and materiality, which fundamentally enables the economic potential of brand names. The relationship between language and materiality most basically builds on a foundation of linguistic meaning, deriving from circulation processes of intertextuality, interdiscursivity, and mediatization (Shankar & Cavanaugh, 2012). People aware of Vassar’s reputation recognize the socially coded meaning of graduating from such a prestigious institution.

The sociality of commodification emerges from these meanings. History, culture, and social context each play a role in structuring the commodity situation; the social history and cultural biography of a commodity trace the processual course of meaning accumulation and value establishment. As previously explained, the “meaning” of Vassar is grounded in a particular historical milieu, culturally substantiated by larger market trends and socially instantiated through daily experience (Appadurai, 1986). The “value” of Vassar, though, has yet to be explored.

The successful commodification of this brand relies on the weight of Vassar’s symbolic capital, particularly in relation to other colleges and universities. The value of a Vassar-branded education proves contingent on a constantly renegotiated market: in direct comparison to similar small, private, liberal, and highly selective institutions, such as Wesleyan College, Bard College,

and Middlebury College, and in indirect comparison to other top universities or state schools. The paradigmatic interdependencies of the market play a role in constructing value, an arbitrary designation dictated by contextualized status.

The contextual discourse of value negotiation occurs under what Appadurai (1986) terms “regimes of value.” Regimes of value speak to “the ways in which desire and demand, reciprocal sacrifice and power interact to create economic value in specific social situations” (Appadurai, 1986, p. 4). The cultural biography of Vassar, to be detailed later, dictates the regimes of value that contextualize price formation. The economic value of a Vassar education is set at \$57,070, a price broken down into tuition (\$45,580), room and board (\$10,800), a student activity fee (\$310), and a health service fee (\$380). This price does not include the meal plan, course-required books, and other general costs of living. Vassar explains that this cost actually underestimates the true cost of education; alums who donate to the annual funds subsidize the additional fees (“Vassar Admissions,” 2012). The historical expansion of colleges and universities accounts for these high costs; the transformation of colleges and universities into essentially large towns creates a substantial financial demand in order to sustain such a residential ecosystem.

Vassar meets 100 percent of demonstrated financial need, and the percentage of the most recent freshman class receiving financial aid is 58 percent. In 2008, Vassar instituted a need-blind policy. Now, students’ acceptance into the College is no longer contingent on whether or not they can afford to pay (“Vassar College returns,” 2007). The current Vassar President,

Catherine Hill, classified this policy as an effort to promote diversity (Hill, 2012). As discussed earlier, diversity has constituted a historical focal point for higher education. The history of education access is fraught with battled entry; the acceptance of African Americans and women into the upper echelons of education has been hard-won. The national discourses surrounding these defining historical moments have created a modern ethos of egalitarianism that demands equal opportunity, regardless of socioeconomic background. The relational value of education thus complies to these cultural expectations and has become flexibly accommodating. The ideology of open accessibility characterizes the regimes of value for higher education (Appadurai, 1986).

Perhaps the most definitive factor of higher education value lies within the cultural discourse regarding education in general. In America, education has been discursively positioned as invaluable. The intellectual, social, and personal growth facilitated by the educational experience has been deemed “priceless.” Gaining knowledge, expanding horizons, self-enlightenment--all of these processes have been culturally marked as paramount in becoming a contributing member of society. The family’s role in these processes proves integral; parents enforce children’s school attendance at an early age. Compulsory education requirements ensure that, up to a certain point at least, children are receiving formal education.

Higher education, though, is not compulsory. Support obligation on behalf of parents usually ends after their children graduate high school. Parents’ drive to ensure an ideal future for their children beyond these basic requirements

corresponds to the cultural ideology of the family unit, which revolves around support. Children often become the first priority for parents, and every effort is made to secure each child's success and happiness. Such an ideology enables higher education on a fundamental level: without financial support from parents, many emerging adults would simply not be able to attend college. Financial aid and governmental funding alone would not be able to subsidize higher education for the amount of students attending colleges and universities today. Parents help cover the substantial costs of university tuition, sacrificing their own income for the sake of their child's future. Consequently, the consumption of higher education represents an act of sacrificial devotion and an expression of familial relationships (Miller, 1998). The "education as invaluable" ideology structures the economic value culturally assigned to higher education.

The ideological ethos of the higher education world and the resulting regimes of value articulate the commodification of the Vassar brand. The symbolic capital of the brand, positioned within the value system of college rankings, predicates the economic exchange relation. The relational determination of Vassar's brand value was delineated in this section, and now the meaning behind the brand will be analyzed in depth using the linguistic framework outlined earlier.

## THE VASSAR BRAND

Vassar College was founded by Matthew Vassar in 1861 as a women's liberal arts college, one of the historical pioneers of women's education. Located in the Northeast, this regional locale typifies Vassar's geographical roots. The campus embodies the idyllic college setting: historic buildings, verdant vistas, and picturesque gardens. Vassar's relationship with the local community of Poughkeepsie, New York, has progressed from historic separation to gradual integration. The original student population was exclusively female and primarily upper class; this gender and class demographic caused a division with the community. In recent years, Vassar has put forth efforts to resolve this disconnect.

Today, Vassar prides itself on diversity. The school boasts of a student population consisting of 25-33% students of color and 10% international students. Vassar also prides itself on being a small, close-knit community. The 2,400 students share a 8:1 ratio with the faculty; the average class size is 17 students. Vassar leverages these numbers as evidence of the personal attention afforded to the students and the opportunity to develop close relationships with the professors. Vassar highlights its reputation for curricular innovation and interdisciplinary programs. The College's Independent Program allows students to create their own course of study, a unique opportunity among higher education institutions.

Vassar has built a profile as one of the best liberal arts colleges in the country. As the first of the Seven Sister schools, the sister schools to the Ivy League, Vassar has set a precedent for academic excellence since its establishment. After declining an invitation to merge with Yale, Vassar's sibling institution, the college became coeducational in 1969. Consistently ranked among the top liberal arts institutions, Vassar achieved this prominence historically. With renown faculty, successful graduates, and highly selective admissions standards, Vassar has built and maintained its prestigious reputation.

Vassar's mission statement serves in structuring a fundamental sense of the brand. The mission statement reads as the following:

The primary mission of Vassar College, to furnish 'the means of a thorough, well-proportioned, and liberal education,' was articulated in The First Annual Catalogue and has remained constant throughout its history. Founded in 1861 to provide young women an education equal to that once available only to young men, the college has since 1969 opened its doors to both women and men on terms of equality. Encouragement of excellence and respect for diversity are hallmarks of Vassar's character as an institution. The independence of mind and the diverse intellectual interests of students are fostered by providing them a range of ways to meet our curricular expectations. The structure of the residential experience, in which students in all four classes live in the residence halls, obliges students to master the art of living cooperatively in a diverse community. Diversity of perspective is honored as well in the college's system of shared

governance among all the constituencies of the institution. ("Mission Statement," n.d.)

The mission statement summarizes the College's foundational values and upholds the brand model. As previously mentioned, though, this overarching conception of brand represents an idealization, which can clash with actual brand experiences (Pinar et al., 2011).

This very broad, very general, and very basic overview of the Vassar brand merely glosses over a set of institutional facts. The reality of the brand, though, encompasses a range of different experiences and perceptions that can conflict with the idealization of the brand. Accounting for this reality poses a challenge, however. The brand embodies the amalgamation of each individual's psychological impression of the school. The only way to even indirectly access these perceptions manifests in the linguistic elicitation of self-reports: people painting a linguistic depiction of their experiences, communicating their impressions, and telling their personal story of the brand. While unable to present a comprehensive overview, this thesis aims to demonstrate the diversity, complexity, and discrepancies inherent in brand experiences.

In order to achieve this goal, interviews were conducted with Vassar students, faculty, and administrators, as well as with several students from nearby schools Marist College and Bard College. The majority of these interviews consisted of a few, short, survey-type questions asking about Vassar that took place in informal settings at the convenience of the interviewees (Appendices E-X). Other interviews, some of which were briefly referenced earlier, were longer

discussions that were recorded in an office setting and later transcribed for analysis. These interviews were conducted with administration members identified as people able to offer valuable insight into the internal workings of the brand: President Catherine Hill, Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid David Borus, Vice President for Communications Susan DeKrey, and Director of Media Relations and Public Affairs Jeffrey Kosmacher. The transcriptions for these interviews can be found in Appendices A-D. The data from these longer interviews were in part used to supplement the ground-level examination of the Vassar brand, but their main purpose manifests in a later examination of the broader implications of the linguistic construction of branding.

Finally, a focus group of eight Vassar students was also conducted, ultimately to accomplish three goals. The first goal aligns with the established objective of exploring the diverse meanings behind the Vassar brand. The second goal uses these meanings as a jumping off point for an investigation of the symbolic implications of branding. That is, how consumers, in this case students, critically interpret the symbolic meaning behind the brand with respect to their own sense of self and how these symbolic meanings become incorporated into their self-concept. Through a linguistic lens, the focus group ultimately serves to achieve a third goal by demonstrating the theoretical value of applying the branding framework to higher education institutions.

These discussions will ultimately culminate in a reexamination of the broader issues involved in conceptualizing higher education institutions as brands. The ideological controversy behind this topic will be analyzed, and an

understanding of the term “brand” will be renegotiated. Throughout this discussion, the significance of the linguistic perspective will be manifested.

### **Lexical Networks**

The cover of the facts view book published by Vassar features a white backdrop and “facts” in lowercase, black letters in the middle. “Vassar” is labeled in red in the top left corner. The interesting facet of the front cover design, though, makes a more subtle, understated appearance. In small font connected by thin waving lines, a number of words are scattered throughout the page, such as daring, serious, thinker, confident, and so on. These lines and words continue onto the following pages and the back cover: aware, fluent, intellectual, respectful, etcetera. These words are part of a larger lexicon set generated by the administration to describe Vassar and the students who attend the school.

The layout of the words approximates a visual representation of an association network. The Vassar administration, in publishing the view book, is attempting to make explicit semantic connections between “Vassar” and this set of adjectives. The inside explains:

A highly selective, residential, coeducational liberal arts college--these words describe key elements of Vassar’s character as an institution, but they don’t really define Vassar. What makes Vassar Vassar are the amazingly talented, smart, inquisitive, open-minded, and idealistic students and faculty who together create one of the most vibrant intellectual communities in the country. (“Facts,” 2013)

In explicating this dynamic between the school and the people who study and work at the school, Vassar acknowledges that its institutional identity is derived from the collective identity of associated individuals. McCracken's (1986) model of meaning transfer, explored in more detail later, offers an explanation as to how the defining aspects of the community are transferred as the characteristic elements of the Vassar identity.

As mentioned, interviews were conducted in order to investigate the dynamic meanings surrounding the Vassar brand. Again, Vassar students, faculty, and administration members were asked to respond to a set of questions, as were students of nearby Marist College and peer institution Bard College. These interviews were conducted both spontaneously and by appointment, carried out in a variety of locations, such as administrative and faculty offices, campus dining facilities, and the campus library. The relevant questions under analysis here are the following: 1) What five or six words would you use to describe Vassar? 2) How would you characterize Vassar's identity? 3) How would you describe Vassar's personality? 4) How would you describe the typical Vassar student? 5) What associations do you think Vassar has? The interviews were transcribed, and can be found in Appendices A-X.

When asked to provide five or six words to describe Vassar, the faculty produced a diverse list, which can be found below. Each individual generated a unique list of words. Several words were mentioned by multiple people, though; such words have been marked by a following parenthetical number. This number indicates the specific number of people who mentioned the preceding word. At

the bottom of the table for each question, the interviewees included in the sample and the sample size are listed. It is important to keep in mind that the lexicon sets and opinions of the people interviewed are by no means a definitively representative sample, but they do provide valuable insight into the investigative questions asked in this thesis.

Faculty and Administration Perspective: Words to Describe Vassar				
access	bold	challenge	community (4)	creative (2)
diverse	elite	engaging	excellent	hard-working
historic	inclusive	independent	innovative (2)	intellectual
liberal (2)	liberal arts (2)	lively	meeting-oriented	Northeastern
progressive	relationship-centered	rich in opportunity	risk-taking	selective
small (2)	socially-conscious	socially-just	socially-responsible	superb
thoughtful	welcoming	world-changing		
*Hill, Borus, DeKrey, Administrator 1-2, Faculty 1-2, 4 (N=8)				

Table 1. Words describing Vassar from the faculty and administration perspective.

Six words were mentioned more than once: community, creative, innovative, liberal, liberal arts, and small. However, a number of the words can be grouped into similar categories: access, inclusive (2); bold, risk-taking (2); creative, innovative (4); elite, selective (2); intellectual, thoughtful (2); excellent, superb (2). Again, the parenthetical numbers indicate the number of people who mentioned a word that falls within the specified semantic category. For an eight-person sample, the number of lexical and semantic overlaps appears indicative of

general descriptive themes. Overall, these words provide a snapshot of the diverse dimensions of the college.

When asked to respond to the same prompt as above, students generated a different list, which can be found below.

Student Perspective: Words to Describe Vassar				
arts-oriented	aware (2)	beautiful	comfortable	conscious
creative (3)	diverse	driven (2)	eager to be involved	eclectic
flexible	free-spirited	fun	hipster	historic
home (2)	impressive	intellectual	intelligent (2)	intimate
liberal	loving	multifaceted	naive	non-pretentious
passionate	pretentious	secluded	sheltered	social
successful	trees	understanding	unique	vintage
wealthy	weird	welcoming		
*Students 2, 6-14 (N=10)				

Table 2. Words describing Vassar from the student perspective.

Again, words mentioned more than once were marked by parenthetical numbers; aware, creative, driven, home, and intelligent were all mentioned two or three times. When grouped into similar semantic categories, a stronger overlap emerges: aware, conscious (3); diverse, eclectic, multifaceted (3); engaged, passionate, eager to be involved (3); intellectual, intelligent (3); sheltered, naive (2); impressive, successful (2); historic, vintage (2); unique, weird (2); comfortable, home (3). These descriptive overlaps begin to paint a picture of Vassar's perceptual instantiation.

When comparing students' responses to those of the faculty and administration, a series of similarities and differences became apparent. Common veins manifested: aware, conscious, socially conscious (4); diverse, eclectic, multifaceted (4); engaged, engaging, passionate, eager to be involved (4); intellectual, intelligent, thoughtful (2); creative, innovative (7); driven, hard-working (3); historic, vintage (3); liberal (3); free-spirited, independent (2); welcoming (2). Key differences were also identified in these five or six word characterizations. Students used words such as comfortable, intimate, and home, as well as unique and weird, to describe Vassar. On the other hand, faculty and administration members seemed more inclined to use words like access or inclusive, bold or risk-taking, innovative, world-changing, and elite or selective. These trends underscore the significance of perspective. In this case, differences in role perspective between students and employees are being contrasted, but other factors influence the unique mental representation of Vassar that people hold. Factors such as demographic background, origin, or gender could also contribute to each individual's perception of the Vassar image. Circumstantial interview conditions can also affect the linguistic characterization elicited; a more salient image of Vassar as a home for a student could be triggered by a dormitory room, just as interviewing a faculty member in an office filled with books could trigger a more academic-based depiction of the school.

Interviewees were also asked how they would characterize Vassar's identity. The table below showcases the responses obtained from faculty and administration members.

Faculty and Administration Perspective: Vassar's Identity	
David Borus	And I think that Vassar's identity overall, obviously, is a high-quality, highly selective, very well-known, highly respected, sort of a classical liberal arts college, with the added dimension at Vassar of having a long history of innovation that ties to those traditions of the liberal arts and has resulted here not only in our founding, which was radical at the time, but when we decided to go coed, which was also different from many of our peer women's colleges at the time, and has also revealed itself in our curriculum. We were among the first schools in the country to have interdisciplinary majors. We were one of the first schools in the country to have faculty from different departments crossing those departmental lines, working together in courses. And so that sense of adventure, that sense of innovation tied to that sense of traditions that the college has had for over a hundred years is all part of it.
Susan DeKrey	Well, I think Vassar is, as, you know, some other highly-rated, you know, liberal arts colleges certainly, and universities too, frankly, in some respects, although colleges and universities differ in some fundamental ways obviously, but there's a rigor, a selectivity. I think in our case it has that historic quality. And that quality of being, you know, an institution that broke through barriers at an important time. And I think that, depending on the audience, is still part of the identity...I think again, innovative. I think in a certain way, there's an edginess about Vassar, and I use that word in a positive sense, where, you know, things are not really prescribed in certain ways that one has to follow a certain path. You know, I think there's a sense as you get to know Vassar, it's something that we try to communicate, that you can create your own path. And that it can be a transformative experience coming here for you in the way that you want it to be. So, individualistic I guess is probably not a bad word in that way.
Administrator 1	Vassar attempts to highlight individuality...As an administrator, I would say Vassar has an identity as a community of critical lovers. Lovers of the institution and lovers of each other. The love for this place is incredible.
Administrator 2	I think Vassar is aspiring for the epitome of a liberal arts college and the education that goes along with that.
Faculty 1	I would characterize Vassar as a small village with lots of shared goals, but lots of different personalities.
Faculty 2	Creative. Liberal. Committed. Privileged. I think it's a school that has a history of being committed to providing equal educational opportunities. It's got a strong feminist history. Innovative curriculum I think it challenges students intellectually, and not just academically.
Faculty 3	Vassar is so multidimensional and multifaceted it would be impossible to describe it in a few sentences.

Faculty 4	It's hard for me to differentiate between Vassar's identity and its personality. But, I think of our identity as one in which we value inclusiveness, intellectual seriousness, and intensive contact between between faculty and students. Also, there's a pervasive sense of collegiality and even friendliness, among faculty and administrators, in particular. I think we compare ourselves, on the one hand, to "peer institutions" like Williams, Amherst, Middlebury, etcetera, but also to traditional, elite, East Coast research universities like Princeton, Harvard, etcetera.
*Borus, DeKrey, Administrator 1-2, Faculty 1-4 (N=8)	

Table 3. Characterization of the Vassar identity from the faculty and administration perspective. Again, the diversity of responses is striking. The multidimensional and multifaceted nature of the institution mentioned by Faculty 3 epitomizes one of the causes for this diversity. Some underlying trends, though, can be pinpointed: the selectivity of the school (2), the liberal arts nature of the institution (3), Vassar's innovative spirit (3) and how it radically broke through historical barriers (2), the individualistic bent of the College (2), and the school's strong intellectual focus (2).

According to the students, Vassar's identity also encompasses a variety of different elements.

Student Perspective: Vassar's Identity	
2	It depends on what people are looking for, where they're from, what they study here, what jobs you're trying to get. Vassar's a well-known school on the East Coast, but in other places it's not as well-known. So Vassar's identity depends on who's looking at it.
6	Socially aware, or attempting to be socially aware. I'd say pretty accepting.
7	I would say that it's a place that focuses its attention to make sure that all students have the equal chance to succeed.
8	In an academic sense, Vassar is very free about their academics. Some of the schools back home require you to take some classes, but here you can take whatever you want.
9	Vassar has just been a great experience. Great academics, great people.

10	I think that it has a very mixed identity. You carve your own identity here, you can use it as a backboard to create your own. It can help you get to the place you want, but they put a lot of pressure on the students to create their own path.
11	I feel like Vassar holds this identity of being a former's women's college and being a big activist institution and being a rich kid liberal arts experience. And from being here, I feel like different forces are working the identity to be different things...After being here for four years, I think Vassar as a whole, Vassar wants to be a place where people can be anything and use education to open doors to different experiences.
12	I think Vassar's a place where you can be yourself, and be intellectual. And not be judged by anyone on how you think or act.
13	It's an open environment. It's incredibly open. You can do whatever you want. You can be yourself at Vassar College. Everyone's weird. Everyone.
14	I think Vassar's identity is one of a historic, academic institution that is inclusive or presents the image of being inclusive to a diversity of people, regarding race, sexual preference, gender. I think it's a progressive-thinking institution, and it cultivates progressive thought processes. Or it has those kind of people here. I think of it as very exclusive, but at the same time it tries to be inclusive of many different identities.
*Students 2, 6-14 (N=10)	

Table 4. Characterization of the Vassar identity from the student perspective.

Several students made note that "...Vassar's identity depends on who's looking at it" (Student 2) or "...it has a very mixed identity" (Student 10). Students also commented that Vassar was a place where you could "be yourself" (Students 12 & 13) or "carve your own identity" (Student 10). Another common reported experience was the open and accepting atmosphere of the school (Student 6 & 13), where Student 12 said he felt free of judgment.

Both of the interviewed constituents mentioned how the identity of the school depended on the audience; interviewees from both groups additionally spoke to Vassar's ability to facilitate transformative experiences. Vassar was described as a place where one could create his or her own path. The school's exclusive selectivity, liberal arts identity, historical roots, and intellectual foundation also represent overlapping characteristics. As seen with the question

on descriptive words, faculty again tend to characterize Vassar as innovative and radical, words which the students never mention. On the other hand, students seemed to place a heavy emphasis on Vassar as a open place where they could be themselves, a comment reflective Vassar's personal meaning for them. Unlike faculty and administrators, students fall under a developmental category that Arnett (2000) terms emerging adulthood. "A key feature of emerging adulthood is that it is the period of life that offers the most opportunity for identity explorations in the areas of love, work, and worldviews" (Arnett, 2000, p. 473). As emerging adults, students share a different relationship with Vassar than the faculty and administration. Beyond the obvious distinction between students as consumers and faculty and administrators as "producers" of the Vassar brand, students actually engage with Vassar as a springboard for identity formation, as a place where they can "be themselves" and "carve their own identity."

The different dynamics that each of these two distinct constituents share with Vassar is also reflected in descriptions of the brand's personality. The branding rhetoric borrowed from the discursive construction of the individual extends beyond identity; brands are often said to have personality as well. The 1950s marked the first time "brand personality" emerged as a concept (Avis, Aitken, & Ferguson, 2012), used to reference "the human characteristics associated with a brand" (Aaker, 1997, p. 347). As an example, consider the different personalities of Coca-Cola, Pepsi, and Dr. Pepper. Coca-Cola tends to be associated as cool, all-American, and real, while Pepsi is often perceived as young, exciting, and hip. On the other hand, Dr. Pepper comes across as

nonconforming, unique, and fun (Aaker, 1997). Similarly, universities have begun attempting to cement sets of enduring personality traits: “Washington State University’s personality is confident, approachable, and genuine. It is also worldly without pretense, knowledgeable, inclusive, inquisitive, and reflects and enthusiastic, can-do spirit” (Brand platform, n.d.). These ascribed traits mimic human personality traits.

However, the translation from the human personality framework to that of brand personality is not perfect. Human personalities are defined as patterned emotional, attitudinal, and behavioral traits and are typified by the “Big Five” traits: openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism (Ashton, 2007). Aaker (1997) proposes an alternative set of dimensions: sincerity (down to earth, honest, wholesome, cheerful), excitement (daring, spirited, imaginative, up-to-date), competence (reliable, intelligent, successful), sophistication (upper-class, charming), and ruggedness (outdoorsy, tough). These five dimensions capture the patterned perceptions of brands, encompassing the dominant personification trends. Consumers establish this personification as a perceptual reality while using brands within symbolic and self-expressive functions. Below, the faculty and administration’s lexicon set for Vassar’s personality can be found.

Faculty and Administration Perspective: Vassar’s Personality				
academically, go to the source and dig deep	all over the place	artistic	as a music style, Ryan and Macklemore	bold
creative	dramatic	edgy	engaged	fun-loving

funky	inclusive (3)	individualistic	innovative	intellectually curious (2)
non-cliquey	obsessed with details	open	personality disorder	protective
quirky	receptiveness to the arts	serious (2)	somber	talented
wonky				
*Borus, DeKrey, Administrator 2, Faculty 1-2, 4 (N=6)				

Table 5. Description of Vassar's personality from the faculty and administration perspective.

Common themes become apparent. Descriptions such as academically digging deep, intellectual curiosity (3); artistic, receptiveness to the arts (2); creative, innovative (2); funky, wonky, quirky (3); inclusive, non-cliquey, open (5); and somber, serious (3) can all be loosely grouped.

The students were also interviewed in regard to Vassar's personality. The table below summarizes the responses.

Student Perspective: Vassar's Personality				
accepting	arts-oriented	aware	compassionate	eclectic
flamboyant	flirtatious	focused	friendly	fun
hospitable	intellectual	intelligent	liberal	loud
open	outgoing (2)	quirky (2)	self-confident	unique
upbeat	uppity	warm		
*Students 2, 6-14 (N=10)				

Table 6. Description of Vassar's personality from the student perspective.

Accepting, open (2); compassionate, warm (2); flamboyant, loud (2); friendly, outgoing (3); intellectual, intelligent (2), and quirky, unique (2) encompass the overlapping senses of brand personality.

Contrary to the students, the faculty and administration demonstrated a tendency to describe the Vassar personality as serious, dramatic, individualistic, engaged, obsessed with details, intellectually curious, and so on. On the whole, the students' lexicon set for brand personality seems to include words that would apply more to a relational partner, shaded with a more interpersonal tinge: friendly, outgoing, fun, hospitable, compassionate, and warm. Again, this difference appears to correspond with the emerging adulthood model.

To elucidate, just as brands can be conceptualized as having an identity and personality, they can also be positioned within a relational dyad. Fournier (1998) presents the view that the relationship metaphor applies to the consumer-brand context; consumers develop relationships with brands. The inclination to anthropomorphize brands serves a relational function in the nonmaterial world. People create brand meaning as part of a purposive, multiplex process phenomenon: "they evolve and change over a series of interactions and in response to fluctuations in the contextual environment" (Fournier, 1998, p. 344). The relational, meaning-making process that students engage in with the Vassar brand serves a direct purpose: identity formation. Students are more likely to perceive the brand as warm, friendly, and hospitable makes sense within this context.

Four points of convergence do emerge, though, from the two sets of personality descriptions: accepting, open, inclusive, non-cliquey (7); flamboyant, loud, bold (3); upbeat, fun-loving (2); and arts-oriented, artistic, and receptiveness to the arts (3). An interesting parallel arises when comparing this

personality description with the results of the personality trait scores of the focus group participants, which will be further discussed later on. As a brief summary: the Vassar students in the focus group scored significantly higher on openness to experience than the population norm. Openness to experience includes qualities such as imaginative creativity, artistic propensities, and intellectual curiosity. The reported perceptions of Vassar repeatedly align with all three of these characteristics.

The mirroring of institutional perceptions and student personalities can be taken as an example of McCracken's (1986) model of meaning transfer. The recursive meaning-making relationship shared between consumers and the brand results in this dual signification. The brand is partly instantiated by the students, who in turn adopt brand attributes and define themselves in relation to the brand. Self-perceptions and brand perceptions of imaginative creativity, artistic propensities, and intellectual curiosity transfer recursively between the consumers and the brand.

A question of interest, then, asks about the Vassar students. What is perceived as the quintessential Vassar student, and how does this perception relate to broader themes of overall brand image, identity, and personality? To answer these questions, the faculty and administration were asked to describe the typical Vassar students, the responses for which can be found below.

Faculty and Administration Perspective: Typical Vassar Student				
academically motivated	creative (2)	critical thinkers	different from students as peer institutions	diverse

expressive	feisty	good writers	intellectually curious (4)	interested in politics of gender and sexuality
interested in the arts and humanities	likes to talk	not apathetic	no typical Vassar student (2)	opinionated
politically progressive	privileged (in terms of class background)	smart (2)		
*Borus, Administrator 1-2, Faculty 1, 3-4 (N=6)				

Table 7. Description of the typical Vassar student from the faculty and administration perspective.

The most commonly mentioned characteristics were intellectually curious (4), smart (2), and creative (2). Two interviewees responded that there was “no typical Vassar student.”

Student interviewees also generated a list of adjectives to describe the typical Vassar student.

Student Perspective: Typical Vassar Student				
academically curious	aware of social inequality	creative	diverse interests	driven (3)
eclectic	engages in intimate relationships with small, close circles	excited for the future	focused on studies	fun
geared toward academic learning	hipster	independent	motivated	nice
not ethnically diverse	not geared toward professional life	no typical Vassar student (2)	open	open-minded
passionate (3)	quirky	smart	socioeconomically diverse	unsure what they want to do

upper-middle class	white			
*Students 2-4, 6-11, 13-14 (N=11)				

Table 8. Description of the typical Vassar student from the student perspective.

Students generally identified the typical Vassar student as being academically curious, geared toward academics (2); driven, motivated (4); open, open-minded (2); passionate (3); and eclectic, having diverse interests (2). Again, two people mentioned that there was “no typical Vassar student.”

The main differences between the two groups’ responses are subtle, but can best be summarized by the perspective difference. Faculty and administrators often described students’ academic abilities and defining academic interests, pointing out that the typical Vassar student is opinionated, expressive, and likes to talk. These abilities, interests, and behaviors can all be discerned from the formal classroom setting in which the faculty and administrators are more likely to see students. Students, on the other hand, in a meta-like commentary, paint a more diverse picture of the typical student, ranging from after-college plans to personality descriptions to comments about the general ethnic and socioeconomic diversity of the student population. Such differences once again highlight the significance of perspective when building a linguistic image of such a multidimensional concept. Institutional brand derives from the amalgamation of perceptions and the linguistic circulation of those perceptions within the culturally-constituted world (McCracken, 1986).

Several lexical overlaps occurred among the faculty, administration, and student responses: academically curious, geared toward academics,

intellectually curious (6); creative (3); diverse interests, diverse, eclectic (3); passionate, not apathetic (4); and smart (3). All of these overlaps correspond with previous overlaps found, which substantiates the interconnectedness between these different levels of the brand and will be explored in more detail later.

When combining the lexical data from all of the above questions for both groups, the following semantic themes appeared with the highest frequency: intellectual, intelligent, smart (13); creative, innovative (13); access, inclusive, open (13); unique, weird (10); diverse, eclectic, multifaceted (9); engaged, passionate (9); intellectually curious (9); driven, hard-working, motivated, committed (8); aware, conscious (7); bold, risk-taking (6); liberal arts (6); liberal (5); historic (5); arts (5); community (5); elite, selective, exclusive (5); and mixed identity (5). These semantic themes constitute the set of paradigmatic interdependencies that characterize the brand. Below, the pictorial list of words represents the culmination of lexical data depicting the Vassar brand. Larger words indicate higher use frequency.



Figure 1. Lexical Depiction of the Vassar Brand

Compare these words with those officially endorsed by the Admissions Office in the “Facts” view book publication:

“Facts” Admissions Publication				
daring	<b>serious</b>	<b>thinker</b>	<b>confident</b>	<b>intelligent*</b>
<b>creative*</b>	ambitious	dedicated	<b>curious*</b>	ingenious
athletic	idealistic	<b>independent</b>	prepared	frontrunner
strong	persistent	<b>bold*</b>	flexible	inspired
relentless	vibrant	transformative	motivated	<b>passionate*</b>
inquisitive	aware	fluent	<b>intellectual*</b>	respectful
tenacious	fair	optimistic	introspective	rational
informed	friendly	articulate	imaginative	skillful

Table 9. Lexical set presented in the “Facts” view book publication.

Bolded font indicates words that were used to describe Vassar in some respect by those interviewed: serious, thinker, independent, and confident. The bolded words followed by an asterisk represent words that appeared in the overall interview set at least five times: creative, bold, curious, intellectual, intelligent, and passionate.

The significance of this overlap between the words used in the Admissions publication and those used by the students, faculty, and administrators is twofold. First, it indicates a degree of congruence between Vassar’s representation efforts and the internal perceptions of the school. Second, this overlap reveals what makes up a more stable image of Vassar--Vassar’s brand identity. As mentioned, each person experiences and perceives Vassar differently. The common basis

behind these perceptions and experiences, though, embody what can be considered the core essence of the institution's brand.

An interesting trend that emerges in these lexical networks is the fluidity between these seemingly distinct categories: general words to describe Vassar, the typical Vassar student, and Vassar's personality. "Creative" was used as one of the words to describe Vassar as a whole, but also in reference to the typical student and Vassar's personality. "I think the faculty and the staff both have the same sort of curiosity and approach to the world where they want to learn about it and interact with it" (Faculty 1). These numerous categorical overlaps, seen among all the interviewees' responses, speak to the interactive dynamic between these groupings. The free-association adjectives for Vassar are derived in part from the student population; this student population in turn contributes to the institution's personality. If the student body tended to be competitive and aggressive, the general personality of the school would likewise be characterized as such. A recurrent response when answering different interview questions would follow along the lines of, "I would use the same words to describe the personality and the students" (Faculty 1). Equating the adjectives for these different categories demonstrates the conceptual links between them.

A suggestive contrast becomes apparent when comparing the internal perceptions of Vassar with the reported external perceptions surrounding the school. Interviewees were asked what associations they thought Vassar had. The responses provided below are divided between the faculty and administration perspective and the student perspective.

Faculty and Administration Perspective: Vassar Associations				
all from private schools	all women's college (3)	avant-garde	bright, capable students	committed
dedicated	druggy	elitist	excellent	hidden
large gay community (2)	no rules	privileged	serves the upper-middle class	small
snobbish	students as white, rich hipsters from New York	teaching- and student-centered	very liberal	walled or gated community
white gloves and pearl era				
*Borus, Kosmacher, Administrator 2, Faculty 1-2, 4 (N=6)				

Table 10. Reported associations about Vassar from the faculty and administration perspective.

Student Perspective: Vassar Associations				
academically impressive (5)	accepting (of gays and lesbians)	all women's college (8)	arts-oriented / artsy (2)	beautiful (2)
critical thinkers	elite (2)	expensive	good education	hipster
in the middle of nowhere	Ivy League	large female demographic (2)	large gay community (6)	Lisa Kudrow
Meryl Streep	no name recognition (3)	prestigious (2)	pretentious	privileged (2)
progressive	quirky	rural	scholarly	super hippy
theater	unemployed	weed	white	(very) liberal (8)
*Students 1-14 (N=14)				

Table 11. Reported associations about Vassar from the student perspective.

The common stereotypes identified by the students, faculty, and administrators were very similar: all women's college (11); excellent, academically impressive, prestigious, elite (10); very liberal (9); large gay community (8); privileged (3);

elitist, pretentious (2). Several students claimed that Vassar did not have strong name recognition (3). Clearly, the stereotypes and associations show a higher consistency rate than general descriptions of Vassar, Vassar’s identity, personality, or typical students. This consistency, perhaps, can be attributed to the fact that stereotypes are often based on a superficial understanding and lack the multidimensionality of the full truth. By definition, stereotypes are simplistic generalizations, commonly held and reproduced by large groups of people. “Recent research has suggested that interpersonal communication may be an important source of stereotype maintenance. When communicated through a chain of people, stereotype-relevant information tends to become more stereotypical, thus confirming the stereotypes held by recipients of communication” (Lyons & Kashima, 2003, p. 989). So, it makes sense that the stereotypes described by Vassar members would exhibit strong agreement.

Several students from the nearby schools Marist College and Bard College were asked to give their perspective on Vassar as well (See Appendices Y-AA). They were asked three questions: 1) How would you describe Vassar? 2) Do you know any stereotypes about Vassar? If so, what are they? 3) How are Vassar students different from students who go to Marist / Bard? The table below summarizes their responses.

Bard Student 1	
1	Vassar looks collegiate. Liberal, but preppy. It’s flat. Classic brick buildings. The library is impressive, and it seems like the school has lots of money. It’s a bubble in the demographically poor and “sketchy” city of Poughkeepsie.
2	They’re fast-talkers, often have their own made-up slang language.

3	Vassar is more diverse than Bard. It's less grungy.
Bard Student 2	
1	It's work-hard, play-hard. It seems like Vassar sets up the formula for a perfect "college experience" in that all the buildings are big and beautiful, all the events are planned out and organized, and all the students dress the part of students, but in that way it seems like more of a direct extension from high school.
2	There are many straight guys? Students are very wealthy?
3	Vassar students seem more mainstream compared to Bard students who are all about not being mainstream. Also, Vassar students seem to keep their academic life and their social lives very separate, where I feel like at Bard they blend together more. Bard students seem more into music events rather than classic "parties." There are less drugs at Vassar, and also less leaving the campus which I think makes a big difference in the student social scene. All-in-all Vassar students are more outgoing.
Bard Student 3	
1	It is very collegiate and formal in appearance and the students at times seem elitist. The students are all smart and witty, and the party scene and life in general is based on the campus.
2	Vassar kids are both preppy and alternative. They are known to be snobby about education.
3	Vassar has a more classic liberal arts education, while Bard is more experimental and arty.
Marist Student 1	
1	I don't know, Vassar kids are known as lightweights, I guess? A lot of people at Marist actually don't really know that Vassar exists. It used to be an all-girls school?
2	People think it's an Ivy League school. They think it's a good school with smart students that's hard to get into.
3	I would say that Vassar students are more globally aware and conscious and active, whereas Marist is pretty active in the ministry and with things on a more local level.

Table 12. Summary of the interview responses from Bard and Marist students.

Stereotypes mentioned by Vassar constituents were corroborated by Bard and Marist students: not many straight guys, Ivy League, impressive academics, selective, snobby, and wealthy students. These responses give shape to the external perceptions that surround Vassar and strengthen the argument that

stereotypes maintain higher consistency rates than phenomenological perceptions.

The Bard and Marist descriptions of Vassar contrasted fairly drastically with those given by Vassar constituents. Bard students, especially, made particular note of the Vassar aesthetic and the stereotypical “collegiate” experience crafted by the school. Repeated mention was made of Vassar’s relationship with the local community, or the lack thereof. While the Bard students did use “liberal” and “smart” to describe the college, which aligned with some of the internal descriptions of Vassar, several of their main comments contrastingly spoke to the social scene at Vassar. The Bard students referenced Vassar’s party scene and “work-hard, play-hard” mentality. The Marist student also alluded to the party culture at Vassar, calling Vassar students “lightweights.” Interestingly, none of the Vassar students, faculty, or administrators mentioned this aspect of Vassar’s social scene.

Distinctions drawn between other schools help define the conceptual boundaries of the institution. According to the Bard and Marist students, Vassar differs from their respective schools in a number of ways. For Bard students, Vassar seems to be mainstream. This view contrasts with Vassar’s self-perception as unique, quirky, and weird. Bard Student 3 offered a brief comment: “Vassar has a more classic liberal arts education, while Bard is more experimental and arty.” Again, this perception conflicts with Vassar’s self-perception. While Vassar does indeed endorse the “classic liberal arts” image, the institution also claims strong ties with both innovation and the arts. The Bard

and Marist perspective relativizes the Vassar image purported by its internal constituents.

These perceptual depictions of Vassar give shape to the meaning behind the Vassar brand and how it is perceptually constituted. A sense of what “Vassar” means was gained through an amalgamated linguistic rendering from these interviews. The way in which people talk about the brand circulates the perceptual reality of brand meaning. The “ground-level” of the Vassar brand has been explored, and now the broader scope of Vassar’s brand identity will be analyzed.

### **Vassar Brand Identity**

Vassar’s identity is articulated within the logics of equivalence and difference; its identity is situated relative to other higher education institutions (Lowrie, 2007). The administration members that were interviewed identified Vassar’s similarities to its peer institutions: small classes, intimate student-faculty ratio, high-quality facilities, a plethora of clubs and organizations, academic rigor, general course offerings, and the residential nature of the college. The points of difference that define Vassar’s uniqueness were reported as the following: academic flexibility and a lack of restrictive core requirements, the size and breadth of the curriculum given the school size, the three-part location as a beautiful campus in the Hudson Valley near New York City, the school’s history, the general vibe of the campus, and Vassar’s commitment to egalitarianism.

Another unique characteristic was identified as Vassar's pioneering "sense of adventure" (Borus). The curriculum was said to reflect this radical, innovative spirit: Vassar prides itself as one of the first schools to pave the way for interdisciplinary courses of study and faculty involvement. Vassar's founding as one of the first women's colleges was also radical, as was the decision for a women's college to introduce coeducation. These features, in addition to the lexical mapping of the school, give shape to the brand identity.

The question of institutional identity is complex. Overall institutional identity is stable, coherent, and sustained through history. On the other hand, contextual identifications fluctuate depending on the situation. In the interviews, one of the students called attention to the fact that Vassar does not just have one identity, but a mixed identity that is experienced differently by each student. Borus likewise spoke to this phenomenon, "I think Vassar doesn't have one identity. I think Vassar, like most institutions, has many identities depending on how one looks at it, where you're coming from, what your experiences have been coming in." Kosmacher made a similar comment, "If you ask everyone on this campus, you're going to get 2,400 different answers for what the Vassar way is."

These multiple identities that the interviewees referenced are actually identifications, as argued by Brubaker (2000). Brubaker (2000) asserted that as an analytical concept, the term "identity" has been overburdened and that its wide-ranging uses need to be broken down more specifically. Namely, "identification" should be reassigned to the unstable, shifting aspects of identity. So, there are as many identifications of Vassar as there are people who know

about the institution and hold a perception of the school in their minds. In this sense, brands are psychological; they are maintained in the minds of the consumers, producers, and external actors. Organizational identity derives from a collective aggregation. The underlying concept behind this collective identity at first appears paradoxical: that the very diverse myriad of images ultimately comprises the coherent, unified identity.

Coherence and stability are drawn from the most common threads of these perceptions. Recurrent words and descriptions constitute the core understanding of the college: as liberal, as a school with rigorous academics, as inclusive, and so on. This basic sense of institutional identity essentially stays uniformly stable. However, when a huge shift occurs in this underlying perceptual thread, the core identity changes. For example, Vassar's identity shifted when the college made the decision to go coed. "It certainly changed the identity of the college...Because Vassar probably had a very singular identity. It was the first comprehensive women's college. It was the first of the Seven Sisters" (Kosmacher). This decision forced a shift in the internal perceptual structure of the college.

The huge decision to change the identity of the college and go coed spurred debate at all levels of the college, from the board of trustees, to faculty, to administration, alum, and students. This identity crisis, of sorts, was prompted by the pressing conditions of the time, "[Vassar President Simpson] found Vassar becoming less competitive in admissions compared to most of the other Seven Sister colleges, and he heard reports of student dissatisfaction with Vassar's

geographic isolation from comparable men's colleges" (Daniels & Griffen, 2000, p. 19). The sociological context placed strong emphasis on marriage and the family unit; women were meant to find their spouses in college, a difficult task at Vassar considering the lack of access to a peer male population. In order to maintain its competitive edge, Vassar was forced to make a decision. Possible solutions ranged from relocating to New Haven and partnering with Yale, adding a coed graduate program, establishing a nearby men's college, or instituting coeducation. "But there was also controversy over how to best preserve Vassar's identity, its highly selective student body, and its traditional mission of improving opportunities for women" (Daniels & Griffen, 2000, p. 12). Ultimately, opening its doors to men redefined the College brand, causing a reconceptualization of the institutional identity. The shift in the linguistic labeling of the school, from a women's college to a coeducational institution, marked a change in one of the College's most distinctive characteristics.

The effects of this decision were wide-ranging on both an external and internal level. Externally, the public reputation that Vassar had built up was redefined. "...'Vassar College is the Woman's College in the mind of God.' He was dramatizing his perception of the likelihood that Vassar's deeply-layered national identity and reputation as a woman's college would stand prominently in the way of its development of coeducation" (Daniels & Griffen, 2000, p. 89). Abandoning this iconic identity created challenges for the school, as it attempted to attract high-caliber male students in order to to maintain its reputation for excellence. "And how do you think you will get a job in the business world with a

degree from a woman's college?'...That attitude highlighted the conceptual problem that the College had to overcome" (Daniels & Griffen, 2000, p. 85).

The introduction of coeducation has been implicated as the cause for a drop-off in brand equity--the recognition value of a well-known brand name (Pinar et al., 2011). Coeducation challenged the meaning of a Vassar degree and necessitated a renegotiation of its value. An interviewee identified a consequent decline of Vassar's prominence: "To an older generation, it's a well-accredited school that produced these bright, independent, intelligent women...In the modern day, I don't know what it is. It's very obscure. The percentage of people who know it now is less...Vassar isn't on the map" (Student 4). This student's observations align with those of Vassar alumna Sara Bensman, "I think 'Vassar' has been watered down as a concept during [recent] decades, but remains a vivid reference point for older generations and a major symbol of the past...This might be because Vassar's modern coed status has made it less original over time..." (Ruff, 2002). Similarly, many people on the college review site "College Confidential" express a frustration with the lack of name recognition ("Haven't people heard of Vassar?," 2010).

Kosmacher addressed the claim that the coeducation decision diluted Vassar's brand equity and reputation in the public eye, "So when the time came when they said to the college to become coed, it did change one of the easier ways to think about Vassar. The easiest way to think about it is as a top women's college. So that easy label went away when we went coed." Forgoing its iconicity as a prestigious women's college forced the College to grapple with the

implications of a new identity and with the challenge of maintaining its historical precedence for excellence.

You know, if you look at the trends, if you look at the numbers, on the basis of let's say what was the average GPA or the average SAT scores of students who were admitted to Vassar pre-coed, post-coed, and, you know, early post-coed, now. There's probably some dip, I think, no doubt. There was a-- we let go of our instant excellence reputation by bringing that in because people had to start thinking about Vassar in a different way. (Kosmacher)

This quantifiable decline of selectivity reflects the semiotic impact coeducation effected on the brand: the dilution of brand equity and symbolic strength.

Kosmacher went on to argue, though, that the school has since regained and even perhaps surpassed its former reputation, evidenced by a rebound of selectivity standards.

While the quantifiable rebound in selectivity may mark a return of Vassar's prestige to a certain degree, it should not be accepted as conclusive evidence. As revealed in interviews, Vassar's name recognition in regions other than the Northeast is relatively low. Additionally, an interview with a student from Marist College, a college housed in Vassar's own hometown of Poughkeepsie, suggested that many Marist students did not even know that Vassar existed. Despite the number of applications that are received, the College has not achieved the level of public name recognition and cultural iconicity maintained by other well-known schools, such as Harvard or Yale. This paradox would suggest perhaps that Vassar's prestige is isolated to some extent within the world of

higher education. Those engaged in the college decision process unearth the Vassar name as highly reputable, perhaps its impressive standing on the U.S. News Ranking list prompts students to research the school they might not otherwise know about. In this way, Vassar becomes a magnet for a substantial number of applicants.

Coeducation also transformed the internal construction of the College. One of the core attributes of the College had changed; Vassar was no longer an all-women's college. This fundamentally altered Vassar's identity and incidentally highlights an interesting dimension of higher education identity: the role of the students. Students make up a dynamic element of the college's identity, both demographically and on a more intangible level. Vassar publicizes diversity as one its foundational premises, which is derived from the demographic variance of the student population. The "vibe" or more abstract quality that faculty and students identified as a unique marker of the college also derives in part from the students. The underlying phenomenon behind this student influence, though, manifests a paradox: the identity of the school is in part predicated by the student body, an identity which remains consistent despite the fact that this student body changes from year to year. Two specific processes make this ostensible paradox possible: self-selection and socialization. The institution is a bi-directional self-selecting entity. On one end, students choose to apply because they see an attribute congruency between themselves and the school: they can see themselves going to Vassar and fitting in. On the other end, the school filters the

student candidates through an admissions process that selects those that the school deems compatible with the brand.

DeKrey emphasized the critical role of the Communications Office in this selection process. As the representational mediator for the College, the Communications Office acts as a major influence on the public's associative perceptions of Vassar's attributes. The Communications Office, as well as the Admissions Office, is thus tasked with the challenge of conveying an accurate, representational image of the College to a mass audience.

So that big Admissions communications, if we all collectively, the Admissions Office and we, do it well, then we should be attracting students who are interested in the kind of place we are. So their inclinations, not necessarily their specific personalities, but their inclinations and their preferences in terms of how they want to approach their learning experience here, should be in sync with the kind of institution we are. (DeKrey)

The selection process hinges on clear and accurate communication, which generates a shared understanding and leads to a successful, "synced" consumer-brand match. DeKrey cited Vassar's high retention rate as evidence for the Communications Office's success in accurately conveying a representational brand message.

On the other side of the selectional process, Borus identified the three main dimensions upon which Vassar's admissions standards hinge: intelligence, diversity, and interestingness.

We're looking for the smartest, as evidenced by the academic credentials and history record of the student. The most diverse class, diverse broadly defined, not just ethnic diversity or racial diversity, but diversity of geographic, diversity of experience, of opinions, of interests. And the most interesting...so we're looking to put together that class every year. (Borus)

The compatibility evaluation process is then handed back over to the accepted students, who make the final decision as to whether or not they view Vassar as the best fit for them. Extenuating decision factors are involved, of course, especially concerning the financial aspect of the college decision process. Generally, though, students make such a decision on a best-fit basis.

Hill confirmed the significance of the selectional process in solidifying an enduring brand identity: "So, I think the faculty self-select to [the school], and I think the students do as well. So, I think we end up with a place where people are committed to engaging with each other fairly deeply over the academic year." Thus, the selectional process works to ensure identity stability.

The socialization process works to further this stability. Borus mentioned this process, "...[the upperclassmen have] had two or three years to change, and grow, and become who they are now. The freshmen haven't had that opportunity yet. So, of course they're going to look more like high school kids when they come in, because that's what they are." Throughout the course of four years, the student body assimilates to the established Vassar culture, reinforcing the stability of the student influence on the overall brand identity.

These two processes circle back to the internal effects of coeducation. Coeducation shifted the self-selection process. One of the fundamental demographic qualifications, gender, was redefined, and the self-selection process changed on both ends of the spectrum. Male high school students were granted the new opportunity of considering Vassar in the self-brand matching process, and the college had reestablished a major selection qualification. The admittance of men destabilized the socialization process, which caused students to renegotiate cultural norms at Vassar and what it meant to be a “Vassar student” (Griffen & Daniels, 2000).

The agency behind Vassar’s brand identity is contingent upon its constituents. The institutional identity is constituted and maintained by individuals, achieving coherence through an overarching, unifying brand culture. The perpetuation of this culture relies on constituents’ discursive circulation and reproduction of brand signification. These discursive practices are articulated through linguistic performances, further discussed below.

### **Performing the Vassar Identity**

On February 10, 2013, the Westboro Baptist Church (WBC) posted a picket schedule proclaiming its intention to protest Vassar College.

LORD WILLING, WBC TO PICKET IVY LEAGUE WHOREHOUSE VASSAR COLLEGE (124 RAYMOND AVE., POUGHKEEPSIE, NY) ON THURSDAY, FEBRUARY 28, 2013, 1:45-2:30 PM. WBC will picket Vassar College to warn the

students, faculty, and alumni that the satanic policies of this nation, especially those of the colleges and universities, are causing God to pour His wrath out upon this nation. Doomed american academics fancy themselves to be smarter than God. They promote the fag agenda with all their might and mock the word of God and His messengers at every turn. Let's see how that works out for them on the Judgement Day! God Hates Vassar College for following the satanic Zeitgeist by professing the soul-damning lie that it is 'OK to be gay.' That is what the men of Sodom and Gomorrah professed and we see how well that worked out for them. WBC will kindly warn everyone affiliated with Vassar College that the Lord that destroyed those ancient cities on the plan yet reigns. Repent or Perish! ("Westboro Baptist Church Picket Schedule," 2013)

The event on February 28th, hereafter referred to as the WBC event, served as an oppositional force that prompted Vassar to re-articulate its identity and reexamine the linguistic performance of this identity.

In the face of this hate group, Vassar students immediately responded with a myriad of Facebook postings: "my reputation as a whore is finally being recognized. IT'S ABOUT FUCKING TIME. #VCPRIDE", "I am trying to choose between a Satan costume and being naked. Please advise.", "Ivy League Whorehouse graduate of 2012, right here folks. Thanks Westboro Baptist Church, for validating for me (as if I needed it) how proud of my gay-loving, "satanic" alma mater I am. VC, give em hell on the 28th.", "!!! The Westboro Baptist Church is coming to Vassar on Feb 28th from 1:45-2:30 to pick our gay gay gayness! I'm having so many feelings! We're going to need a lot of glitter.",

“Studied at: Ivy League Whorehouse Majored in: Fag Agenda”, and “Make full use of the ‘clothing optional’ campus...” (lindsey1z, 2013). This reaction parodied the perceived ridiculousness of the WBC’s statement against Vassar, using humor to re-appropriate the church’s offensive comments. This humorous stance soon dissolved, however, into serious reflection. Three hundred students came together at a meeting the day after the WBC posted their picketing schedule to discuss what the appropriate response would be when the church came to Vassar’s campus.

Throughout this meeting, and during later meetings leading up to the event, one particular comment kept resurfacing, “We need to respond in the Vassar way.” The underlying question behind such a statement then becomes, “What is the Vassar way?” This question prompted a self-reflective process, causing students, faculty, and alumni to consider the school’s values, mission, and identity.

Performing institutional identity is more complicated than a single individual performing their own identity. The aggregate nature of institutional identity calls for collective agreement. As Kosmacher pointed out, there are a lot of different ideas of what the Vassar way is; the “Vassar way” does not have a singular meaning. In order to perform Vassar’s identity, a common understanding must be shared, to which the embodied agents of the institution must abide.

According to Noy (2004), “identity is constituted through narrative performance” (p. 115). Vassar can be thought of as a linguistic performer of a particular identity; this performance is narratively carried out in publications,

campus tours, college fairs, information sessions, and online. This performance is contextualized by a sociodramaturgical context. As a result, the performance process is constantly in flux, continuously redefined by context, syntagmatic interdependencies, audience, and so on. The audience, whether prospective students or alumni, “consume” the performance of the Vassar brand (Noy, 2004). Strategic audience segmentation, then, constitutes part of the process by which performance negotiation occurs, an element that will be further discussed later.

Performance is linguistically achieved through story-telling. Institutional history manifests as the culmination of an identity storyline; the historical narrative of the institution serves to articulate its identity and provides the central theme around which the institution constructs and conveys its discursive embodiment. Noy (2004) defines this “identity” as a sociocultural category through which performance and social location is communicated, a useful conceptualization for the study of institutional identity.

Vassar performs its branded identity through coded avenues. Different aspects of performance--such as medium, content type, presentation style, and so on--signify certain meanings about the performer. These dimensions of institutional performance manifest as highly conventionalized. Accordingly, Kosmacher identified a specific coding category for higher education: We, the privileged, there’s almost a consensus--...U.S. News sells you-- they’ll sell you the right to put their little badge on your website. To signify that you are a top ten, top twenty-five, top fifty U.S. News-ranked school. You won’t see that badge on the top fifty schools. Because these are the schools with built-in

prestige. But you will see the badge on the fifty to a hundred, the hundred to a hundred-fifty schools. Because they're looking for a marketing advantage. And the Association of the U.S. News Ranking gives them an advantage.

So, Vassar performs its identity with respect to its semiotic location in the higher education world; Vassar does not pay for U.S. News endorsement, produce television commercials, or advertise in magazines. Communication output is primarily handled on an internal basis by the Communications and Admissions Offices. Vassar's historically-attained prestige requires the College to operate under these semiotically-coded communication guidelines. In this way, higher education communications are codified by regimes of value.

As an institution, Vassar is very conscious of the way in which it represents itself and performs its identity. Tours provide an informative example. Vassar offers tours in accordance to the standardized presentation rituals of universities and colleges. In compliance to tradition, a student takes on the role of the tour guide. This role evidences as highly influential: the tour guide essentially serves as the brand ambassador for the College. At Vassar, the tours are narratively scripted and allotted a particular route throughout campus. Tour guides are given a series of instructions, "Please remember that you are representing Vassar to a wide spectrum of people. On tour days, do not wear any articles that have sexual, alcohol/drug, and/or political references. Do not wear any articles of clothing with the names of other colleges or universities on them" and "There is a difference between being dishonest and being 'honest, but positive.' We DO want you to be honest to prospective students and their families

about Vassar -- it is not advantageous to anyone to misrepresent the institution" ("Tour Guide Handbook," 2013). Such guidelines work to ensure that the performance of the Vassar identity carried out by the provisional representative aligns with the administrative-approved image of the school. Tours in particular highlight Noy's (2004) argument that identity is linguistically performed: tours enact a storied representation of the school. Tour guides relate the College's history, provide factual information, and recount anecdotal stories about the school. This narrative performance conveys Vassar's institutional identity to the audience.

### **Images, Perceptions, and Stereotypes**

The images and stereotypes that surround Vassar are created and circulated discursively. These creation and circulation processes operate respectively on vertical and horizontal levels. Vertically, institutional images are created as a function of temporal duration. Historical reinforcement emerges as a key element; a stereotype that lasts for a day or week is probably not significantly meaningful. For example, a number of the perceptions that confer meaning to the Vassar brand originate from the school's history. Founded in 1861, the college was originally an all-girls school. When asked what about the associations surrounding Vassar, many interviewees stated that people still thought of Vassar as a women's college. Additionally, Vassar's image as a prestigious institution is rooted in its history as one of the Seven Sisters colleges, considered the sister

institutions to the Ivy League schools. Vassar built international renown for academic excellence through a historically influential lineup of distinguished faculty. History and temporal aggregation, thus, play an integral role in shaping certain images of the college.

Horizontally, people's widespread, collective perceptions constitute different institutional images and stereotypes, as demonstrated by the interview responses. These perceptual images must be shared by a group people. Aggregation across a wide range of people strengthens the social significance of a stereotype. This aggregation is enacted by narrative circulation, for which mass media provides a powerful medium.

Vassar entertains a variety of evaluations from the media, ranking as one of the top ten schools with the happiest students, most DTF ("Down to F\*\*k") campuses, most unique traditions, and most hipster population (Saragoza, 2012; "Unigo: Top 10 colleges with the happiest students," 2012; "Unigo: Top 10 colleges with unique traditions," 2012; "Unigo: Top 10 hipster colleges," 2012). Each of these stories both reflect and perpetuate an existing stereotype about the College, circulating and reinforcing these stereotypes for a wider audience.

Popular culture further adds dimension to the brand, acting as a sounding board for cultural meaning. Media capitalize on the understood symbolic meanings of a brand when making a brand reference, which in turn reinforces preexisting associations with the brand name. Vassar's history as an all-girls school typifies its representation in the media, limiting the school's portrayal to the feminine sphere. "Vassar" makes appearances in many prominent films and

television shows, including *A Day at the Races*, *Gentleman's Agreement*, *The Simpsons*, and *Don't Tell Mom the Babysitter's Dead*.

'[These] references...recycle persistent images of the 'Vassar Girl': famously unique students, boy-crazy girlie-girls, self-deluded scholars, alluring sophisticates, elitist bigots, strong trail-blazers, bored aristocrats, ravenous power-brokers, and outmoded ladies...Magically, at any given time, during any given social reality, 'Vassar Girls' stand for all of these extreme qualities and none of them.' (Ruff, 2002)

The semiotic diversity of the Vassar brand becomes socially understood through this referential feedback loop facilitated by the media. These examples of student accounts, popular culture references, and media appraisals lend insight into the multidimensional, multifaceted nature of brand identity, where contextual identifications shift in flux with the social frame of reference and negotiate with the stable, core brand image.

Borus pointed out an important aspect of these creation and circulation processes: "Images of colleges are very slow to change, even if there is genuine change going on on a campus, reputation and image lags decades behind that." This phenomenon results from the powerful vertical and horizontal aggregation behind such images. The modern stereotype of Vassar as an all-women's college provides a prime example of this image-lag: forty-four years later, people still think of Vassar as a women's college. "For several years, I'd go to college fairs and stand behind a table, and inevitably, a parent would come by, usually a dad, who would say, 'Oh, Vassar. Great place. Too bad I can't send my son

there.'...You know, because he didn't even realize we were coed" (Borus).

Accurate or not, these images or perceptions constitute a reality for the people who hold them and are integrated into the larger scheme of what Vassar is. For many people, Vassar is an all-women's college; this belief thus influences the conceptual construct of "Vassar."

Image-lag and stereotypes cyclically manifest in interesting ways.

Kosmacher predicted an approaching end to the all-women's college stereotype: the generation who grew up associating the "Vassar" name with a women's college is soon being succeeded by a generation who grew up more familiar with Vassar as a coeducational institution. This generational cycling out of different stereotypes will most likely be expedited by the new dominant Vassar stereotype: Vassar as a gay school.

In Borus's experience as Admissions Director, he reported this stereotype as a common perception, saying that parents would come up to him and ask in hushed tones "if the rumors were true." This stereotype clearly drew the WBC's attention, which in turn drew the attention of the media world. The extensive social media response was immediate. As mentioned, Facebook in particular fielded Vassar students' reaction to the news of WBC's plan to picket the school. Both local and national news sources honed in on story, covering background on the WBC as a hate group, on Vassar's formative plans to counter-protest, and the school's fundraising efforts. This spotlight reinforced the school's preexistent gay stereotype. Unexpectedly, the event also caused a more understated stereotype to resurface: Vassar as an Ivy League school. The tagline from the

WBC's picketing schedule proclaiming Vassar as an "Ivy League Whorehouse" went viral, solidifying the public image of Vassar as part of an academic elite.

These stereotypes and images are perpetuated through a folkloric process, emerging from stories told about the school. As mentioned, technology and mass media enable this narrative circulation.

And [the brand]'s hard to protect, because you can't control what's being said about you out there. Erroneously usually, but it's out there...when I started, the only information that a student got on us, on a college, was what the college sent them...And it was all propaganda, obviously. Everything was reflected in the most positive light, and there was no other place to get information on colleges. With the advent of the web, obviously that's all blown up, and colleges no have virtually no control about what's being said about them out there. (Borus)

Control over institutional image has been redistributed with the advent of technology; the internet has re-coded traditional avenues of information paths. Through social media and college review sites, stories and stereotypes spread rapidly and are broadly reinforced.

### **Brand Gaps**

As has become apparent, the images and stereotypes circulated about the College do not always hold consistent with the established brand identity; the image of Vassar as a women's college is a case in point. Likewise, many of the associations reported by the interviewees reflect similar inconsistencies: Vassar

as an Ivy League with a disproportionate female demographic, consisting primarily of white, rich hipsters from New York private schools. Alternatively, the image sponsored by the institution can also misrepresent perceptual reality in some way. Data from the interviews--as well as from the focus group, which will be presented later--revealed a number of such discrepancies, concerning the school's relationship with the local community, the campus as a safe space, the climate of acceptance and open-mindedness, and issues of diversity.

Diversity, in particular, often arises as an issue of contention. Vassar proclaims itself as representationally diverse, but students directly contradict this depiction. In interviews, several current students pointed to a lack of diversity, claiming the majority of the student population as white. On the college review site "College Prowler," one person reported, "Vassar prides itself on being very diverse, but I'd say that a majority of people are caucasian. It seems like there are a lot of gay people here..." ("Vassar College Diversity," 2012). While known as a school welcoming of heterogenous sexuality, Vassar fails to fulfill students' expectant qualifications for ethnic diversity.

The focus group brought further dimension to this debate on Vassar's diversity, citing experiences that speak to a lack of political or religious diversity. As a conservative Christian, one of the interviewees supported these experiences with his own. "I have a lot of friends who are conservative and religious who live in my dorm. Who have all said alongside me that Vassar is very accepting to everyone except for the people who are conservative and religious" (Student 12). The lack of diversity along these dimensions seems to

result in a secondary discrepancy, between Vassar's proclaimed climate of acceptance and people's actual experience. Brand identity emerges from and is defined by such representational conflicts, termed as "brand gaps" by Pinar et al. (2011), also known as perceptual gaps or knowledge gaps.

### **Communications**

As demonstrated, media obviously represent a powerful force in constructing institutional image, both positively and negatively. Image does not just lay helplessly at the hands of the media, however. Colleges and universities often actively work to engage the media as a means of publicizing a representational image. Colleges maintain a specific brand identity and attempt to convey this identity to the public through media outlets, a medium which inherently offers third-party credibility.

Vassar consciously utilizes the media in order to communicate its identity, but also as a means of consolidating brand gaps. For Vassar, many of these brands gaps surface in the stereotypes circulated about the school: women's college, large gay population, lack of diversity, elitist, etcetera.

Now Vassar was a women's college until 1969, and even though it's been almost forty years now since it went coed, there's still many people who don't know that Vassar is a coed college. So, in the back of my mind, when I'm thinking about stories that I might potentially bring to the attention of a reporter, I think about a story that might include one of our male students. Just to contribute to that

aspect of what we're trying to bridge in the knowledge gap about Vassar in the general public. (Kosmacher)

Bridging these gaps proves critical in preventing the consequences of misrepresentation; if certain students believe that the majority of the Vassar student population is made up of white, rich hipsters, they may decide not to apply. Stereotypes carry the danger of skewing prospective students' self-brand matching process. With this possibility in mind, the College formulates a set of communicative priorities aimed at bridging brand gaps.

DeKrey summarizes the Communications Office's other current priorities: So, we try to tell good stories that reflect bold thinking, that innovative spirit, that breadth of our curriculum, the ability of people to do hands-on, higher level research in all fields here as undergraduates...So, that's our goal really with the national media, as well as this characteristic of being accessible to people of all income levels. We've been doing a lot of work in getting that message out through national media, including through our president, as a higher ed economist who's been very generous with her time in writing op-eds and other pieces that get out there and make that case. And also most recently with the Veterans Posse program that you may have heard about, we're bringing veterans to campus beginning in the fall.

Another prioritized goal of the Communications and Admissions Offices is to promote the school's socioeconomic diversity. Raising public awareness of the College's need-blind policy serves to accomplish this goal. Additionally, the Communications Office is also working toward building recognition for the

strength of the sciences at Vassar. The reason behind this aim is twofold: first, the college is more well-known as an arts and humanities school, and the sciences lack proper public awareness; second, the college is building a new science building, which requires financial support from alumni.

In order to produce optimally efficient communications pieces, the College engages in audience segmentation. For example, the Admissions Office's messaging is geared toward prospective students, while the Communications Office is tasked with addressing the general public and the alumni audience. The school tries to paint Vassar as an attractive option for prospective students and their families, inform the general public of Vassar events, and direct fundraising efforts towards alumni. The purpose of engaging with each of these various audiences differs; thus, the messaging and mediums of communication used for each segment differ as well. Cognizant of the sociodramaturgical context, the College caters its linguistic performance to its audience.

The final relevant point of discussion relates back to broader processes of identity maintenance. As mentioned, the media contribute to the information circuit that feeds different images of Vassar, both positive and negative. When negative characterizations of Vassar do occur in the media, the Communications Office is charged with the responsibility of consolidating these characterizations with the overall brand identity. For example, Vassar's infamous admissions mistake in 2012 put the college in the national media spotlight. The negative backlash criticized Vassar for its negligence in accidentally sending acceptance letters to students who had not actually been accepted. The ensuing media crisis

forced the College to re-articulate its identity in the face of these negative media images, which characterized the institution as “careless” and “cold” (Bolton-Fasman, 2012). The effect of such negative media evaluations depends on the event that sparked the backlash; these media representations can engrave long-lasting scars into the institution’s image, or alternatively, blow over in a brief span of time. “You know, it’s not something in most cases that is going to change the impression of the institution publicly in any permanent way. I think there are things that can do that, by the way, at institutions. But I don’t think that most crises do that” (DeKrey). The College’s long-standing reputation generally prevails in the face of media crises, and the overall brand identity eventually absorbs the negative depiction.

In this section, the processes by which brand identity is linguistically constructed, performed, circulated, perpetuated, consolidated, and maintained were all explored. The branding framework as applied to the higher education context clearly offers a valuable theoretical perspective when studying these issues of institutional identity. The application of a linguistic lens, in particular, highlights not only the discursive nature of such processes, but also the usefulness of uniting these two conceptualizations.

### **Focus Group Discussion**

Returning back to a ground-level analysis of Vassar, this next section reexamines the instantiation of the Vassar brand and makes a final case for the

theoretical potential in applying the branding framework to the higher education model. In order to accomplish this goal, a focus group was conducted. To explore the semiotic diversity of “Vassar,” the focus group questioned how people talk about Vassar, their experiences at the school, and their perceptions of the College. This focus group was composed of Vassar students, whose discussion revealed the variance of perspectives surrounding the brand. Both the similarities and differences in the students’ experiences and perceptions speak to the nature of brands. The focus group showed how brands operate on multiple levels: ranging from a more abstract, shared understanding to individual, unique experiences with the brand.

As mentioned, the focus group was also aimed at exemplifying the theoretical potential in approaching higher education institutions as brands. The marriage between higher education and the branding framework offers a new and valuable perspective. In particular, branding provides a specific set of psychological insights as to how students carry out the college decision making process and the processes of internalization and assimilation that occur during the college years. This case study of Vassar College and the Vassar brand demonstrates the value of this original perspective.

### **Conceptual Framework**

As previously discussed, brands embody a set of cultural meanings. These cultural meanings derive from the culturally constituted world.

This is the world of everyday experience in which the phenomenal world presents itself to the individual's senses fully shaped and constituted by the beliefs and assumptions of his/her culture. Culture constitutes the phenomenal world in two ways. First, culture is the 'lens' through which the individual views phenomena; such as, it determines how the phenomena will be apprehended and assimilated. Second, culture is the 'blueprint' of human activity, determining the co-ordinates of social action and productive activity, and specifying the behaviors and objects that issue from both (McCracken, 1986, p. 72).

In his model of meaning transfer, McCracken (1986) outlined how meaning moves from the culturally constituted world to the brand to the individual consumer. In other words, the cultural meanings associated with the brand are passed on to the individual who consumes that brand.

Although McCracken's (1986) model does not address the issue of recursivity, it can be argued that each location of meaning that he delineated operates along reciprocal feedback loops. The individuals who participate in a particular brand culture characterize that culture; as the type of users generally associated with a certain brand, consumers collectively augment brand meaning (Batra & Homer, 2004). Likewise, culture is constituted by the same individuals for which it is a lens and blueprint. Brands add dimension to the cultural landscape just as the cultural landscape frames brand meaning.

While these recursive relationships present a number of interesting implications, the present study focuses on brand meaning and the significance of this brand meaning for the individual consumer. "Consumers possess social

selves that are constantly under construction...This calls for new meanings or ways of defining and presenting the self. There are several sources for these meanings, including consumer goods and brands” (McCracken, 1993, p. 139). Escalas and Bettman (2005) investigated the use of brands as part of the self-concept construction process. The relevant results indicated that more symbolic brands--brands that convey a message about the user--enhanced self-brand connections to a greater degree than less symbolic brands. McCracken’s (1986) model of meaning transfer offers an explanation for this finding, where consumers incorporate the symbolic aspect of brands into their own self-concept. McCracken (1986) asserted that this symbolic incorporation hinges on a perceived congruence between the brand image and the self-image. Based on this congruence, brands are functionally employed as part of social signaling and self-concept construction (Escalas & Bettman, 2005).

Hollenbeck and Kaikati (2012) conducted a two-year study researching self-portrayal through the use of Facebook brands. The study essentially consisted of two phases. The first phase identified which brands participants publicly endorsed on Facebook, and the second phase involved a self-report on whether these brands reflected either a more actual or ideal sense of self. Markus and Nurius (1986) marked the distinction between these two senses in a discussion of possible selves: while the actual self substantiates one’s existing self-concept, the ideal self constitutes the goal-directed concept of what one would like to become. Hollenbeck and Kaikati’s (2012) study demonstrated that the participants used brands to present both actual and ideal selves. At times,

these portrayals of multiples selves were found to be conflicting. The online linkage of personal identity with brands was used in enhancing and protecting self-concepts, as predicted by self-concept theory. People engaged with brands that were perceived as congruent with their sense of self, whether actual or ideal.

Malar, Krohmer, Hoyer, and Nyffenegger (2011) delved deeper into these issues of self-congruence. They showed that the type of self-congruence people had with a brand influences emotional brand attachment, and this impact is moderated by product involvement, self-esteem, and public self-consciousness. Actual self-congruence enhanced emotional brand attachment more so than did ideal self-congruence. Malar et al. discussed the theories that account for such results, beginning with self-expansion theory. Self-expansion theory lays the foundational basis of self-brand connections, positing that people are disposed toward expanding their self-conception through the inclusion of others--in this case, brands. Brands become incorporated into consumers' sense of self, and the closer that personal identity and brand identity become entwined, the stronger the consumer's emotional bond with the brand. This emotional bond could potentially be weakened or broken if an incongruence emerged: whether the brand meaning evolved in such a way that it no longer corresponded with the person's sense of self or the individual re-conceptualized their sense of self. Self-brand connection and processes of self-expansion depend on a shared congruence between the self and the brand.

Malar et al. (2011) proposed on an interrelating network of theories: self-verification theory, self-enhancement theory, and construal-level theory. Self-

verification theory states that people maintain efforts to validate and sustain their conception of self, which accounts for why people are motivated to engage with brands that reflect their actual sense of self. Self-enhancement theory speaks to why people engage with brands along a dimension of idealization: people are psychologically driven to improve their self-esteem. Therefore, brands that embody idealized aspirations provide a motivational standard. Construal-level theory builds upon these two theories in explaining the relative influence of actual and ideal self-congruence: “the greater the person’s psychological distance from an object (e.g., a brand)...the greater is the likelihood that he or she will mentally conceptualize this object or event in an abstract way rather than in a concrete way” (Malar et al., 2011, p. 36). As the actual self remains grounded in the “here and now,” it tends to be perceived as more psychologically close than the ideal self. The emotional attachment with brands reflecting the actual self consequently evidence as stronger than those with brands reflecting the ideal self.

Kelman (1985) conducted a study examining three processes of attitude change: compliance, identification, and internalization. The process relevant to this particular study is internalization, which Kelman (1985) describes as the following: “Internalization can be said to occur when an individual accepts influence because the content of the induced behavior...is intrinsically rewarding. He adopts the induced behavior because it is congruent with his value system” (p. 53). Kelman argued that internalization results from a perceived

credibility of the influencing agent and that performance of the consequent behavior occurs with regard to contextual relevance.

According to Vygotsky (1978), internalization follows a series of three stages: “an operation that initially represents an external activity is reconstructed and begins to occur internally... 2) An interpersonal process is transformed into an intrapersonal one....3) The transformation of an interpersonal process into an intrapersonal one is the result of a long series of developmental events” (p. 56-57). Essentially, these stages encompass the sociality of internalization. Internalization results from assimilation, which is achieved through socialization. The social world, thus, precipitates any process of internalization. This social world is constituted by interaction, communication, and collective meaning-making (Unruh, 1980).

## **Hypotheses**

### **Hypothesis 1: “Vassar” has a specific meaning.**

While everyone’s experiences, perceptions, and opinions about Vassar differ, there is a shared, implicit understanding of what “Vassar” means. “Vassar” connotes a particular meaning and conveys a specific message. It is predicted that when the participants in the focus group describe Vassar, an interpretive sense of this brand meaning will be attained.

### **Hypothesis 2: Actual and ideal self-congruence with the Vassar brand will affect students’ decision to attend the college.**

It is predicted the reasons that students will report as part of their decision to attend Vassar will reflect a perceived sense of actual or ideal self-congruence with the Vassar brand. In other words, the students will report a match between their own characteristic attributes, whether actual or ideal, and the attributes of the college. It also is predicted that there will be a higher frequency of reported actual self-congruence than ideal self-congruence.

**Hypothesis 3: Consumption of the Vassar brand will affect students' symbolic incorporation of the brand into their self-concept.**

It is predicted that students will report a self-conceptual change as a result of their experiences at Vassar, where it will be evident that Vassar brand has been incorporated into their self-concept. Students will give accounts of ways in which they have assimilated to the established Vassar culture; they will report how they have adopted and internalized specific brand attributes during their time as a student.

## **Methods**

### **Participants**

The on-campus focus group was made up of an eight-person convenience sample of Vassar students, with equal numbers of male and female students from each class year. The table below summarizes the main demographic data for each of the participants.

Summary of Participant Demographic Data
---

Student Identification Label	Class Year	Gender	Hometown
Student A	2016	Female	South Ozone Park, New York
Student B	2016	Male	Madrid, Spain
Student C	2015	Female	Berkley, California
Student D	2015	Male	Singapore, Singapore
Student E	2014	Female	Chicago, Illinois
Student F	2014	Male	Brooklyn, New York
Student G	2013	Female	New York City, New York
Student H	2013	Male	Poland, Maine

Table 13. Reported demographic data for each of the participants.

As demonstrated by the demographic table above, the participants were from a variety of places: South Ozone Park, New York; Madrid, Spain; Berkley, California; Singapore, Singapore; Chicago, Illinois; Brooklyn, New York; New York City, New York; Poland, Maine. The frequency of New York origins is a reflection of the fact that students from New York make up the largest state demographic for each class. Participants ranged in age from 18 to 24 years old. All participants, besides two, were heterosexual. The two who responded otherwise identified their sexuality as “Whatever looks good / open” and “Undefined.”

### **Materials**

A scripted email was used to recruit participants for the study. A consent form and an audio/visual release form were also used in the study. The focus group was guided by a series of activities and questions. The discussion was

preceded by an introduction to the study and was concluded with a debriefing and an invitation to express any concerns or questions about the study. The focus group discussion was structured by a threefold focus: a description of Vassar, the college decision-making process, and students' internalization of Vassar's brand attributes. Participants completed a demographic survey and a personality questionnaire, the BFI-10, at the conclusion of the study (See Appendix CC).

### **Procedure**

Eight participants were specifically chosen as part of the convenience sample. Participants were strategically recruited to represent both a male and female perspective from each class year. Participants were also chosen in an attempt to represent a diversity of academic interests and extracurricular activities. A recruitment email was sent out to potential participants, informing those interested in the logistical details and the overall purpose of the study.

After signing a consent form and an audio/visual release form, the students took part in an hour-long recorded discussion and, at the conclusion, completed a series of basic demographic questions and a short Big Five personality questionnaire. The focus group was moderated by the thesis author, who introduced the discussion, guided the conversation, and concluded the session with a debriefing. The recording of the focus group was then transcribed for analysis. The transcription can be found in Appendix BB, where the participants have been assigned identification labels to replace their names in order to preserve their privacy and anonymity.

## **Coding Criteria**

The transcription analysis involved a threefold approach, divided among the three hypotheses. Data relevant to the first hypothesis was identified as any description, perception, opinion, or view regarding Vassar. This descriptive commentary was compiled and thematically organized in order to give an overview of the Vassar brand from the participants' perspective.

Data for the second hypothesis was isolated to responses concerning the college decision making process. Based on congruence evaluation, this process mirrors the consumer decision process with respect to brand selection. Decision reasons corresponding with participants' existing self-concept were coded as instances of actual self-congruence. For example, if a participant stated that they chose to attend Vassar because Vassar's message of acceptance and inclusion reflected their own personal values regarding acceptance and inclusion, this reason would be coded as actual self-congruence. Similarly, any mention of "a good match" or "a perfect fit" would be considered instances of perceived actual self-congruence.

Decision reasons citing a correspondence between the participants' ideal self-concept and the institutional brand were coded as ideal self-congruence. This type of self-congruence involves the participants' idealization of their future selves: someone they wish to become. To illustrate, if a participant stated that they chose to attend Vassar because of its renowned English department and because they hoped that this program would help them develop their literary skills, this reason would be coded as ideal self-congruence.

The third dimension of transcription analysis incorporated the final hypothesis. Any personal changes cited by the participants as a result of their experiences at Vassar were reviewed for cases of internalization. Instances where such a change appeared to be an internal adoption of established brand attributes, achieved through a processes of socialization and assimilation, were coded as cases of internalization.

### Results and Discussion

The results of the BFI-10 and the statistical analysis of these results can be found below. The scores of the personality inventory were reported on a scale of 1 to 5, with “1” representing “Disagree strongly,” “2” representing “Disagree a little,” “3” representing “Neither agree nor disagree,” “4” representing “Agree a little,” and “5” representing “Agree strongly.” The higher the numerical score, the higher that the participant scored on a specific trait. For example, if a participant’s extraversion score was a “5,” it would appear that they consider themselves to be a very extraverted person. Conversely, if they score a “1,” it would indicate that they side more on the opposite end of the spectrum, as an introvert.

One-Sample Statistics				
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Extraversion	8	3.6250	1.30247	0.46049
Agreeableness	8	3.3750	0.51755	0.18298
Conscientiousness	8	2.7500	1.00000	0.35355
Neuroticism	8	3.2500	1.25357	0.44320

Openness	8	4.6250	0.51755	0.18298
----------	---	--------	---------	---------

Figure 2. Table of Descriptive Statistics for BFI-10 Scores

One-Sample Test						
	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
					Lower	Upper
Extraversion	0.958	7	0.370	0.44100	-0.6479	1.5299
Agreeableness	-1.536	7	0.168	-0.28100	-0.7137	0.1517
Conscientiousness	-2.268	7	0.058	-0.80200	-1.6380	0.0340
Neuroticism	0.474	7	0.650	0.21000	-0.8380	1.25890
Openness	3.525	7	0.010	0.64500	0.2123	1.0777

Figure 3. Table of One-Sample T-Test Scores for the BFI-10 Scores

A one-sample t-test was conducted for each of the personality traits, using established population norms from Srivastava, John, Gosling, and Potter's (2003) study as a comparative reference. The one-sample t-test revealed no significant mean differences from population norms for four of the five factors: extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and neuroticism. However, the one-sample t-test for openness to experience indicated that the mean score was significantly different from the population norm ( $p < 0.05$ ). The participants perceived themselves to be significantly more open to experiences than what would be expected by chance.

Openness to experience includes a number of dimensions, such as imaginative creativity, artistic propensities, and intellectual curiosity (Ashton,

2007). This finding perhaps lends some insight into the association of Vassar students as artistic, creative, and curious. While this eight-person sample and ten-item personality questionnaire by no means provides concrete, quantifiable justification for these associations, it certainly sets the stage for an interesting path of investigation and indicates that these associations might indeed be merited.

A chicken-or-egg question arises: are students naturally open to experiences attracted to Vassar and end up attending the school, or does Vassar play an influencing role in cultivating this trait? The answer is perhaps both, an example of the selectional and socialization processes detailed previously.

### **Hypothesis 1: The Meaning of “Vassar”**

The beauty of the campus is heavily emphasized by the Admissions Office in its tours as well as in its printed and online materials. The topic of the aesthetic appeal of the school in the focus group, however, was somewhat controversial. Some of the participants praised the beautiful campus, while others disagreed strongly, saying that “I don’t think it’s beautiful. I think that’s really overused to describe it” (Student C). Several of the participants endorsed the more standard view of the campus, though: “But I think I mostly liked the school because the aesthetics. The beautiful buildings and the campus” (Student E), “...the library is beautiful” (Student H), and “I like the architecture. I like how it’s just different, you know” (Student B). The location of the campus was also described, however, as, “a place in the middle of nowhere...it’s detached in the sense of location in

Poughkeepsie, but, I mean, at the same time, you want to encounter civilization, you just take the MetroNorth or whatnot” (Student A).

“Vassar” was clearly delineated as a separate entity--both conceptually and physically. The school was conceptually contrasted with the rest of the world and physically contrasted with the immediate local community. Student D’s comment was particularly revealing in this regard, “I’ll probably be mostly unprepared for the real world and still harping on about the prison industrial complex, as if enough people in the world give two shits.” His statement exposed the perception that Vassar is, in fact, not the real world. Student A expressed a similar sentiment, which was reinforced by several other participants: “When I go outside of the campus and somewhere else, it’s like a completely different world. You notice that. When you walk out of Vassar, you know you’re out of Vassar.” So, Vassar apparently maintains some very clear physical and conceptual borders. These conceptual borders, though, introduce a very tangled question: what is Vassar?

Student C, in particular, expressed difficulty in describing what actually makes Vassar unique: “And it’s a lot of kids who, yeah, are unique and everyone has different varied interests. But there’s something cohesive in the-- I don’t know. It’s a lot of upper- to middle-class, liberal-y kids. So it’s not unique in that way” (2013). Then, how is it unique? There seemed to be an undefinable quality that unites and characterizes Vassar: “I think that it’s like I definitely know the difference between Vassar and state-school kids, and pretty distinct” (Student C). So, this quality is knowable, but not definable--it is difficult to be put into words.

Partly, this “Vassar” quality is defined in opposition to what it is not and relationally to what it is similar to. In this respect, participants contrasted Vassar with larger state schools in terms of size and college mindset. Student H said, “Whereas that kids who were at the University of Southern Maine, were just like all-- they like to party, they like to have fun, and they just want to-- They’re probably working a job on the side, and they’re just trying to get through school.” Student C stated that the student population at Vassar is similar to those that can be found at peer schools, specifically in regard to the liberal and middle- to upper-class demographic. “Just in terms you can compare kids at Vassar, Wesleyan, Oberlin, Bard. Just, you know, a lot of schools that are pretty similar in caliber, I guess.”

Beyond the physicality and location of the campus, the school seemed to embody a number of different characteristics for each of the students. Each student offered a different, unique description of Vassar. Two participants referenced Vassar as a home; one participant explained Vassar’s significance to him as a center for friendships, growth, and pride. Another mentioned the eccentricity of the students. Student C spoke to a unifying characteristic, “I’d say, is just in general a sort of enthusiasm and passion for learning in whatever field that people are in. Which, that field is diverse, people have different interests. But generally, at least almost everyone here is not apathetic.” Vassar as a place of growth was also brought up by several participants; one person described Vassar as welcoming. Another participant said, “Trying. People are trying, not like too hard. People are trying a lot of weird things” (Student H).

Vassar's rigorous academics were mentioned, as well as its reputation and ranking: "It's a good name to have on a resume. It has a good reputation, and that does-- you know, with however much I disagree with all that surrounds that idea, it is helpful if you want to succeed" (Student C), "...it was the highest-ranked that I got into" (Student H), and "It's a school with lots of money and a great competitive name" (Student B). While this ranking was acknowledged, several participants admitted to being unfamiliar with the school before applying: "And then my dad, who made me apply to Vassar, I hadn't even really heard of it" (Student B) and "So I basically had no idea about it..." (Student H). These reflections bring to the surface the paradoxical issue of how Vassar seems able to maintain a strong reputation, but lacks name recognition among many people. The discrepancy between these two points is an issue that is not easily resolved, and requires further investigation.

Student G stated that "...Vassar is not a safe space for everyone." By this, she explained herself to mean that "...there have been experiences, other than my own, here at Vassar that have not necessarily been unpleasant, but just have been-- you know what I'm trying to say." In response to her comment, another participant shared his experiences of Vassar as not a safe space. He gave an account of his freshman year at Vassar, where he felt uncomfortable because of his conservative background. Student C affirmed this experience, "...and then the second that someone is like, 'I'm conservative', people really react to that." This discomfort was attributed to the large liberal demographic at Vassar, which relates to other issues:

Because even some of the environmental projects, for example, they would be so passionately talking about organic food and stuff. Which I am fully all about. But they would say things about how horrible, you know, a non-organic farmer might be. And those are my parents you're talking about. But if I were to bring that up, it'd be kind of like, 'Ooh. He's not a good farmer. He doesn't know about agriculture like we do.' I'm probably like, 'Dude, you're from like Manhattan or something. You've never even been on a farm.' (Student H)

He made the point that this lack of openness and acceptance flies directly in the face of what Vassar purports to foster.

Further discrepancies were revealed as the participants discussed Vassar's relationship with the community and the school's diversity. Both issues sparked extended discussion: "Given the student body, I would think that there would be more of a relationship between Vassar and Poughkeepsie, and the fact that it's not there, I think is a reflection of the intellectual work that we do versus the energy we're willing to put into the things that are right next door" (Student G), "I mean it's like when you go to an Admissions thing, 'Yeah, there's a lot of community involvement.'...But the situation's fucked up and there's a huge disparity" (Student C), and "But [Poughkeepsie community members] also voice their concerns about Vassar. Because they don't feel as connected to Vassar as we feel about Poughkeepsie. So it's a mutual thing" (Student A).

With regard to diversity, many of the students had different opinions. Student D stated, "Isn't it like eight to ninety-something percent white?...I mean, does much more need to be said?" The other students, though, thought that the

matter merited further discussion. Both Student H and Student A compared Vassar's racial diversity with that of their hometowns; Student A commented that Vassar was less diverse than Queens, New York and Student H stated that Vassar was more diverse than Poland, Maine. Student H, though, questioned what is meant by "diversity": "I think there's something to be said about categorical diversity, like race, or, I don't know, I guess like political standpoints or something like that, and just kind of like academic mindset? Or like, life mindset?" In terms of political views, Student C again pointed to Vassar's lack of diversity: "I don't think we're as diverse as we claim to be or say we are in terms of Republicans, or whatever. Or like we're diverse in a very liberal way, I guess." Student H agreed: "I have this one other friend who's pretty conservative, and we decided that there was diversity in almost everything here. Except for in diversity of opinion on that sort of subject."

Several of the participants agreed that Vassar consisted of a diverse population in terms of interests and perspectives. Student A's thoughts provided an informative view, "And then coming here, I think what was interesting to me was everyone brings something different to the table...I think that even though people say that it's not as diverse, for me, it's that I met so many people that even though it's not as racially diverse, or, you know, financially. They have different mindsets that they were able to bring to the table, and I got to learn something out of it."

To sum up, according to the participants, "Vassar" connoted a physically- and conceptually-bounded entity. The conceptual bounds that constrained

Vassar, though, are not as clearly delineated as the physical ones. “Vassar” was relationally situated within a system of perceptual similarities and differences. Vassar was identified as similar to peer liberal arts schools and different from large state schools. Vassar signified a number of characteristics, different for each of the participants. Overall, Vassar was collectively believed to be a prestigious and high-ranking liberal arts institution. Participants pointed to several discrepancies regarding the Vassar image, concerning diversity, openness and acceptance, and involvement with the local community.

These descriptions of Vassar demonstrate the complexity of understanding Vassar as a conceptual entity. Although Vassar does exist in a concrete, physical sense, it also exists within a psychological dimension. The mental representation that each individual has of Vassar--shared and circulated--constructs a larger social understanding of the institution. These perceptual understandings of Vassar contribute to the social reality that frames institutional brand meaning (Sun, 2001).

### **Hypothesis 2: College-Decision Making Process**

A number of reasons for “Why Vassar?” were given by each of the participants, ranging from “...just ‘cause of some sort of vibe. Some random feeling” (Student C) to “Well I was convinced to go to Vassar after attending the Focus Week” (Student A). The three most common factors mentioned by the participants were the following: the beauty of the campus, Vassar’s reputation, and some form of a personal encounter with someone from Vassar. Three of the participants cited the campus aesthetic as one of the reasons for choosing

Vassar. Three people also mentioned the school's reputation and ranking as a significant sway in their college decision. The most frequent reason, though, often took the form of an anecdotal experience with someone at Vassar or from Vassar. For example, Student G said that "I decided based on the interviews that I had with the people--- the alumni that I guess you meet." Student C referred to her Vassar tour guide as one of the reasons she decided to come. Student F similarly recounted a personal story:

...I sat in a developmental biology class...But we were talking about-- I don't even remember, but I said something about a point. I remember it was a very stupid point. But, the professor was like, 'Yes'-- he pointed, and he was like, 'Yes, good point.' And then after class, you know, as I was preparing to leave, and he was like, 'Hey, you.' And he gave me a fist bump. And I was like, 'Whoa! That's so cool!' And I think that was a really-- made me want to come here.

Student A also got a personal sense of Vassar from her visit during Focus Week.

As predicted, there seemed to be a strong indication that participants chose Vassar based on a perceived actual self-congruence with the school rather than an ideal self-congruence (Malar et al., 2011). Without explicit explanation from the participants, however, this conclusion is interpretively based on the coding criteria. For instance, Student G's story of her interview with a Vassar alumna was coded as ideal self-congruence. When she asked the interviewer what she would be ultimately gaining from her Vassar education, Student G received the following response: "And the Vassar alumni told me, you get a sense of awareness...But a sense of your role in the world, be it understanding

what your privilege is like even having this education...” Student G clearly valued these characteristics that the interviewer described; they aligned with what she saw herself ideally gaining from her college education. These attributes embodied the type of enlightened person that she wanted to become (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012).

Student C’s expression of ideal-self congruence was a bit more vague. “I also had a great tour guide, which I think makes up a ridiculous portion of everyone’s opinion about what kind of college you want to go to. She was super hot and funny, and I was like, ‘Wow, I would love to go here because everyone is just like her.’” Student C did not explicitly explain that she saw this tour guide as someone she envisioned herself becoming or wished to become. The underlying implication behind her story, though, can be read as such. Similarly, Student F’s account of his interaction with a Vassar professor can be interpreted as an academic idealization. Though he characterized the point he made in the class as “stupid,” he clearly appreciated the positive feedback he received from the professor. Student F perhaps imagined himself becoming a valuable intellectual contribution to the classroom, where his thoughts would be appreciated and valued. Vassar provided a match for this ideal self (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012).

Student A offered a comprehensive account of Vassar’s congruence with her actual self.

And I think it was [at Focus Week] that I was able to get a sense of that’s what I wanted in a liberal arts education. Where I’m able to have a very involved curriculum, academically but also a place where I will have enough time to really

discover myself and what my interests are, and what I want to use my future. Because my twin, she decided to go to Dartmouth. So, two different environments where she's always busy academically. And she's not as able to really do the things that I do in terms of having a lot of extracurriculars or having a lot of free time, and just exploring the campus. And I think that's something that's really important for me. Something that I really hold dear today, that I have the ability to take part of the things that I wouldn't have been able to take part in if I went to a school that was very strict academically. Like a constricting force. Not to say Vassar is-- that the academics are different. They're still great academics, it's just that there's not as much pressure to take as many courses or core curriculum or any of that.

Student A saw Vassar as a match along a number of dimensions: liberal arts education, challenging and rigorous academics, and the opportunity to engage in extracurriculars--the freedom to explore. She recognized these aspects of Vassar as a match for herself (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012).

Other participants spoke to this process of "finding a match." Student B talked about how he considered going to University of Chicago, but decided against it because it did not seem like it had the fun environment that he was looking for. Vassar, on the hand: "I took a tour. And then I just walked out and I was like, 'Yeah, I'll go here.' Everything just meshed with me, and I felt like I could go here." This meshing that Student B described speaks to a sense of congruency he felt between himself and the school. Student C shared a similar experience: "It felt right. Just 'cause it did.' I had a good feeling about it in

general.” It can be assumed that this “matching process” and search for “the right fit” was carried out by all the participants; they decided to come to Vassar because they saw a matching correspondence between the school and themselves (Hollenbeck & Kaikati, 2012).

### **Hypothesis 3: Brand Incorporation into the Self-Concept**

Student F’s description of Vassar ended with a poetic note, “Finally, [Vassar is] the picture I’ll draw in decades to come when I think back about how all of this has shaped me.” Change is an inherent part of the college process, and a useful way to conceptualize this change is to think of how exposure to and experiences with the brand lead to brand incorporation into the self-concept. This framework by no means accounts for the sum total of changes experienced by students throughout college, but it isolates an interesting facet of this developmental process.

To distinguish between a general sense of change and the effects of brand internalization, it is important to identify the semiotic dimensions of “Vassar” in order to determine what brand characteristics have been integrated into participants’ sense of self. These perceptual dimensions were previously discussed, with the relevant attributes being the following: strong liberal perspective, heightened awareness of social justice, a passion for learning, a critical eye, drive, and high-standard academics.

Many of the participants described how they have adopted certain brand characteristics. The Vassar identity was inscribed into their self-concepts, becoming a part of who they are (Kelman, 1985). Student H said:

Because I felt like sort of brainwashed at first, which isn't necessarily the case. But I think last year, I had real, actual, physical-- not physical, but tangible changes in my opinions about social issues... I guess I became more liberal in that sense. I think it was a shift that was valuable and to be noticed. Not one way or the other, just the fact that it has changed me. Vassar definitely did something.

Student A said, "And, I think that one thing that Vassar strengthens that I used to have, and I still have, is just paying attention to detail. Or really trying not to take anything for granted. And just absorbing everything around me and having a fond appreciation for it."

Student E said:

I think that Vassar is really inspirational in the sense that there's so many people here who do so much with their summers and the jobs they get after. I think it's really pushed me to pursue things that I otherwise would have thought were so far out. So, I think that's what caused to do some of the things that I've done during the summer work-wise."

Student B added, "I've kind of gone from 'I'll probably get my masters' to 'I'll definitely get my PhD.' Just in one semester. It's definitely changed. Just on the academic side, Vassar really inspired me."

Student G said:

But I reflect back on my freshman self often. And I'm so glad I'm not that person anymore because of how much more aware I am about important issues that I just didn't even-- I'd been ignorant to before. So, I think it's definitely the courses that I take. Also, the passion that people have. Yeah, it's inspiring. I know more

about what I need to be concerned more about. I wasn't really concerned with much when I was a freshman, except really myself. Yeah. There's more work to be done. And I'm ready to do that work, and knowing what that is is helpful.

Student C said:

But it's taught me to learn from the people around me and to really recognize that there's a wealth of information in even any friend and any discussion. And to just really pull all that I can, and I guess use everyone for the valuable information that they can teach. Inside and outside the classroom, but mostly outside.

These stories showcase instances of brand incorporation into the self-concept. Vygotsky's (1978) three stages of internalization summarizes this process, where interpersonal processes transform into intrapersonal processes. Exposure to the brand, a selective choice in this case, serves as the first step in this process: an external activity becomes reconstructed as an internal operation. The social world, constituted by the Vassar community, acts as a powerful influence in the second stage. The peer group in particular operates as a socializing force, facilitating inculcation into the brand culture and internalization of brand attributes through a series of developmental events (Vygotsky, 1978).

Student E mentioned how meeting friends helped her open up to Vassar culture, which Student H also confirmed with his own experience: "So I had a population of people that I respected and would hear from finally, and who also happened to be your normal Vassar kids. So, I don't know. It allowed me to-- I guess I became more liberal in that sense." Student G similarly spoke about how

conversations outside of the classroom with her peers reinforced the learning process.

Obviously, though, Vassar is not a production factory for a uniform set of students. Individual differences account for this, as well as differences in socialization experiences. While Vassar embodies a core identity, its contextual identifications are highly situation-dependent. The Vassar that a theater major student experiences differs from the Vassar experienced by someone involved in the science department. While both students are receiving a broadly similar liberal arts education, they have unique experiences of different sides of Vassar. Selective exposure to these contextual identifications influence the relevant attributes incorporated into the self-concept. Student F summarized this point, "...I think your experience definitely differs depending on the academic course you take...I think the amount of growth that you can undergo in your four years here definitely depends on what you decide to learn also."

These results demonstrate the complexity and variation of brand internalization. The participants' accounts highlight the social dimension of internalization, calling attention to the fact that their peers served as a strong influencing factor in the assimilation process. As a result, participants incorporated specific brand attributes into their own self-concept.

## **Conclusion**

This focus group offered a grounded and in-depth look into the complexity of the Vassar brand. The innovative insights revealed during this study, specifically regarding congruence-evaluation and internalization processes, demonstrate the theoretical value in conceptualizing higher education institutions as brands. Furthermore, this focus group serves as a stepping stone for the study of higher education branding. To further investigate the semiotic nature of brands and processes of brand selection and internalization, a more comprehensive and methodologically rigorous study would be necessary. Such a study could also potentially explore the implications of meaning transfer and the way in which higher education brands are used as a symbolic resource in the social world.

## **CONCLUSION: REVISITING THE BRANDING FRAMEWORK**

The final section of this thesis revisits the conceptual framework of branding and offers a final set of conclusions. The need to re-engage with the branding framework became apparent in interviews with Vassar administrators. These interviews yielded mixed results concerning the internal conceptual positioning of Vassar as a brand. When asked whether or not they thought Vassar had a brand, interviewees' responses varied. Hill said:

I guess I slightly respond to brand as a word that I don't like using about a non-profit with a mission. I can understand where brand comes from, but I guess I like talking about our mission and our vision more than our brand. But in many ways, I guess you could consider them similar. It's what we think we do, and who we are, and that's closely tied, I believe, with our mission and what we think we're accomplishing.

Her answer demonstrates that the term "brand" is not used self-referentially within the internal structure of the college. The college does not use "brand" as a label or explicitly engage in "branding strategies." This assumption is also apparent in the other interviews.

Borus contributed his perspective:

Sure. You know, Vassar definitely has a brand. We have a brand as a highly respected, well-known, liberal arts institution with a little bit of an edge to it. And a bit of a creative bent. We also have a brand as a-- one of the things I didn't mention before is the beauty of the campus. I mean, that's part of our brand

too...that's all a part of our brand, the image of the place that we sell...So yeah, yeah, there's definitely a brand. And it's hard to protect, because you can't control what's being said about you out there. Erroneously usually, but it's out there...But sure, we have a brand. Every institution does.

DeKrey said:

Yes, I do. I do. I think it goes back to one of your very first questions, and I think that brand is the sort of sum total of those characteristics, those character characteristics, I guess that we talked about. I think it is thought of generally in a way that is, again, you know, the rigorousness, obviously very selective. I think those things just almost go without saying. But once that's said, there is this boldness, this innovative spirit, this ability to think outside the box, to try new things. I do think that's how it's thought about.

Kosmacher, on the other hand, expressed a negative opinion of branding: Which probably was something that was somewhat slowly adopted by higher ed, because I can imagine that colleges were not thinking of themselves in that type of identity. That you might associate with a product...And I can happily tell you that in my ten years at Vassar, I've never felt like we've ever even approached that realm where I would feel like we are branding ourselves or commodifying ourselves. And I wouldn't do this work, if that were being asked of me. Because it would kind of go against my principles.

While Borus and DeKrey conceded that Vassar is branded, the impression was given that this was indeed just that--a concession. From the interviews, it can be determined that the Vassar administration does not expressly operate

under the assumption that it functions as a brand, unlike other schools that publish branding platforms, for example.

In fact, Kosmacher very explicitly rejected the term brand and the possibility of Vassar engaging in branding strategies. He made a distinction between branding strategies and what he calls communication strategies: For us, in higher ed, to be clear, to be more effective in helping the public understand what a college has to offer. Or what a college is accomplishing and why that matters. But when you begin to simply take a college and try to boil it down into advertising lingo, that would be a distinction that I would make. That it's more about clear communication rather than opportunistic communication, where you're just simply trying to gloss what a college does rather than simply make it more clearly known...If you put five ads in front of me, I would tell you which of these colleges I feel is more in the branding end of the spectrum and which are more the clear communication end of the spectrum...I think when you get too toward the spectrum of sales, and less toward the spectrum of exposition, you know, that's kind of a big distinction.

He referenced an example of a branding strategy suggested by a PR firm for a college wanting to increase its sense of prestige:

So the college was called-- Let's just say hypothetically, Jane Smith College. And one of their pieces of advice to the college was to refer to itself as Jane Smith. Not as Jane Smith College, because the perception was that there was more cache in just being referred to as Jane Smith. Kind of as if you would think of Harvard. You know, people don't talk about Harvard as Harvard University. They

just refer to Harvard. Or even Vassar, right? Because we have name recognition in that singular word. You know, we don't have to call ourselves Vassar College. For many people, Vassar is enough. And that was some of the advice that this PR firm gave. And to me, it was completely upside-down advice, because Harvard has only gained its ability to refer to itself as Harvard because it has three hundred years of reputation. And it's kind of become a household name. By, to some extent, by advantage of being around so long and its excellence that it's maintained all those years. Same with Vassar. We're the first comprehensive women's college. So we gained recognition beginning in 1865, and we've had the benefit of that. But for a fifty-year-old college to think that it can someone gain a sense of greater regard or cache by referring to itself only as Jane Smith rather than as Jane Smith College, to me that's the epitome of branding mentality that diverts a college from really presenting itself more effectively.

This account not only provides an illustrative example for Kosmacher's argument, but it also serves to demonstrate a key linguistic phenomenon addressed in the conceptual framework of this thesis. The extent to which branding efforts can impose an artificial image are limited by the retroactive process of naming: "...the brand identity does not pre-exist the articulation of the relational complex but rather identity occurs through the naming" (Lowrie, 2007, p. 992). Through language practice, the brand is discursively positioned with respect to the relational hierarchy of higher education institutions. "Jane Smith College", then, cannot self-articulate its own identity as a more prestigious institution because the naming process is inherently retroactive. Kosmacher pointed to this flawed

logic as part of his argument against the branding framework. He contrasted the problematic branding approach with his own work with communication strategies.

He drew an interesting and insightful distinction between these two types of strategies. However, when his description of the expositional, clear communication strategies is compared with alternative understandings of branding strategies, a disjoint manifests. A comparative overview of the two actually reveals a number of similarities--so many similarities, in fact, it renders the two almost indistinguishable. Zhou (2012) identified many of the same procedural schemas within a branding context for Harvard that Kosmacher reported as part of his own job for Vassar, which he claimed has never involved any sort of branding. These similar procedural schemas include telling a story, communicating information about the college, providing a public representation of the college's identity, bridging knowledge gaps, and so on.

So, a discrepancy emerges. The strategies that Kosmacher enacts on behalf of the college are the same strategies that Harvard performs, but Harvard labeled them as branding strategies and Kosmacher identified them in antithesis to branding strategies (Zhou, 2012). This discrepancy exposes an ambiguity that surrounds the term.

Now, ambiguity is an inherent property of language. As has been demonstrated by the meaning of "Vassar," what one word means to one person can mean something completely different to another person based on differential knowledge and experience. Meaning exists as a dynamically constructive process (Hanks, 1996). A typical exemplar for the word obviously exists, though;

without a shared understanding of linguistic meaning, communication would not be possible. However, the perceptual instantiation of words is uniquely shaded for each individual.

This property of language contextualizes the semantic discrepancy regarding the term “brand”. This discrepancy, though, prompts two questions: What does “branding” mean? What is a “brand”? These issues were addressed earlier, but the interviews with administration members have exposed the need to clarify “branding”, specifically in the higher education context.

Part of this problem of ambiguity is derived from a deeper underlying perceptual difference. With branding’s conceptual link to commodification, resistance to the “education as commodity” discourse can lead to a stigmatized view of branding. A rift exists between views of higher education as a public good and the emerging view of education as a private good. Revisiting this debate will help clarify the divergent perceptions of branding.

The public versus private good debate ultimately stems from economic origins. The question of who should bear the economic burden of higher education condenses to a question of who is receiving the benefits of such an education. It can be argued “that the public gets benefits from people going to college and should not be transferring responsibility for the costs of education to students” (Baum & McPherson, 2011). This view falls in line with the conception of higher education as a public good.

The economic definition of a “public good” is contingent on the following conditions: non-excludability and non-rivalry in consumption. The non-excludability

condition states that no one can be excluded from consuming the good. The second condition asserts that the benefit of the good for each person cannot be diminished by any additional person's consumption of the good: everyone is able to enjoy the benefits of the good equally no matter how many people are consuming it. With these conditions in mind,

Higher education is not a pure public good. It is clearly possible to exclude people who do not pay. What people who call education a public good mean is that there are positive externalities--not all of the benefits accrue to the students...This is not an either/or question. The benefits of college are not all public and they are not all private. (Baum & McPherson, 2011)

To reject the commoditization of higher education, then, operates along a false assumption, at least in the United States.

Other nations may subsidize the cost of higher education to a higher degree, in accordance to the belief that tertiary education should be available for free or at low cost (Weber & Bergen, 2005). The variance in the range to which education acts as a public good also manifests within different levels of education; the public sector often provides free access to primary and secondary education (Shaw, 2010). These diverse approaches to funding education contextualize the private versus public good spectrum. With this spectrum in mind, higher education in the United States does not fully fulfill the qualifications of a public good, and so must be understood in the context of the economic reality: the majority of students do have to pay for their higher education.

However, people continue to treat this issue in higher education as an “either/or question”. The pervasiveness of this attitude fosters resistance within some areas of higher education toward commoditization and branding. Kosmacher explained, “So, it’s interesting because I’ve never really liked that term...because I think branding is a term more readily used with a commodity. Like toilet paper.” Kosmacher admitted, though, to his bias toward branding: “...what I consider branding or even what I would feel is somewhat of my negative orientation toward branding, others might feel is actually a constructive step forward. That in that sense it does end up in someone else’s mind, helping a college be better known by the general public.” He conceded that schools may feel pressured to adopting brand strategies. Schools like Harvard, for example, may be susceptible to marketing anxiety; once at the top, the prospect of dropping even one or two spots lower in the rankings may drive Ivy League schools to branding strategies in the hopes of maintaining their competitive edge. Alternatively, state universities may feel this same pressure to stay competitive more for the purpose of economic survival. Kosmacher sympathized with the financial obstacles that face state institutions. Nonetheless, he declared branding strategies to be only seeming solutions that inaccurately cast the public good of education as a mere commodity.

Others in the higher education circuit share Kosmacher’s perception of branding’s ties to commodification and the consequent belief that colleges and universities should not be “lumped together” in the same category as these commodities. However, other higher education professionals have come to a

different conclusion, “‘We’re not a breakfast cereal and we’re not a detergent,’ [President Susan Herbst of University of Connecticut] said. ‘But, we still need to communicate what we do, why we do it, and how we do it. Branding actually matters a great deal’” (Associated Press, 2013). Harvard professor and former Dean of the College Harry R. Lewis stated:

This whole notion of brand management is somewhat distasteful, because universities are not retail stores; they’re not sports teams. We’re not trying to sell a product after all. Somehow it seems slightly dissonant with the higher purposes of education, to think of it as a brand’...Fortuitously, branding need not emphasize the Harvard name over the education it represents. Shore says ‘Everything has a brand. All that branding is about is having a reputation. The question is what you want to have a reputation for. Harvard is a brand just like every other university. Do you just let that happen on its own? As Harvard has concluded, you don’t just let it pop out of the ether.’ (Zhou, 2012)

These perspectives reflect a burgeoning trend in higher education, where branding’s significance is becoming recognized.

Zhou (2012) posited that “Discomfort with the idea of branding potentially lies more with how these efforts are implemented rather than the actual efforts themselves.” This hypothesis speaks to Kosmacher’s concerns with branding and labeling the College as a brand, and perhaps grants valuable insight into how Kosmacher’s clear-communication and branding spectrum can be re-imagined with respect to a broader understanding of branding strategies.

Kosmacher conceded that the branding strategies he does not approve of and the clear communication strategies actually do share a commonality: ...where I think the two worlds can meet is in brevity. I think academics and the higher ed environment lean toward lengthy exposition, and without, you know, boiling down too much or dumbing, you know-- It's being able to make more concise statements that get your point across without that kind of indirect, lengthy exposition that higher ed is in the habit of. Because that's the way academics tend to work, and I think higher ed communications, and what would be called higher ed marketing now, was driven and led by an academic mentality. He pointed to the main difference between the two, though, as the underlying perceptual associations discussed above: "To some extent, it's actually talking about how you communicate by using that term...it brings a certain mentality to the process. That you're looking for catchphrases or trendy ways of talking about a college, rather than really focusing on what is the heart and soul of the institution." Branding does indeed seem to inherently trigger a negative association with commodification in the higher education context, as evidenced by Kosmacher's comments and statements issued from other higher education professionals.

However, the world of higher education seems to be re-appropriating the term--not only American universities and colleges, but higher education on a global scale. "Branding" has been linguistically re-positioned, instead referring to communication strategies aimed at keeping the university competitive, where, as Kosmacher says, brevity is key. This new conceptualization of branding leads to

a new imagination of Kosmacher's continuum, which can instead be thought of as a branding strategy continuum. Rather than aligning "branding" as one side of the spectrum, branding encapsulates the whole range of strategies. In this new spectrum, clear-communication strategies remain on one end, which contrasts with marketing strategies on the other. The marketing dimension of the spectrum includes advertising slogans and television commercials, whereas clear-communication efforts translate the essence of the institution. This re-conceptualization of branding helps answer the question "What is branding within the higher education context?" and serves to demonstrate the significant applications of branding for higher education.

The question of "what is a brand" does not have a clear answer. A brand is a culture. A brand is an identity. A brand is perceptually constituted. A brand is enacted by individuals. A brand has shifting, multiple dimensions, while at the same time embodying a stable, core set of values. A brand is unique--a distinguishing trademark.

The question of "what is the Vassar brand" also does not have a clear answer. In attempting to answer this question, this thesis first asked the question: how is the brand constituted? Through a linguistic lens, this thesis has explored the way in which people understand Vassar, perceive Vassar, experience Vassar, and talk about Vassar. The thesis analyzed these issues through a variety of perceptual perspectives, engaging with the multidimensionality of the brand. Through this process, the complexity of the brand became apparent--a product of the institution's cultural biography and social history. In this way, the Vassar

brand was shown to be historically constituted, perceptually embodied, and discursively constructed.

## References

- Aaker, J. L. (1997). Dimensions of brand personality. *Journal of Marketing Research*, 34(3), 347-356.
- About WSU: Why WSU. (2012). *Washington State University*. <http://about.wsu.edu/about/why.aspx>
- Appadurai, A. (Ed.). (1986). *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Archer, L. (2007). Diversity, equality and higher education: A critical reflection on the uses of equity discourse within widening participation. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 12(5-6), 635-653.
- Arnett, J. J. (2000). Emerging adulthood: A theory of development from the late teens through the twenties. *American Psychologist*, 55(5), 469-480.
- Arnould, E. J., & Thompson, C. J. (2005). Consumer Culture Theory (CCT): Twenty years of research. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 31(4), 868-882.
- Ashton, M. C. (2007). *Individual Differences and Personality*. Amsterdam: Academic Press.
- Associated Press. (2013, April 5). Cal, UCLA, MIT, Penn: add UConn 'brand to the list. *The Register Citizen*. Retrieved from <http://www.registercitizen.com/articles/2013/04/05/news/doc515e43b2dd34d790351656.txt>
- Avis, M., Aitken, R., & Ferguson, S. (2012). Brand relationship and personality theory: Metaphor or consumer perceptual reality? *Marketing Theory*, 12(3), 311-331.

- Barzun, J. (1968). *The American University: How It Runs Where It Is Going*. New York: Harper and Row, Publishers.
- Batra, R., & Homer, P. M. (2004). The situational impact of brand image beliefs. *Journal of Consumer Psychology, 14*(3), 318-330.
- Baum, S., & McPherson, M. (2011, January 18). Is education a public good or a private good? *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/blogs/innovations/is-education-a-public-good-or-a-private-good/28329>
- Brand overview. (2012). *The University of Texas at Austin*. Retrieved from <http://www.utexas.edu/brand-guidelines/brand-overview>
- Brand platform. *Washington State University: Brand Identity Standards*. Retrieved from <http://identity.wsu.edu/brandrefresh/pdf/2-WSUBrand-SecA-Brand.pdf>
- Bolton-Fasman, J. (2012, January 30). What should Vassar College do about its admissions mistake? *The New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://parenting.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/01/30/what-should-vassar-college-do-about-its-admissions-mistake/>
- Bourdieu, P. (1980). The production of belief: contribution to an economy of symbolic goods. (R. Nice, Trans.). *Media, Culture, and Society, 2*, 261-293.
- Chandler, D. (2007). *Semiotics: The Basics*. London: Routledge.

- Daniels, E. A., & Griffen, C. (2000). *“Full Steam Ahead in Poughkeepsie”: The Story of Coeducation at Vassar 1966-1974*. Poughkeepsie, NY: Vassar College.
- Duck, S. (2007). *Human Relationships*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications Inc.
- DuPuis, E. M. (2002). *Nature’s Perfect Food: How Milk Became America’s Drink*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Escalas, J. E., & Bettman, J. R. (2005). Self-construal, reference groups, and brand meaning. *Journal of Consumer Research*, 32(3), 378-389.
- “Facts.” (2013). *Vassar Facts View Book*.
- Fournier, S. (1998). Consumers and their brands: Developing relationship theory in consumer research. *The Journal of Consumer Research*, 2(4), 343-373.
- Hanks, W. (1996). *Language and Communicative Practices*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Haven’t people heard of Vassar?. (2010). *College Confidential*. Retrieved from <http://talk.collegeconfidential.com/vassar-college/899971-havent-people-heard-vassar.html>
- Hill, C. (2012, December 10). Become need-blind? For colleges, that’s the wrong question. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from [http://chronicle.com/article/Become-Need-Blind-For/136191/cid=wb&utm\\_source=wb&utm\\_medium=en](http://chronicle.com/article/Become-Need-Blind-For/136191/cid=wb&utm_source=wb&utm_medium=en)
- Hofstadter, R., & Hardy, C. D. (1952). *The Development and Scope of Higher Education in the United States*. New York: Columbia University Press.

- Hollenbeck, C. R., & Kaikati, A. M. (2012). Consumers' use of brands to reflect their actual and ideal selves on Facebook. *International Journal of Marketing*.
- Holt, D. B. (2010). Brands and branding. *Cultural Strategy Group*. Retrieved from <http://culturalstrategygroup/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/brands-and-branding-csg.pdf>
- Hoover, E. (2012, April 10). A president surveys the future of liberal-arts colleges. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Retrieved from <http://chronicle.com/blogs/headcount/a-president-urges-his-peers-to-reclaim-the-conversation-about-liberal-arts-colleges/29908>
- Howard, M. A. (2012). 2012-2013 series: Responding to the commoditization of higher education. *Presidential Perspectives*. Retrieved from <http://www.presidentialperspectives.org/pdf/2013/2013-Chapter-0-and-1-Against-the-Windmills-HE-Commoditization-Cevallos.pdf>
- Keane, W. (1997). *Signs of Recognition: Powers and Hazards of Representation in Indonesian Society*. Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.
- Kelman, H. C. (1985). Compliance, identification, and internalization: Three processes of attitude change. *Conflict Resolution*, 2(1), 51-60.
- Kirmani, A. (2009). The self and the brand. *Journal of Consumer Psychology*, 19(3), 271-275.
- Kizilbash, Z. (2012). Branding Canadian higher education. *CBIE PhD Research Series*.
- linsey1z. (2013, February 11). 22 Reactions to Westboro Baptist Church's plan to

picket 'Ivy League Whorehouse' Vassar College. *BuzzFeed*. Retrieved from <http://www.buzzfeed.com/lindsey1z/22-reactions-to-westboro-baptist-churchs-plan-to-969f>

- Lowrie, A. (2007). Branding higher education: Equivalence and difference in developing identity. *Journal of Business Research*, *60*, 990-999.
- Lyons, A., & Kashima, Y. (2003). How are stereotypes maintained through communication? The influence of stereotype sharedness. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *85*(6), 989-1005.
- Malar, L., Krohmer, H., Hoyer, W. D., & Nyffenegger, B. (2011). Emotional brand attachment and brand personality: The relative importance of the actual and ideal self. *Journal of Marketing*, *75*, 35-52.
- Markus, H., & Nurius, P. (1986). Possible selves. *American Psychologist*, *41*, 954-969.
- McCracken, G. (1986). Culture and consumption: A theoretical account of the structure and movement of the cultural meaning of consumer goods. *Journal of Consumer Research*, *13*(June), 71-84.
- McCracken, G. (1993). The value of the brand: An anthropological perspective. In A. L. Biel's & D. A. Aaker (Eds.), *Brand Equity and Advertising: Advertising's Role in Building Strong Brands* (pp. 125-139). London, UK: Psychology Press.
- Milestones in African American Education. (2007). *Infoplease.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0872844.html>
- Miller, D. (1998). *A Theory of Shopping*. New York, NY: Cornell University Press.

- Mission statement. *Vassar Office of Communications*. Retrieved from <http://collegerelations.vassar.edu/missionstatement/>
- Morse, R., & Flanigan, S. (2012). How U.S. News calculates its best colleges rankings. *US News and World Report*. Retrieved from <http://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/articles/2012/09/11/how-us-news-calculates-its-best-colleges-rankings?page=2>
- National liberal arts college rankings. (2012). *US News and World Report*. Retrieved from <http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/rankings/national-liberal-arts-colleges>
- Noy, C. (2004). Performing identity: Touristic narratives of self-change. *Text and Performance Quarterly*, 24(2), 115-138.
- Pinar, M., Trapp, P., Girard, T., & Boyt, T. E. (2011). Utilizing the brand ecosystem framework in designing brand strategies for higher education. *The International Journal of Educational Management*, 25(7), 724-739.
- Rhoades, G., & Slaughter, S. (2004). *Academic Capitalism and the New Economy: Markets, State, and Higher Education*. Baltimore, MA: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Ruff, V. (2002, Spring). Popular culture: Vassar steals the spotlight. *Vassar: The Alumnae/i Quarterly*, 98(2). Retrieved from <http://vq.vassar.edu/issues/2002/02/features/steals-the-spotlight.html>
- Saragoza, A. (2012). The 10 most DTF campuses. *CollegeMagazine.com*. Retrieved from <http://www.collegemagazine.com/editorial/2225/Top-10-DTF-Colleges>

- Saussure, F. (1995). *Course in General Linguistics*. La Salle, IL: Open Court.
- Schultz, M., Hatch, M. J., & Larsen, M. H. (Eds.) (2002). *The Expressive Organization: Linking Identity, Reputation, and the Corporate Brand*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Shankar, S., & Cavanaugh, J. R. (2012). Language and materiality in global capitalism. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 41, 355-369.
- Shaw, J. S. (2010). Education--A bad public good? *The Independent Review*, 15 (2), 241-256.
- Silverstein, B. (2008). Brands in a league of their own. *brandchannel*. Retrieved from [http://www.brandchannel.com/features\\_effect.asp?pf\\_id=446](http://www.brandchannel.com/features_effect.asp?pf_id=446)
- Smith, W., & Bender, T. (Eds.). (2008). *American Higher Education Transformed, 1940-2005: Documenting the National Discourse*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Srivastava, S., John, O. P., Gosling, S. D., & Potter, J. (2003). Development of personality in early and middle adulthood: Set like plaster or persistent change? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 84(5), 1041-1053.
- Sun, R. (2001). Cognitive science meets multi-agent systems: A prolegomenon. *Philosophical Psychology*, 14(1), 5-28.
- "Tour Guide Handbook." (2013). *Vassar College*.
- Unigo: Top 10 colleges with the happiest students. (2012, October 30). *Huffington Post*. Retrieved from [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/unigo/top-10-colleges-with-the-\\_b\\_1840568.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/unigo/top-10-colleges-with-the-_b_1840568.html)

- Unigo: Top 10 colleges with unique traditions. (2012, September 4). *Huffington Post*. Retrieved from [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/unigo/top-10-colleges-with-uniq\\_b\\_1855993.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/unigo/top-10-colleges-with-uniq_b_1855993.html)
- Unigo: Top 10 hipster colleges. (2012, September 7). *Huffington Post*. Retrieved from [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/unigo/top-10-hipster-colleges\\_b\\_1861977.html#slide=1505921](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/unigo/top-10-hipster-colleges_b_1861977.html#slide=1505921)
- Unruh, D. R. (1980). The nature of social worlds. *The Pacific Sociological Review*, 23(3), 271-296.
- Vassar Admissions (2012). Retrieved from [http://admissions.vassar.edu/finaid\\_tuition.html](http://admissions.vassar.edu/finaid_tuition.html)
- Vassar College Diversity. (2012). *College Prowler*. Retrieved from <http://collegeprowler.com/vassar-college/diversity/?page=1>
- Vassar College returns to “need blind” admissions policy. (2007). *Vassar Office of Communications*. Retrieved from <http://collegerelations.vassar.edu/2007/2450/>
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in Society: Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Weber, L., & Bergan, S. (Eds.). (2005). The public responsibility for higher education and research. Council of Europe: Council of Europe Publishing.
- “Westboro Baptist Church Picket Schedule.” (2013). *Westboro Baptist Church*. Retrieved from <http://godhatesfags.com/schedule.html>
- Wæraas, A., & Solbakk, M. (2009). Defining the essence of a university: Lessons from higher education branding. *Higher Education*, 57(4), 449-462.

Wengrow, D. (2008). Prehistories of commodity branding. *Current Anthropology*, 49(1), 7-34.

Zhou, L. S. (2012, March 28). Deconstructing the Harvard brand: A Harvard brand that reflects the student experience. *The Harvard Crimson*.

Retrieved from <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2012/3/28/making-the-harvard-brand/>

Appendix A  
Interview with Vassar College President Catherine Hill  
December 7, 2012

Interviewer: Okay, just to start off, if you had to describe Vassar in five or six words, which ones would you use?

Hill: Superb, liberal arts college. That's four words.

Interviewer: In terms of different adjectives, like highly selective, or community?

Hill: Well, liberal arts.

Interviewer: Mhmm.

Hill: Selective, community. Liberal.

Interviewer: What would you say Vassar's identity as a college is? Like if you had to say, this is how we are unique, this is what Vassar represents, how would you put that?

Hill: See, that's really interesting because I usually don't actually do that. Because I think about higher education a lot, and I think about liberal arts colleges a lot, and we're not like businesses which are competing with each other to grab the other's market share. So, Coke is trying to distinguish itself from Pepsi because it would like to have all of Pepsi's customers. But, in fact, we're looking for six hundred-sixty students every year, and we couldn't accommodate or house all of Wellesley's or Amherst's or William's, if we convinced them to come to Vassar. So, I mostly think about talking about Vassar as a really wonderful liberal arts college, and the fact that there are others of them is fine. It doesn't-- so I-- and in many ways, within higher-- this is more, maybe more than you wanted for a short answer, but--

Interviewer: Oh, yeah. This is great, honestly.

Hill: More-- within higher education, it seems much more important and strategic for us that we're a liberal arts college than I should be spending time trying to distinguish us from other ones of those. And, in many ways I think, we will all do well together if we're all doing well together. And-- So we shouldn't necessarily be thinking about competing with each other.

Interviewer: Mhmm.

Hill: Okay?

Interviewer: Yeah. Thank you. So, my next questions were, how would you say Vassar is similar and different from peer institutions. So I guess that answers--

Hill: Well, you know, having said what I said, which is I think the most important thing, it's then of course true that all of our schools are different because we've-- we were founded at different times, we've had different histories, we've evolved over time slightly differently, but again, I would say that we have much, much more in common than in fact we have differences.

Interviewer: Mhmm. So, since coming to Vassar, have your ideas or perceptions about Vassar changed in any way? Did you come into Vassar thinking it was one thing, like from your experiences with Williams, and then--

Hill: No, I feel like, I feel like I had a pretty good sense of the kind of place that it was, and you know I think there were some surprises of changing jobs from being a provost to a president, but in terms of finding things different here than I

thought they would be, in terms of it being a liberal arts college, and what it's mission was, no.

Interviewer: And would you say that the public image of Vassar is ever different from how Vassar wants to be represented? For example, the admissions mistake that went out. People in the news were characterizing Vassar as irresponsible, careless. How does Vassar work to consolidate those two representations?

Hill: It was interesting, that was a very intense four day period-- four or five day period.

Interviewer: I'm sure.

Hill: And I think kind of ironically, what got conveyed to the world more strongly was that Vassar was a very selective liberal arts college that people were really sad that they hadn't actually gotten into. So, I think there was a little bit of the careless, but in fact in most cases, I felt like people understood a technological mistake that had happened at other institutions and that continue to happen to other institutions after our mistake. And, I think in-- we learned a lot in responding, just about how little time you have to think about responding to something like that, just given the change in the rapidity of communication. It was a particularly difficult one for us because I had gotten on a plane at twelve noon that day to Tokyo, and the mistake happened at four o'clock, and I was still on the plane for another twelve hours. And it was the kind of thing where I needed to be involved in the discussions, and so people had to sit tight for twelve hours, which was really, I think, you know, just kind of the perfect storm in terms of being able to respond to it.

Interviewer: Yeah, definitely. How would you say-- Do you guys-- Does Vassar has a PR firm that they use to-- I know we have a College Relations department?

Hill: We have a College Relations department. We had previously-- For that particular example, we had previously been using an advisor to help us as we went through the economic crisis, and he worked very closely with our Communications Office on just, you know, best practices. But then, he actually switched jobs, and so at that point in time we didn't have anybody helping us. So, we since have found somebody else that we can call on when we need them, but we're trying really hard not to do that by making another mistake.

Interviewer: Yeah. So, how does Vassar undertake these processes of promoting, maintaining this reputation as a highly selective liberal arts college, in terms of faculty, in terms of communicating the level of academics here to potential students?

Hill: I think the most important thing, and I think we actually do this well, is that we recognize the most important thing is to do what we do really well. And that in some ways, don't start with the communication, but start with the commitment to the education and the mission, and then in some ways it speaks for itself. Although, of course we do have a Communications Office that helps us relay that information. But I've always felt coming in one of the things that I've really valued is, to me, we actually do what we do really well, and the Communications communicates that. And I don't feel that the Communications is spinning what we do or we're starting with a vision of what we want to communicate whether it matches who we are or not. I think we do a really good job of communicating

who we are. And that comes from a Communications Office that's really in touch with what goes on on campus and then does a nice job of communicating in a way that's consistent with who we are.

Interviewer: A little bit earlier, at the beginning, you were saying we obviously-- it's not a business in terms of how Coke is a business, but would you say that you of Vassar as having a brand?

Hill: I guess I slightly respond to brand as a word that I don't like using about a non-profit with a mission. So, I think-- I can understand where brand comes from, but I guess I like talking about our mission and our vision more than our brand. But in many ways, I guess you could consider them similar.

Interviewer: Mhmm.

Hill: It's what we do, and who we are, and that's closely tied I believe with our mission and what we think we're accomplishing.

Interviewer: Because I know other schools have been shifting towards this-- perceiving as their institution as a brand. And, maybe it's different for Vassar because it's a liberal arts college, and it kind of has this, like you were saying, this reputation that speaks for itself. So it almost, in terms of these other schools, maybe it doesn't need to have-- maybe it needs those strategies, in terms of having that competitive market, because they're bigger schools?

Hill: Yeah. I wonder if it's just a question of how schools choose to talk about these things as much as anything. And whether it's just a shift towards using language that's a little different and maybe a little bit more acceptable in some environments than in others, I don't know. It is true within American higher education that some schools are facing greater difficulty in terms of making sure that they have enough applications. That isn't an issue for Vassar or for many of the other highly selective institutions, and perhaps schools that are more worried about making sure they have a deep enough applicant pool are thinking of branding as something that can make sure that that happens.

Interviewer: No, that's interesting. I wasn't sure if that's how the administration was perceiving Vassar, as shifting towards the need for those strategies. But that's really interesting. I'm going to my backup questions now, I wasn't sure with the time constraints.

Hill: No problem.

Interviewer: So during the President's Welcome my freshman year, you mentioned how each class is specifically shaped, in terms of demographics, and interests, and abilities. How do you think that Vassar's identity is influenced and shaped by this group of students?

Hill: Well, I guess ultimately, what happens on campus is the interaction of the faculty, and the staff, and the students. And so when you bring a particular group of students to campus from all different backgrounds, geographically, racially, socioeconomically, it does affect what goes on here. So, I suspect the Vassar of today certainly has a different feel than the Vassar of a hundred years ago. Although there would be many things that, you know, remain the same, but there would be many things that would be very different, just as a result of the student body being so, so, so different than it was back then. But it would be a little hard

to sort it all out, because in addition to being, you know, decades-- There were so many things that would be changing it would just be hard to sort out everything.

Interviewer: Yeah, the cultural shifts from the--

Hill: Yeah. But I think a school, a school that's, you know, very diverse from all over the world is going to have a different feel from a school that's a regional school with significantly less diversity. So I think it does shape who we are.

Interviewer: How would you describe the Vassar community? And, after that, it's relationship with the Poughkeepsie community?

Hill: Yeah. So, I guess we talk about a community, and I would think that everybody's perception of what that community is colored by what their experiences are on campus. And again, from where everybody's sitting it might be a little bit different, but I do think that it's affected by faculty wanting to come to a place where it's a relatively small community, compared to teaching at a big institution. Where it's a residential liberal arts college, and that means that there's an understanding that it's not just the kind of place where you come in and you disappear, and you go home, but that being part of the life of the college is important. So, I think the faculty self-select to that, and I think the students do as well. So, I think we end up with a place where people are committed to engaging with each other fairly deeply over the academic year. In terms of the relationship to the Poughkeepsie community, I think it's overlapping in so many different ways. First of all, we have about, I don't know, over a thousand people who work for the college, and while many of them live on campus or right around campus, the Poughkeepsie and Dutchess County community is where they live, and where their families live, and their kids go to school, and their spouses, if they have them, work, or their parents live. So, that community is important to the people who work here because it's their community. I think we also have a student body that's not only interested in the college community, but many students come here with a broader interest in the community outside the walls and get engaged with that community from a very early stage. I think historically, Vassar was much more separate from the community, that partly was historically I think a result of both gender and class. I think, you know, upper, higher class students went to college. It was a women's college, which was unusual, so there was some sense of being protective of the students. It was from the very beginning really thinking of itself as national and not really thinking of recruiting locally. And when it did recruit locally, it tended to not have those students live on campus, so there was kind of a real distinction between the local students and the students were recruited from further away. But I think over time that has really shifted. We've certainly considered part of our outreach to the community to say to students that-- to high school students from the local communities that Vassar would be a great place for you to go to school, and we've been increasingly successful with that. And I think that that's blurred those lines between what the communities are, which is I think a good thing.

Interviewer: Yeah, definitely. Yeah, I actually have several friends who are from around here locally.

Hill: That's good.

Interviewer: Yeah, that's perfect. How would you say that you've changed since being at Vassar? Has your role of president and being this figurehead for Vassar changed you in any way?

Hill: I don't know-- that's really-- I don't know if I've actually--

Interviewer: Sat down and thought about it?

Hill: Thought much about that. Yeah, I don't know. Certainly, the first couple of years-- I mean, the first year or two was really just I came in recognizing that I just needed to get to know the place. I needed to get to know the faculty, I needed to get to know the staff, and the students, and understand the community. And then, unfortunately, we got hit with the economic recession in '08-'09, which was a huge external shock. So the next two years-- two or three years were really dominated with just figuring out how to deal with that. So, I guess I don't know that I've taken much time to reflect on that.

Interviewer: Yeah. It looks like we have a couple more minutes, I don't want to go over. I know you're very busy and booked up at this time of year.

Hill: I'm sure you are too, so.

Interviewer: Has-- You were mentioning the economic, has there been anything that you're specifically trying to shape or change about Vassar? I know there's a debate going on about need-blind admissions right now.

Hill: Yeah. I think when I came to Vassar, one thing that I did find really interesting was a slight disconnect between the rhetoric of the place in terms of its serving a diverse student body and its commitment to social justice, and when you actually looked at the data, it looked like we were spending less on financial aid than many of our peers and that we had a significantly less diverse student body than many of our peers. So, the college did decide at the end of the academic '06-'07 year, with lots of discussion with faculty, and the board, and students, that returning to need-blind would be a strategy for making a bigger commitment to a diverse student body. And we've, I think, succeeded quite well at that. I think there, certainly in higher education more generally, there are concerns about the affordability of that strategy, and I think there are some concerns about that on campus. Although, I think the board has been letting us get through this economic recession by taking slightly more from our endowment than would be sustainable in the long run to ride out the recession. So, I think it's probably a misconception on some people's part to think that if we weren't spending it on this we'd be spending it on something else. I think we'd in fact be leaving it in the endowment. And, we're hoping for the economy to pick up to moderate some of that need. And hopefully that will happen.

Interviewer: Yeah. That looks like all the time-- Thank you so much. This was a great interview.

Hill: Sure. Okay.

Appendix B  
Interview with Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid David Borus  
February 7, 2013

Interviewer: So, just to kinda start off, would you mind describing what you do as the Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid?

Borus: I do a lot of different things. Basically I'm in charge of the Admissions operation at Vassar, and I am-- I'm in charge of the Financial Aid operation too, although there's a director of Financial Aid who actually runs the office and does the day-to-day supervision of that process. But because Admissions and Financial Aid are so intertwined, both offices report to me. What do I do? Well, our job is about first getting the word out on Vassar, apropos of your project, and letting people know what Vassar is all about. What we offer, what we don't offer, so they can consider Vassar as one of their college options. And then, the larger part of our job actually in terms of time-consuming work, is the actual selection of the class each year, going through all the applications, coming up with a freshman class that is as talented and diverse and interesting as we can come up with each year. So those are the two main rubrics of our work in Admissions, and obviously in Financial Aid it's to make the resources available to students who qualify for them, so that they can afford to come and take advantage of what we have to offer.

Interviewer: Okay, and what five or six words would you use to describe Vassar?

Borus: Five or six words? Now, these words I would use, or that we use in our publications and presentations?

Interviewer: Both.

Borus: Okay. We talk a lot about things like the academic flexibility. We talk about our student body as being lively and engaged and bright, interested in many different things. We talk about community. We talk about involvement in that campus community. So, I mean these are, again, these are themes that we talk about. We talk about location a lot because that's one of the things that differentiates us from our peers, who are mostly stuck off in the boonies somewhere.

Interviewer: Williams.

Borus: Yes, exactly. So, those are all themes and words, phrases that we use.

Interviewer: Okay so, but if you had to put in your own words, those would be maybe slightly different based on your experiences?

Borus: No, it depends on what you're asking me to describe. It's hard to characterize an entire institution in a few words, and I've been here seventeen years. And so I know the place pretty well, and so it's-- and Admissions people love to talk. So it's very hard for us to be concise and use one word when twenty will do. So, it's hard to simply pick a few choice words. But, I think lively, engaging, community, diverse, all of those things are terms that we would pick up on and then expand on in our presentations.

Interviewer: Okay, so going off of that, how would you say Vassar has an identity?

Borus: I think Vassar doesn't have one identity. I think Vassar, like most institutions, has many identities depending on how one looks at it, where you're coming from, what your experiences have been coming in. And I think that Vassar's identity overall, obviously, is a high-quality, highly selective, very well known, highly respected, sort of a classical liberal arts college, with the added dimension at Vassar of having a long history of innovation that ties to those traditions of the liberal arts and has resulted here not only in our founding, which was radical at the time, but when we decided to go coed, which was also different from many of our peer women's colleges at the time, and has also revealed itself in our curriculum. We were among the first schools in the country to have interdisciplinary majors. We were one of the first schools in the country to have faculty from different departments crossing those departmental lines, working together in courses. And so that sense of adventure, that sense of innovation tied to that sense of tradition that the college has had for over a hundred years, is all part of it.

Interviewer: Okay, and how would you say that Vassar is different from our peer institutions?

Borus: Well, we're all different from one another in some ways. Some of the things that differentiate Vassar are some of the things I've already mentioned. One is our curriculum, which is much more flexible than the curricula at many of our peer schools because we don't have a core curriculum, we don't have distribution requirements. Students have much more flexibility and freedom to explore in the curriculum. And that the size of our curriculum. The fact that we offer-- a little college like this, offering over a thousand courses a year is really remarkable. And if you look at the offerings of most of our peer schools, they're nowhere near as rich as that, in terms of richness of the curriculum. So that's one thing that distinguishes us. Another thing that distinguishes us is our location. As I said, most schools like Vassar are off in the woods, or on a mountaintop, or in a small village in upstate New York, or rural New England, or in a cornfield in Iowa or something, and we're none of those. I mean, not only do we have a metropolitan area of over one hundred thousand people right here at our door, which affords lots of opportunities for volunteerism, for internships, for sort of more mundane things like shopping and restaurants, but we have access, fairly easy access to New York. And all that that means. So, our location really does differentiate us. We hear that all the time from students. You know, one of the things that really attracted me to Vassar, not necessarily Poughkeepsie, but the fact that you weren't off in the woods, and I don't want that. I don't want to be isolated. I don't want to be in a town with one drugstore and a pizza parlor. Welcome to Oberlin, Ohio, you know. It's not that, and people like that. And the other thing that characterizes us I think that makes us different from many of our peers is sort of the nature of our student body. I think because, in part, because we don't have a lot of academic requirements going in, we tend to draw a student body with lots of different interests. People like you, do Independent Majors and who have lots of things that they want to focus on. They may end up where they started. You know, they say I want to come in, I want to be a doctor. And they may end up being a doctor, but along the way they will have done lots of other

things to solidify that decision. And that's different. And not only curricular-ly, but we tend to bring in people because of our history, because of kind vibe we give off. This is not a school like some of our peers where everybody is sort of grinding it out pretty professionally. You know, I'm going to be an investment broker if it kills me kind of place. We have a lot more people who are, whatever their major, whether they're scientists or artists, who are creative, who like to play with ideas, who like to talk about those ideas. I think that our favorite sport here is talking, arguing.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Borus: We do a lot of that. So, our students tend to be I think tend to be on the whole more creative, maybe a little feistier, a little more expressive, more interested in some of the arts and humanities than you might find at a, not to knock other schools, but at a Williams or at a Middlebury or at a Trinity. Different-- I've worked at, this is my fourth liberal arts college that I've worked at, and our students are definitely different, on the whole, than the students at those other schools.

Interviewer: What other schools did you work at?

Borus: I worked at a couple schools in the Midwest. Where are you from?

Interviewer: I'm from Washington state.

Borus: Oh, okay.

Interviewer: Northwest.

Borus: I worked at a couple liberal arts colleges in the Midwest, at Earlham College and at Kalamazoo College. I then I worked at Trinity College in Hartford, which is my alma mater, before I came to Vassar. And so, different places, different sizes, different student bodies, but Vassar students I think are A) the best of the bunch, in terms of academics, but also the most interesting, so. I think that differentiates us. And I think that's a large reason why a lot of students end up applying here, because they like the vibe that they get from our students. Other aspects of Vassar, things like small classes, and great contact with faculty, and, you know, facilities, you can get those at most of our peers. But there are things about us that you're not going to get there. And those are the things we tend to emphasize in our information sessions and publications.

Interviewer: Yeah, my next question was, how are we similar to our peer institutions? So.

Borus: Well, yeah. I mean I think if you do the college tour, which I'm sure you did. Did you go around to lots of schools?

Interviewer: No, yeah. I only-- This is my data collection, so--

Borus: No, no, no. When you were looking at college.

Interviewer: Oh, yeah. Yes, I did.

Borus: Well, if you take the tours at the various schools like us, we all sound alike. And so, I'm always reminding my colleagues, what you need to emphasize is the things that are different about us, that differentiate us from our peers. Because if you talk about, too much, about small classes, and terrific faculty, and lots of clubs and organizations on campus, you sound like everybody else. Because everybody has all of those things in our, sort of, in our league, if you

will, you know, at our level. But it's the things that differentiate us that are really the things that are going to stick with people and that they're going to remember.

Interviewer: Okay, and you've kind of touched on this through your descriptions, but how would you say kind of has a personality? Like if you had to describe more personality traits, like you were saying maybe vivacious or--

Borus: Vassar's personality. Academically, I think a lot of our personality is revealed in that old chestnut that gets talked about all the time here--go to the source. I think our faculty expect that students will really dig deeply into the subject matter, and not just skim along the top and memorize the facts and spit them out on an exam and forget about them ten minutes later. You know, we're not that kind of place. And I think that's part of our personality. We get people here who really, for the most part, want to dig into things and are really intellectually curious. Another part of our-- sort of our personality is, and I may be wrong, I'm not a student, but I've always felt that Vassar is much less of a, sort of a cliquy, territorial kind of place among our students, you know. You see all kinds of people hanging out with all kinds of people here. And that's not the case at a lot of schools, it really isn't. And part of that I guess is because we don't have fraternities and sororities, and because it's just sort of the ethos here that is inclusive rather than exclusive. And I think that that's part of our personality. And some of the other things I mentioned about receptiveness to the arts. One other big part of that is our history as a former women's college. For a long long time after most of the liberal arts colleges in the Northeast went coed, you know, I went to an all-mens college which went coed in 1969, as did most of the schools, within a three or four year period there that were either all men or all women. And most of the men's-- all of the men's colleges went coed. A few of the women's colleges, Vassar, Connecticut College, Wheaton, and a few others. But at most of the schools, especially the ones that used to be all men, they always felt like, for the next two decades, they felt like men's colleges that happened to have women. Because the men still sort of ran the campuses. That's never been the case here. I think our brand of coeducation has always been-- President Ferguson, who preceded Cappy, he used to talk about it as a co-equal education, that you were just as likely to find a woman as the president of VSA or the head of the paper or whatever as a man. And that's not the case still on a lot of campuses. And where men still set the social agenda, and run the extracurricular activities, and so forth. Never been the case here. And so I think our brand of coeducation is part of personality too. I think men and women get along, not always, unfortunately, but get along a lot better here generally than they do at a lot of our peer schools.

Interviewer: Okay. And we've been talking a lot about the students here, do you think the students have an influence in this Vassar image?

Borus: Sure.

Interviewer: Or how is this stable over time versus this new incoming class of freshmen?

Borus: Oh no, no it doesn't change much from class to class. Images of colleges are very slow to change, even if there is genuine change going on on a campus, reputation and image lags decades behind that. So I think, you know, I think our

students definitely are a big part of the image of Vassar that's out there, for good and for ill. You know, there's one image out there that all of our students are New York hipsters, you know. And if you look at our student body for about five minutes, you'll see that's not true. We knew who these students were when they got here, and where they came from, and so forth. So it's always funny to us to hear people make these sweeping generalizations about our student body, and we know-- they're all rich hipsters from private schools in New York. No, not really. Sixty percent of them are receiving financial aid, and they're from all fifty states and sixty foreign countries, so not really.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Borus: But, sure. Image is a funny thing for colleges.

Interviewer: How would you say that-- would you say that the student influence is minimized because the admission process mediates it?

Borus: What do you mean the influence-- the influence on what?

Interviewer: So, if let's say the new incoming freshmen class was radically different from those before-- but that's usually not the case because admissions--

Borus: That's never the case.

Interviewer: Yeah. How would you say admissions plays a role in kind of mediating the type of student that comes here?

Borus: Well, we're looking, we go out, we beat the bushes. We look for good students in the fall, and then we read their applications. We're looking for the smartest, as evidenced by the academic credentials and history record of the student. The most diverse class, diverse broadly defined, not just ethnic diversity or racial diversity, but diversity of geographic, diversity of experience, of opinions, of interests. And the most interesting, you know. The people who have done or promise to do things to keep this a lively, engaging place to study four years and to work. And so we're looking to put together that class every year. It doesn't shift much in terms of-- I mean, there is folklore on every campus, and I hear it every year, no matter where I am and how long I've been doing this, which is almost forty years. I've yet to have a year where I didn't hear, directly or indirectly, from the juniors and seniors of the college that that freshmen class, you know, "They're admitting a whole different group of kids, and they're much more conservative, and they're much more narrow, and they're much preppier," or whatever, fill in the adjective. And then the previous class is, "Admissions is trying to change the college." Well, what they don't understand is that the freshmen-- they've had two or three years to change, and grow, and become who they are now. The freshmen haven't had that opportunity yet. So, of course they're going to look more like high school kids when they come in, because that's what they are. And Admissions is not trying to mold or fashion a class other than on those three dimensions I already talked about in any way. You know, we're not looking for a preppier, jockier, artsier, you know, more men, more women, more people from Montana. And any class, you know, we sort of look at the whole pool and take the ones that we think are most promising. And, you know, that's the way it works. And we don't know who's going to come of the ones that we admit. So, it's a minor crapshoot every year.

Interviewer: Mhmm.

Borus: But we go at it with the principles that we're trying to recruit the most academically able, the most diverse, and most interesting class we can come up with. And it usually plays out that the one class is pretty darn similar to the last class. Our applicant pool is large. This year we have seventy-six hundred applications.

Interviewer: Oh my goodness.

Borus: We're looking for a class of six hundred and sixty students. You know, we're going to take about between twenty and twenty-five percent of those that apply will be admitted. So, there are an awful lot of kids out there to choose from and most of them are pretty good.

Interviewer: Mhmm. Would you say that there is a "Vassar student?"

Borus: No. I wouldn't say there is a Vassar student. Other than, they're all smart. They all have done well in high school. Because if they haven't, they're not here. Whatever other characteristics they may have, if their academic record doesn't warrant it, they're not here. Other than that, you know, we're looking for students who bring a variety of interests, and a variety of talents, and a variety of experiences with them. So, to say there is a Vassar student would indicate that we're looking for people who are all alike. We're not. We're looking for people who are different by definition to some extent. So, no, there is no Vassar student. Other than they fit sort of that description I mentioned before. You know, they're smart, they're intellectually curious, they like to talk about ideas and other things. I mean I always joke, you know, ask five Vassar students their opinion, you'll get ten opinions. So, you know, it's that kind of place, and that's part of the fun of it.

Interviewer: Earlier you mentioned the kind of stereotype that surrounds Vassar sometimes, the New York, white, rich hipster. Would you say that that stereotype dissuades people sometimes from applying here? They think they're not going to fit in?

Borus: It might, it might. On the other hand, that's probably a stereotype that's only current in this area, you know. People from Washington state probably don't think of Vassar students as being New York hipsters. They may think there may be-- maybe they're too East Coast, and that's different from me. Or they're, you know, they all went to private schools, which, P.S., sixty-five percent of our students went to public schools. Or whatever they want to-- they see online and want to grab hold of on "College Confidential" or what have you. But the fact of the matter is, I think, sure. There are other stereotypes, you know, about Vassar. For several years, I'd go to college fairs and stand behind a table, and inevitably, a parent would come by, usually a dad, who would say, "Oh, Vassar. Great place. Too bad I can't send my son there." He'd start to chuckle, and I'd say, "Why not?" You know, because he didn't even realize we were coed.

Interviewer: Mhmm.

Borus: I'd say, "It's kind of only been forty years." You know, where have you been, in a hole? I didn't say that to them. You know, or we used to get the question at many information sessions, some parent would come up to one of us after we've given the talk and say, "Let me ask you a question. Is it true that all the men here are gay?" You know, and we say, "I don't know where you get this from." You know, and we give them the little spiel about, "Look, Vassar is a place

where people feel comfortable being who they are. You know, we don't take roll. We don't know and we don't care who's gay, who's Catholic, who's this, who's that, you know. Whatever. That one has died down somewhat in recent years, I think because it's no longer socially acceptable to ask the question out loud. Although they probably still have it. But, you know, those are the sorts of things that any school has to deal with to one extent or another. I know that from friends from Swarthmore that they get asked, you know, "Is this a place where people are all incredible nerds and nobody ever has any fun?"

Interviewer: That's a good question.

Borus: "Yes, that's right. That's who we are." So, these myths build up around schools, and you know the web simply helps reinforce them all. But no, I think while any of those individual characterizations of a place might dissuade a particular student who doesn't want to do the homework, who doesn't want to come visit, who doesn't want to look at the website, and find out there's much more to a college than that one-liner that somebody told them, "Oh, you shouldn't look there because..." If that student doesn't apply, so be it, you know. We have almost eight thousand applications, we don't need anymore.

Interviewer: How is Vassar represented to prospective students, in general, but also on campus tours and during information sessions?

Borus: We talk about all the things that I've mentioned. We talk about the curriculum, we talk about the academic program, we talk about the location, we talk about campus life, and student activities, and sense of community, and so forth. That's all in our publications, it's all in our presentations. If you read our view book for example, I mean, it tries to convey the sense that we're a place where you can pretty much decide what you are interested in. I mean look, if you open our current view book which is about to be changed, but for the last several years it starts with a blank canvass and it says, "Okay, Picasso." You know, you get to paint yourself here. Decide how you want to fill the canvas. And that's really the message we're trying to get, that this is a place with a tremendous amount of flexibility, and freedom, and ability to work with faculty to figure out, you know, your own directions. And your major is a perfect example of that. You can't do that at every school. And you can't do it with as much faculty support at every school. So, I think that that's the Vassar we try to portray in all of its facets.

Interviewer: One thing I did want to ask about that I thought was interesting, was someone had mentioned to me that at another school, they have a completely unscripted campus tour. They'll just send the student out, and the student will talk about-- I'm sure they give them some sort of structured guideline in general, but Vassar doesn't run that way, that's right?

Borus: Well, it's not scripted.

Interviewer: Mhmm.

Borus: Our tour is not scripted. We do give our tour guides A) a lot of training, and B) we give them a manual. And in the manual, there are a lot of facts and figures. They don't have to mention them all, but it's just so, you know, you know what the ALANA center is as you walk past it. And so that you can point it out, and then if people have questions you can answer them intelligently. Even if you're a science major, and you don't know anything about the music

department, well, you got to learn some things about it because people might have questions. And you can't just say, I think it's down there.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Borus: So, to the extent that we supply a lot of information, and we sort of, we do prescribe the route that people take. So that we make sure they cover as much of the campus as you can get to in an hour, and we tell which are the parts of campus, the buildings, whatever, that they really have to stop and talk about, because they're central to the place. The library, the chapel, the student center, etcetera. The residential quad. So forth. But other than that, you know, we give them a lot of information, but we don't tell them what to say. And our tour guides tend to be-- they're carefully selected. We have a selection process. They have to interview for the job. They have to talk about what they like and don't like, and so forth. We tell them to answer questions honestly, but from an informed perspective, rather than just, you know, grabbing it out of the air, saying, "I had a friend who I think maybe did that once." You know, that's not an answer. So, yeah, no. So it's not a scripted tour. They do not have a script that they're supposed to memorize, and then repeat.

Interviewer: Okay. And how does Vassar communicate with prospective students--sending information packets and so on? And who is selected to receive this recruitment material?

Borus: Well, we do it in many ways to different segments of the potential audience. In the spring, do you remember when you were a junior, and suddenly you received an onslaught of mail? Okay, the College Board Search Service, that was triggered when you checked, innocently, checked the box on your PSAT that said, "Yes, I want to receive information from colleges." Do you remember doing that? Well, that led to the deluge. And so, we do, we and all of our peer colleges, we buy names from the College Board who fit certain criteria. We give them academic parameters, geographical parameters, academic interest parameters. I mean, we're not going to mail out to people who want to be electrical engineers, because we don't do that. Or major in agriculture, because we don't do that. But if you want to major in English, and you meet these criteria that we set, we may mail to you. So, we mail out a fairly substantial number of brief pieces, we call it the search piece, obviously, with a letter and a return card, and students can do that or they can go to the web, and fill out a form there. That gets them sent a view book in the summer, much more extensive publication, that has lots of information on the college in it. And we have constant back and forth on the web, I mean, on email with students. Everyday, we get hundreds of emails that come in we get answered. We visit high schools in the fall, and somewhat in the spring, mostly in the spring we go to college fairs that are around the country. In the fall, we visit high schools in thirty-five to forty states and abroad every year. Just to see students who are interested in Vassar, who might be. We do a bunch of college fairs in the fall and spring. We have our alumni volunteers who do another hundred or so college fairs for us around the country. And so there's a lot of outreach that goes on. We work with talent search, and sort of community-based organizations, talent-search organizations, CBOs, non-profits all over the country, scholarship organizations who have access to kids who normally

wouldn't be looking at a place like Vassar, so that we can diversify our student body in many ways, mostly socioeconomically. And so, there's a lot of outreach that goes on in a lot of different ways: print, web, in person, and through third parties.

Interviewer: Mhmm. Okay. And I know we've been focusing on Admissions, maybe. Going over to Financial Aid for a minute. How will the shift away from need-blind admission policy affect the admissions process?

Borus: How would it affect the admissions process?

Interviewer: Mhmm.

Borus: Well, it would change our message, if you will. One of the great things about being need-blind is that we can give a very straightforward, succinct, and attractive message about financial aid. That is that we don't consider your financial status in the admissions process, at least if you're a U.S. citizen or permanent resident. And we will meet a hundred percent of your demonstrated need for every student that we admit. Now, if we shifted away from need-blind, as Wesleyan did this past year, the second part of that would still be true. We would still meet a hundred percent of need for everybody we admitted. But we would have to take, for some portion, probably a small portion, of our applicant pool at the end of the process, we would probably have to take need into consideration. That muddles the message that you can give to people. People tend to see being need-blind or not being need-blind as sort of a litmus test. For some people, a point of morality. It's not morality, it's finances. And schools can only do it if they can afford it, and a lot of them, first-rate schools, can't afford it. Whether we can sustain it forever, who knows. It's very expensive. But it's the right thing to do, if you can afford it. We're hoping we can. Would it cost us some applicants? Yes, it would. But how much the effect would be? I don't know. Impossible to say.

Interviewer: Do you think that would affect the type of students who would apply here?

Borus: Not really, the type of students would be the same. We might not have quite as socioeconomically diverse an applicant pool as we do now. I think that's probably true. But the impact on the freshmen class would not be that great one way or the other. We can still admit who we want to admit, for a whole variety of reasons. And I think too that we used to not be need-blind. We used to be need-sensitive, at least at the very end of the process. And the type of student that came to Vassar then is pretty much the same kind of student that came to Vassar now. You know, we're more diverse now than we were then. And I think part of that has to do with our outreach, part of that has to do with being need-blind and being able, therefore, to reach out more easily to some segments of the high school population. But I don't think it would change dramatically.

Interviewer: Okay. And my last question is, do you think that Vassar has a brand?

Borus: Sure. You know, Vassar definitely has a brand. We have a brand as a highly respected, well-known, liberal arts institution with a little bit of an edge to it. And a bit of a creative bent. We also have a brand as a-- one of the things I didn't mention before is the beauty of the campus. I mean, that's part of our brand too. You can't imagine kids, I hope are past it, but how many kids have written their essays or said, we have a question. You know, basically, "Why Vassar?" And if I

never see another one that says, "Vassar looks just like Hogwarts," it'll be too soon. I'm hoping we're just about over Harry, but, you know, that's all a part of our brand, the image of the place that we sell. Close student-faculty interaction, that's an important part of our brand. Not that that's unique, schools like us, but it's an important part to establish for students and families that they're going to find that here. So yeah, yeah, there's definitely a brand. And it's hard to protect, because you can't control what's being said about you out there. Erroneously usually, but it's out there. I've been doing this a long time, and when I started, the only information that a student got on us, on a college, was what the college sent them. There was no other place to go. I mean, you could go to your public library and find the catalogue, because all the public libraries used to have college catalogues in them. And so did all the college guidance offices in high schools. That was it. If you were lucky, and you asked us nicely, we would send you a view book. And it was all propaganda, obviously. Everything was reflected in the most positive light, and there was no other place to get information on colleges. With the advent of the web, obviously that's all blown up, and colleges now have virtually no control over what's being said about them out there. So you just have to not worry about it, and make sure that in all the presentations and publications, contacts that we have with the people, that we're emphasizing the things that truly do make Vassar distinctive. And the field has changed dramatically in that regard. But sure, we have a brand. Every institution does.

Appendix C  
 Interview with Vice President for Communications Susan DeKrey  
 February 22, 2013

Interviewer: Okay, so to start off, what do you do as the Vice President for Communications?

DeKrey: I oversee the Office of Communications, which, I guess, no surprise. Which encompasses a whole range of communications areas, from editorial services, writers and editors who do a variety of publications, print and electronic, for the college. We also have print designers here, who are responsible for everything from, you know, invitations to campus events to very high-end catalogues for the Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center, and, probably, about ninety percent of all the rest of the printed matter you see on campus, from posters, to brochures, to flyers, whatever it might be. We have a web development team here, because our office is responsible for the official web presence of the college. So we have both technical people and designers who do that. We have Media Relations staff, who are responsible for communicating about the college with the media on all levels, national to local. And then, there's some community outreach. Our Media Relations Director is also the Director of Public Affairs for the college. So, you know, for example, oftentimes things that involve media also have that very public affairs side to them. One recent example is the effort to reduce the deer population on the farm and preserve. So he's kind of in the front line of answering questions that the press have about that, and also working with neighborhood groups and individuals who have questions and either are happy or unhappy about what the college is doing. So, we do a good deal of that. And we also-- This office oversees the Powerhouse Theater, which is a summer professional theater season that we do in partnership with a theater-producing company in New York City. We've been doing it for just under thirty years now.

Interviewer: Oh wow.

DeKrey: And there's a professional season of all new work, with a lot of emphasis on the development of new plays. And then we have a training program, where we have somewhere in the neighborhood of forty apprentices, actors, playwrights, and directors, late high school through college age, and sometimes older, students who come into a six week program here. I think that covers it. So overall, collectively-- Oh, excuse me. I did forget something. We also now incorporate, and this is new, relatively new, for our office, alumnae/i communications. So the "Vassar Quarterly" is located here, Vassar alumnae/i web presence, "The Hub" is a new website. We are responsible for that as well, so. It's kind of a wide range of things.

Interviewer: Yeah.

DeKrey: Never, never dull.

Interviewer: Kind of transitioning to Vassar, what five or six words would you use to describe Vassar?

DeKrey: I did give this one, you know, some thought, and I wrote them down because I didn't want to forget. There are probably some that I'm, you know, I'm missing. But here's what came to my mind. Historic. Bold. World-changing, I think

is one. Risk-taking. Innovative. Those two are kind of, I guess, connected. And then, the word access. Because I think that increasingly Vassar has been doing a lot to level the playing field for talented students who would like to come here. So, that's my list.

Interviewer: Awesome. Thank you.

DeKrey: Mhmm.

Interviewer: What would you say Vassar's identity as a college is?

DeKrey: Well, I think Vassar is, as, you know, some other highly-rated, you know, liberal arts colleges certainly, and universities too, frankly, in some respects, although colleges and universities differ in some fundamental ways obviously, but there's a rigor, a selectivity. I think in our case it has that historic quality. And that quality of being, you know, an institution that broke through barriers at an important time. And I think that, depending on the audience, is still part of the identity. Sometimes younger people may not be as aware of that. And particularly depending on where you live. But people my age or older, and certainly, you know, a few decades younger probably, many people still think of it in that way. But I would say rigor, selective. I think, again, innovative. I think in a certain way, there's an edginess about Vassar, and I use that word in a positive sense, where, you know, things are not really prescribed in certain ways that one has to follow a certain path. You know, I think there's a sense as you get to know Vassar, it's something that we try to communicate, that you can create your own path. And that it can be a transformative experience coming here for you in the way that you want it to be. So, individualistic I guess is probably not a bad word in that way.

Interviewer: And how would you say that this Vassar identity is contextualized by similarities and differences we have with our peer institutions?

DeKrey: Yeah, that's a tough question that you're asking. I mean, because obviously there are similarities in the rigor. You know, probably to some large degree in the course offerings colleges our size are going to have. Also, that close, you know, student-faculty ratio in terms of numbers, and most of them have a residential nature, you know, to them as we do. But, I think one of the things that sets us apart is our location. I think that one of the things that we say is that we have three locations. We have the beautiful campus, we have the, you know, extraordinary Hudson Valley, including Poughkeepsie, which offers, I think, a lot of students opportunity for internship and fieldwork and all that in kind of a really more accessible way than might be the case in a bigger city. You know, I think you can get in there and actually get your hands on the work, rather than, you know, waiting for a student to make coffee or whatever the line of duties might be. And then, there's also New York City, which is a very real attribute. I also think the size and the breadth of our curriculum sets us apart. I think to have something in the thousand courses really does-- is different from certainly some of our peers. I think our commitment to egalitarianism, and I mean that in terms of the opportunities, both to come here and once you are here, be able to do the things that any student would have the opportunity to do, is something that does set us apart. Not from every peer, but from a lot of peers. And I think that's certainly an important thing. So, those three things came to my mind.

Interviewer: Great. And you kind of touched on some of these when you were describing Vassar, but what would say Vassar's personality is as a school? Like you described it as edgy and individualistic, which I think kind of speaks to that.

DeKrey: Mhmm. Well, you know, I think that as a personality, it is those things. And so we should put those on the list. But I think maybe edgy is the same kind of thing, or what I mean by edgy is bold. There's a boldness. I think about Vassar, it's very founding, was really bold for someone to do. You know, at a time when women weren't even really having high school education, so you know, starting a college for women. So, there's certainly a lack of acceptance of the status quo and what's expected, and I think that that permeates the Vassar character or personality. I think there's a certain inclination or attraction to innovation. And what I mean by that is, you know, there's certain ways of gaining competency in areas and then going out and, you know, performing a job and using those competencies. And that's a very great thing. But I think what I found in the years that I've been at Vassar and meeting alums, and certainly students too, is there's a desire, and often very strong desire, to do it in a way that takes the field, the expertise, whatever job it is someone's doing, in a way that might not have been done before. Or to try new things, to take it further, to accomplish something that wouldn't be expected in that initiative. So, anyway. That's, yeah. I don't know exactly what one word to put on that, but it's--

Interviewer: Well, I think there's a lot of words you can--

DeKrey: Yeah. Yeah. Associate with it. But I think there is that energy to be innovative.

Interviewer: And, so I think in the Admissions material, I was reading up on it, and it was saying that, you know, who we are as Vassar, that comes a lot from the students and faculty. And to try to address that issue, I think that a lot of that personality and identity does come from the students, but also those students are shifting. They come in and out, while the Vassar identity stays the same. So, kind of this interaction between how the students contribute to the identity, but then they also are kind of part of this larger process that kind of reinforces that pre-existing identity.

DeKrey: Mhmm. Yes. Well, we have said, if the Admissions materials, the Admissions communications, and that includes the Admission staff and what they go out to schools and fairs and other things and say about the college, how they talk about it, and also how they do that, and showcase the college when people come here. So that big Admissions communications, if we all collectively, the Admissions Office and we, do it well, then we should be attracting students who are interested in the kind of place we are. So their inclinations, not necessarily their specific personalities, but their inclinations and their preferences in terms of how they want to approach their learning experience here, should be in sync with the kind of institution we are. So there should be a-- you know, you hate for people to arrive and think, "Oh, this isn't the kind of place I thought it was." And I think our ability to not just attract students but to retain students over a period of the four years, that usually comprises their time here, it's a very high number. So I think that the students certainly-- I mean I guess, and this is kind of rambling, but there's a kind of nice, if it works well, there's a nice interchange that the

students who come here are very much in sync with the personality of the college. Right, and it makes for a happy-- does that in any way answer what you're getting at?

Interviewer: Yes, definitely.

DeKrey: I think it has to do with whether the communications are really reflective of the kind of place this is. And, you know, sometimes that doesn't happen. And then there's, you know, sort of disappointment or confusion about, you know, what kind of a place it is, if a college or university doesn't do that well.

Interviewer: So how would you say that the larger media influences the Vassar image? And after that, what is Vassar's relationship with the media on a local scale and a larger national scale?

DeKrey: Mhmm. Well, again, my perspective is that we are who we are. We have an identity, it goes back beginning in the middle of the nineteenth century, or in the 1860s. And, you know, certainly it's changed and evolved, but there's a fundamental character to the college. And that doesn't change depending on what the media does or doesn't do. You know, we don't change. We are who we are. And, you know, we don't change who we are or portray ourselves in a different way in order to get media attention. That would be a very slippery and slippery slope, I think. But the ways in which we work with the media, and I don't know are you asking me practically how we do that or?

Interviewer: Yeah, because I'm not very familiar with these processes.

DeKrey: Well, one of the things we do is to-- we have on the local level, primarily, a lot of exchange with the media about what's going on on campus, events, performances, you know, lectures, things we want the local and regional community to know about and to attend. And on a national level, that's less the case obviously. And what we look to do there is to get out stories that will represent that basic, fundamental character of the institution and put a human face on it. I think to tell a good story about the kind of people who make up this place, so that, again, the word is out to prospective students and their families who may not even have had Vassar on their radar. And that, you know, to one of the questions you had asked about the far-flung areas of the country it can be harder for Vassar to be known than in the Northeast, you know. So, we try to tell good stories that reflect that bold thinking, that innovative spirit, that breadth of our curriculum, the ability of people to do hands-on, higher level research in all fields here as undergraduates, where often that might not be the case in university settings. Often you may have to wait until you're a graduate student, you know, to be able to do that. So, that's our goal really with the national media, as well as this characteristic of being accessible to people of all income levels. We've been doing a lot of work in getting that message out through national media, including through our president, as a higher ed economist who's been very generous with her time in writing op-eds and other pieces that get out there and make that case. And also most recently with the Veterans Posse Program that you may have heard about, we're bringing veterans to campus beginning in the fall.

Interviewer: Oh, I didn't know that.

DeKrey: Yeah, we're bringing a group of, this will be eleven, actually, veterans who will be starting as students in the fall. And, so this is opening, in another way, opening the college up to-- And so we're working to get that word out, you know, on a national level. So, it's not like we-- it's just like we want to represent ourselves, and who we really are, in the most interesting stories that we can come up with and try and convince the press that they should be as interested in those as we are.

Interviewer: Yeah, you kind of touched on this next question as well, in how does Vassar choose what stories are featured in press releases and what attributes and events Vassar tries to highlight. You kind of touched on that, I don't know if you had more to say.

DeKrey: Not really, but when events and things that are happening on campus, we really try to get the word out on almost all of them if they're open, you know, and welcoming to an off-campus audience, which is the case for almost everything, so.

Interviewer: So, this question is from last time, and it's how strong would you say Vassar's reputation is? And do you think the strength of this reputation has changed over time? For example, it's been suggested that Vassar was perhaps more prominent when it first opened, because of its role as a pioneering women's college. Now, it seems that people from other regions don't recognize the Vassar name. On the other hand, Vassar gets an incredible amount of applications from all over. So, kind of getting at that paradox.

DeKrey: Yeah, it is a paradox, it really is. And I think that there's certainly is something to be said when it was the premier women's college, and, you know, it had that history of having broken through something that was the all-male barrier there, may be true. That it may have been, you know, more well-known in certainly some circles at that point in time. I think that over the last, I would say, Andrea, the last decade or so, let's say, it has really become much more, I think, nationally, and to some degree internationally, well-known as a rigorous, highly-selective, liberal arts college. And that's been an interesting challenge for us in Communications because we don't ever want to, and would never, and don't ever deny our history, we only acknowledge it and celebrate it as a women's college. And so we start there, that's its founding. And that that founding, in fact, has informed the way the college has developed over the years and it's, I think, openness and egalitarian, you know, sort of spirit. But it's also really important that we do reflect the reality of the school, which is coed now. You know, so we have to be respectful, and kind of springboard from that history, you know, into the reality. And, I think it is true, you know. It's probably just a fact of life, although our Admissions staff, you know, is out traveling now more and more and more all over the country. There are undoubtedly pockets, you know, as you get further away from the Northeast, where we certainly aren't as well known. But I think we're really working on that and making progress. And David Borus may have told you, internationally, I mean, it's just incredible. Take China, for example, you know, I think-- I can't remember the number of years, he'd have to remind me of this, and maybe if you're interested you can get it from him, but the number of applications from China, you know, from twenty-five to two hundred and fifty in a

very short period of time. So, you know, it's, I mean I guess it's like everything, the internet makes everything, you know, accessible to everyone.

Interviewer: How would you say technology has kind of changed this process of communication?

DeKrey: I think it's changed it dramatically. You know, we used to, and I've been here long enough to remember this well, we used our view book, you know, overseas, when we were recruiting international students. And, you know, sometimes it would take so long for the book to get there that it would be almost time for the deadline to be there by the time they got the materials. Obviously, with the internet, it's just blown everything apart in that way, in a good way, you know, for us because we can obviously showcase the campus, which is just a huge selling point for this place. And, you know, we can do videos, and David tells me that many international students tell him they've watched all of the YouTube videos on the Vassar channel, you know, and--

Interviewer: There's two hundred?

DeKrey: Yeah, I mean, probably none of the rest of the students have done that, but when you're just eager because you're not going to get to get there and look at it. If you're interested in the school especially to take in all you can about what's going on there. There's so many more tools available to us, so it's just made it a completely different world. And, it has increased our work many many fold as a communicator because, you know, for good and bad. I mean, we have to do print. We do a little bit-- our view book is a little less thick now because a lot of that detail's online. But, you know, everything is online, as you well know, that we have nothing to do with. So, opinion about the school, you certainly have much less control over the messaging about the college. If someone doesn't like something about the college, they can put it anywhere they want, on their Facebook page, or many other postings. And, you know, so for good and bad. You know, you get a world that is much more open and challenging.

Interviewer: Do you-- on just kind of a side note--

DeKrey: Yeah.

Interviewer: Do you guys produce those YouTube videos, the Communications Office?

DeKrey: We do.

Interviewer: Okay, so you hire a videographer?

DeKrey: Well, we have a-- actually we work with a number of videographers. We don't have anybody on staff who does it, although we have students who are work study students who are videographers usually, one or two. But we work with current students just on a project basis, and we work with a number of young alums who've graduated with film majors here who continue working with us after they graduate, yeah. So, yeah, we, you know, we do those with very limited budget.

Interviewer: Would that be something that you would put more budget in the future?

DeKrey: Yes. No, it is. And, you know, if I had unlimited funds, or, you know, could control everything, I would definitely want to hire a videographer, I think that would be-- Because something happens, and, you know, spur of the

moment. And I think also when you have someone on staff, you're just incorporating that thinking all the time, about what next project you want the person to work on. I mean we do a fair amount of that planning now, but then we have to find someone who's available, you know, work through the contract with that person, etcetera etcetera. So, yeah.

Interviewer: Okay. So, does the public image of Vassar ever differ from how Vassar wants to be represented? With the admissions mistake, for example, people in the news were characterizing Vassar negatively. How does Vassar work to consolidate its desired representation and how it can, or has been, portrayed and perceived.

DeKrey: Sure, yeah. No, that does happen. Yeah, you know, it certainly does, and the admissions issue, you know, is probably the most recent example of that. You know, it's very difficult in those circumstances because stories like that, particularly one in which people were, you know, very disappointed and hurt and upset by what happened. The students, their families. I mean, it was heartbreaking for us to read those things. You know, that someone had gone out and had celebratory dinner with family or have already purchased the Vassar t-shirt. I mean, it was a very difficult and challenging issues. But in the media, you know, it was interesting, because it started, of course, in social media. That's where it first surfaced. And someone had posted on College Confidential or one of the other, you know, sites that this had happened to them. And so, there was not a lot of time to plan a response. You know, all of a sudden, you were in the midst of it. That's a change from having to wait for a reporter to call you, in that way the story is taking on a life of its own. And then it's just that kind of story, I think, where there was someone who was at fault and there were people who were harmed by that mistake. And it's really hard to counter that, you know, and I think the only thing that an institution can do-- well, a couple of things. I mean, you have to sort of stand steady, assess what's going on, take a breath and be able to assess what's going on. And then you just tell the truth. And I think you tell the truth, you tell the whole truth, as much as you know, in one statement so that your principles and your ethics are not questioned. And I think, in the end, while it was very hard, and certainly, probably left some pretty deep scars, I think there was an understanding that it was a mistake, and that no one tried to hide the mistake. No one tried to deny that the mistake happened. And one thing that a guy who's a real public relations, you know, guru, has been-- you know, one of the very early people in the field, actually. I had the occasion to talk to him once and he said, you know, "You tell the truth, and, if you do that, and you have not gone against your mission or your principles, most institutions can weather, you know, can weather crises like that." So, I guess you have to just be true to who you are, and if you think of the institution, you know, as you had said Andrea, as a person. You just step forward, and you tell the truth.

Interviewer: Alright. And this next question kind of feeds off of that one, we kind of discussed it. How negative evaluations in the media affect the overall reputation, and how this reputation absorbs those blows?

DeKrey: Mm. I think it does affect it. You know, depending on what the negative issue is. Probably for, in most cases, for a limited time. You know, there may be

an immediate reaction, maybe it carries over, you know, for a bit longer period. And I think you just absorb them, and, for a while unfortunately sometimes in the media you have to live with that negative characterization. And occasionally, if there's another instance of such an event, that happens elsewhere, as with the admission communication error. There was another school to which that happened, and they had to bring up Vassar, that we also had that issue. You live with that kind of trail behind you for a bit. But I think you overcome that. You know, it's not something in most cases that is going to change the impression of the institution publicly in any permanent way. I think there are things that can do that, by the way, at institutions. But I don't think that most crises do that.

Interviewer: Okay. And, so, last time you mentioned that kind of different sectors and segments of audiences that you target--

DeKrey: Yes, we do. Yeah.

Interviewer: So, kinda what differences characterize those demographics and changes in the messaging?

DeKrey: Well, that's really a difficult one. Yeah, they're from, you know, what did we say, fifteen or younger. Probably younger. To, you know, our alumni who are up there in their years, and then the general public. So, I think what we try to do is to recognize the primary audience of something that we're creating. A print piece, or a-- In some cases there are websites that have a target audience, many of them don't. It's just-- it's our front door. The home page, for example. An admissions site. Admission print materials. We assume that they have to appeal to the prospective student. If they don't, it doesn't really matter how much a family person, mother, father, grandmother, grandfather, who sees those wants to influence that decision, it's probably not going to happen. So we try to make sure that we think they're going to work for our primary audience, but we do take into account the fact that we understand, the case of admissions grandparents, other people in the family are going to see those. And they also have to be convinced, most often, you know, that the investment is going to be a good one, etcetera. But, that usually comes after a further delving into the detail of what's being offered here. So, it's not a perfect communication strategy by any means, because you do your best to make it work for a particular audience. But it also has to be not unappealing for others. So, if you look at the alumni website, for example, "The Hub," now. You know, we try to think as we're coming up with our content week by week, because we have a lot of feature content there, we want to make sure we have a range of things. And we'll also think to ourselves, "Well, that story that we're thinking about, maybe that's better in the print magazine." If one can in any way count on age differential between who's using computers and who's not, and I think that's risky business, but there may be some generalizations that hold there. So, it's just deciding which medium might-- your best guess of which medium would probably work best. And we do readership surveys, and, you know, that include electronic and print with our alums to find out what they're using for what and try and get a sense of that so that we can do less here and more here. And occasionally we do focus groups with prospective students so we can kind of do the same. But it's a challenge, it's very challenging

for a small staff to be feeding all of these outlets, you know, on a pretty constant basis.

Interviewer: Yeah, so it sounds like you collect a lot of information that inform those messaging decisions--

DeKrey: Yeah, we do. Yeah, and then I think there's the experience of, you know, over years of anecdotal feedback and, you know, your own sense of what works in what medium.

Interviewer: What do those-- you have focus groups with prospective students?

DeKrey: We have had. And we usually, more recently, have limited them to-- just because of a lot of things, but, you know, to our first-year students really early after they get here. And our thinking is that they're still really close enough to the admissions process, even though obviously they chose Vassar so they're biased in that way. But, they do give us a lot of feedback about the process, the other materials they got, the materials they got from us, you know, overall, what worked, what didn't work, what they preferred, were there points in the process where they would have liked more communication, or less. And so we usually do those really, you know, early in September.

Interviewer: That's really interesting.

DeKrey: Yeah, it's really fun. Yeah, it is. And, you know, and we serve pizza.

Interviewer: Free food can always bring in the Vassar student.

DeKrey: Free food-- exactly right. Exactly.

Interviewer: And do you think Vassar has a brand? Kind of going in a different direction.

DeKrey: Yes, I do. I do. I think it goes back to one of your very first questions, and I think that brand is the sort of sum total of those characteristics, those character characteristics, I guess that we talked about. I think it is thought of generally in a way that is, again, you know, the rigorousness, obviously very selective. I think those things just almost go without saying. But once that's said, there is this boldness, this innovative spirit, this ability to think outside the box, to try new things. I do think that's how it's thought about. Did you think of it that way?

Interviewer: Yeah, and I think what I'm kind of thinking about right now is the different between kind of saying an explicit branding strategy versus a communication strategy.

DeKrey: Yes.

Interviewer: Because I noticed a lot of other schools have published a branding platform, saying this is our brand, this is our personality. And it seems that Vassar kind of thinks about itself in that same way, but it doesn't think of itself in this explicit kind of published brand way.

DeKrey: I think that's true. I do. I think that is true. And, you know, there are people who have-- alums, and people here on campus, who very much have the opinion that, for example, every time we develop something on the web, it should all look the same. It should have Vassar be, you know, in all the same-- every time in the same font and same color palette. Or similar. And, you know, be very similar. I've had a lot of alums tell me that too. And we don't believe that. And, you know, it may be that someone who comes after me and my colleagues here

will feel differently. But I don't think a brand is something that you can impose on an organization or institution. And I think most people agree with this. It has to come from the heart and soul of the place. What kind of a place is this. And when you're lucky enough to have a place like Vassar, where, you know, the brand if you will or the character is bold and kind of willing to do like this, that elbows, and push outside the box. I think to be true to the brand, we have to do that too in our communication. You know, we have to, and we do, give ourselves the freedom to express that boldness in a variety of ways. But the unified characteristic is the boldness. And, that doesn't always have to be in Gaudy, you know, sixteen-point, burgundy, PMS color two-oh-eight. It can be anything, you know, that we think works in a particular setting and that there's a consistency about that boldness if you will and that willingness to, you know, look outside the pack. I'll show you, for example-- did I show you our new admissions? I'm sorry, I'll be really quick. I thought that I had one. If I don't, I want to make sure I get one so I can show it to you.

Interviewer: Was it the new-- with the--

DeKrey: Did I show you the green one?

Interviewer: Yeah. With the orange?

DeKrey: Yes, I did. Yes. So, you know, and there are people who aren't going to like this. And certainly one of the questions to me was, well why isn't this-- this isn't our school colors. And my thought was, no. But it's for prospective students, and they don't really know our school colors are. If they do, I don't think they care so much that--

[Outside Interruption]

DeKrey: Anyway, I guess it's a way of interpreting the characteristic of the place into a brand, but it's not that lock-step branding. And I know there are proponents of that. I just-- I think that's sort of dull and sort of counter to the sort of place we are.

Interviewer: Yeah, yeah.

DeKrey: Yeah.

Interviewer: I definitely know what you mean. Do you think there's a stigma in higher education with branding, because it seems like branding, it's kind of like consumerism--

DeKrey: Like a bad word or something like that?

Interviewer: Yeah.

DeKrey: Mm. Yes. Uh huh. Some people-- I do, I agree with you. Yes. It has that kind of business, you know, or it's thought of in a corporate way, you know, branding and logos. But, you know, I think that-- I don't really feel that way about it because I don't feel constrained or, you know, well I don't feel constrained with how we represent ourselves. But also, we do have to make ourselves known in a competitive marketplace. And that's the reality of what we do when we-- And not to benefit the college only, but to get the word out that this is a great place and we want talented students to come here. So, how do we get their attention and get them to learn about us and know about us? And, you know, to me that many of the principles are the same. So, you're needing to be out in the marketplace

and stand apart from-- You know, that's why we do the kind of design that we do, is we want to stand out.

Interviewer: Yeah, I think that a lot of schools have been kind of battling branding, no branding. But I think it's interesting how different schools are adopting and what strategies they're choosing. And I know Harvard came out with saying, "Okay, well we adopted a branding framework, as we see brand gaps. People view us as pretentious and we want to tell a story, and tell these different kinds of stories."

DeKrey: Yeah. What's in their branding strategy platform?

Interviewer: They just have an article. Some schools, I know-- it's kind of interesting, you see a lot of patterns. State schools are very-- they have a whole--

DeKrey: Oh yes.

Interviewer: --whole thing, like our brand personality is approachable, and worldly, and ingenuous. And very specific targeted attributes. Whereas Harvard, it didn't have that same published, "This is our brand." But they had an article published in their newspaper with their Communications Office making a bunch of statements in the article saying, "Competitive marketplace. Modern world." And I think what they were just trying to address was a lot of the brand gaps between what they perceived themselves as and how they had had feedback of how others perceived them.

DeKrey: Uh huh. Yes. So, that's interesting. And so, what was the discrepancy?

That they were seen as snobby, or elitist? Or something in that vein, and then-- ?

Interviewer: Yeah, I can send you the article. It's been a while since I've read it.

DeKrey: Yeah, I'd like to see it.

Interviewer: Yeah, definitely. Does Vassar kind of work in that same way, where they say, "Oh, people see us as an all-women's college still, or--"

DeKrey: Sure, I mean, we do think about those things. Absolutely. Because that's not what we are anymore. So we want to be able to communicate who we are, so certainly, yeah. We do. We definitely think about those things. And I think that-- I remember a time, quite a number of years ago now, where-- I think there were-- I remember meeting with our board of trustees at that time, and I think they felt, you know, that-- well, this goes back many years now-- but, you know, that we were a better school, and so much better than we were getting credit for out in the public. I think that happens a lot of times with schools where you feel like we're this great place, but we may not be being seen that way. And we really gave a lot of thought at that time-- I think our-- and again, I think our brand, our representation of that brand, and the materials that we were creating, was at that time too timid. It wasn't representative of who we really were. So, we're out in the world, in terms of, you know, at least competing for prospective students, with materials that, quite frankly, looked pretty generic. And so we began then to think about, what kind of place are we? Let's talk about the kinds of questions you're asking. Let's once again visit this. What's our personality? What's our character? Who are we? How can we represent that in a way? And, it kind of started, you know, us off on a track of being willing to take some risks. And, you know, at that time, we got rid of all photographs on the cover, and everything was black and white. It was very, you know, it was very cutting edge at that time. And, you know,

it was really fun because it was so different and so bold. And kind of risky, and great to do that. But we felt very confident that it was the right thing. And it did work. And applications, you know, great increase in applications. And I think with that came great increase in attention to the college. And, you know, just kind of a lot of good things happened based on that and other things that Admissions did too. Certainly I'm not saying we were responsible for all that. But it was part of that way of thinking about the place, you know.

Interviewer: Yeah, you mentioned that you, and some board of trustees, and students all met.

DeKrey: We did, yeah, yeah. It was really fun. Yeah, I never did find that. I looked for you, for that. I couldn't find it. But I knew that the words that I was using were similar words, you know.

Interviewer: Mhmm.

DeKrey: But it was really fun. It was small group work of, you know, just brainstorming what we thought about the college. And there was one exercise of drawing. Did I mention this to you? We had to each draw a picture of what the world would look like if Vassar wasn't in it.

Interviewer: Oh, interesting.

DeKrey: Obviously, in a representative way. And then go up and talk about that in front of everyone. It was really funny, and fun. And, you know, even though it was a little uncomfortable for some people who didn't really enjoy doing that or look forward to it, I think they did enjoy it in the end. And we all really learned a lot by spending that day thinking just about these questions that you're asking. It was fun.

Interviewer: Okay, I think that's all that I have questions on.

DeKrey: Wonderful.

## Appendix D

Interview with Director of Media Relations and Public Affairs Jeffrey Kosmacher  
February 26, 2013

Interviewer: So, did you want to start off talking about your experiences with the PR firm?

Kosmacher: Sure. Gerhung Associates was started I believe in the 1970s, and my sense is that it was the first PR firm, media relations firm in the country that focused on helping colleges and universities gain better press coverage. Especially press coverage in the national media. And it became very successful and made people credit it with spurring the movement of more sophisticated marketing of colleges and universities. And kind of bringing the Madison Avenue type of thinking to how colleges present themselves to prospective students and their families for admissions purposes, and to their alumni for fundraising purposes. Which probably was something that was somewhat slowly adopted by higher ed, because I can imagine that colleges were not thinking of themselves in that type of identity.

Interviewer: Mhmm.

Kosmacher: That you might associate with a product. And, in fact, the whole notion of branding colleges seemed to really rise to the surface quite a bit during the 1990s, I would say? Which is the time that I worked at Gerhung Associates for three years in the 1990s. So, it's interesting because I've never really liked that term. And for that matter, I don't even think my bosses, the people who ran the firm, liked it either because I think branding is a term more readily used with a commodity. Like toilet paper.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Kosmacher: Or laundry detergent.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Kosmacher: And I think that's kind of a slippery slope that I think higher ed really needs to be very careful of. That if you can improve the way you talk about what a college offers without having it fall into the realm of making it sound more like a product, than really the public and social good that higher education is, I think that's the important distinction that a college really needs to keep in its mind. And I can happily tell you that in my ten years at Vassar, I've never felt like we've ever even approached that realm where I would feel like we are branding ourselves or commodifying ourselves. And I wouldn't do this work, if that were being asked of me. Because it would kind of go against my principles.

Interviewer: Mhmm.

Kosmacher: I've chosen to do media relations and PR work in higher ed because it was an opportunity to be able to bridge what happens at colleges and universities with the general public. What I like most about my job is what I call translating academia to the general public because I think academics get trained in a certain way, they think in a certain way, they don't often have the tools or the sense of how what they're doing in a lab or in a classroom would be of interest to somebody in the general public. Even though it's crucially important for the general public to be very well informed about what's happening in colleges. You

know, the country invests itself in higher ed as the ticket to success, to fulfillment. And yet, there can be a real gap sometimes between what the public actually knows about higher ed and how well higher ed presents itself to the general public. So I like my work as long as I get to be in that bridging role, in that translating role, in finding ways for things happening in a college to be more clearly and really embraced by the general public.

Interviewer: So do you feel-- What would you say-- I think this is one of the issues that I'm struggling with in my thesis right now, actually.

Kosmacher: Yes.

Interviewer: What is the difference between saying, okay a college is branded versus a college is just trying to communicate its message? And it does have a stable image that it is trying to communicate.

Kosmacher: What is the difference?

Interviewer: Mhmm.

Kosmacher: Well, it's hard to-- I could perhaps show you physical examples. To some extent, it's actually talking about how you communicate by using that term. I think it brings a certain mentality to the process. That you're looking for catchphrases or trendy ways of talking about a college, rather than really focusing on what is the heart and soul of the institution. To me, that's a very important thing to do. For us, in higher ed, to be clear, to be more effective in helping the public understand what a college has to offer. Or what a college is accomplishing and why that matters. But when you begin to simply take a college and try to boil it down into advertising lingo, that would be a distinction that I would make. That it's more about clear communication rather than opportunistic communication, where you're just simply trying to gloss what a college does rather than simply make it more clearly known. So. If that's a helpful distinction.

Interviewer: No, it definitely is.

Kosmacher: Okay.

Interviewer: Obviously as a linguistics major I have an appreciation for the power of words.

Kosmacher: Right.

Interviewer: So I think that when you point out that branding has a particular mindset that comes along with it, I think that's--

Kosmacher: Right. I mean, if I looked at an ad even, for a college-- Or let's say five colleges. If you put five ads in front of me, I would tell you which of these colleges I feel is more in the branding end of the spectrum and which are more the clear communication end of the spectrum. To some extent, it also has to do with the fact that I've been in this business for over fifteen years now. I've gotten to know which schools are taking more of a branding approach, and which schools are taking more of what I would call a clear communications approach. So I have a certain amount of bias probably or experience to bring to bear on judging between the two. And also, I mean, I have my own bias. You know, what I consider branding or even what I would feel is somewhat of my negative orientation toward branding, others might feel is actually a constructive step forward. That in that sense it does end up in someone else's mind, helping a college be better known by the general public. I think when you get too toward

the spectrum of sales, and less toward the spectrum of exposition, you know, that's kind of a big distinction. And now the other thing is that where I think the two worlds can meet is in brevity. I think academics and the higher ed environment lean toward lengthy exposition, and without, you know, boiling down too much or dumbing, you know-- It's being able to make more concise statements that get your point across without that kind of indirect, lengthy exposition that higher ed is in the habit of. Because that's the way academics tend to work, and I think higher ed communications, and what would be called higher ed marketing now, was driven and led by an academic mentality. Really up until probably forty or few years ago.

Interviewer: Yeah, I think that's definitely interesting when you say that there's a distinction between the clear communications schools and branding schools.

Kosmacher: Yeah.

Interviewer: Because in my research I've come across-- there'll be schools that very explicitly say, and have published online, "This is our branding platform, this is our branding personality, this is our brand identity, these are our brand--"

Kosmacher: Right. Even down to the way their logo looks. You know, just the type styles. Again, I mean I won't name a college by example, I mean specific. But I can give you an example of a college that I know hired a fairly pricey PR firm. Because I know somebody who works at the college. And one of the pieces of advice that was delivered by the PR firm as part of their contract was-- So the college was called-- Let's just say hypothetically, Jane Smith College. And one of their pieces of advice to the college was to refer to itself as Jane Smith. Not as Jane Smith College, because the perception was that there was more cache in just being referred to as Jane Smith. Kind of as if you would think of Harvard. You know, people don't talk about Harvard as Harvard University. They just refer to Harvard. Or even Vassar, right? Because we have name recognition in that singular word. You know, we don't have to call ourselves Vassar College. For many people, Vassar is enough. And that was some of the advice that this PR firm gave. And to me, it was completely upside-down advice, because Harvard has only gained its ability to refer to itself as Harvard because it has three hundred years of reputation. And it's kind of become a household name. By, to some extent, by advantage of being around so long and its excellence that it's maintained all those years. Same with Vassar. We're the first comprehensive women's college. So we gained recognition beginning in 1865, and we've had the benefit of that. But for a fifty-year-old college to think that it can someone gain a sense of greater regard or cache by referring to itself only as Jane Smith rather than as Jane Smith College, to me that's the epitome of branding mentality that diverts a college from really presenting itself more effectively.

Interviewer: So definitely kind of imposing the appearance of an image versus working on the image itself and then communicating that image?

Kosmacher: Right. Yes.

Interviewer: Okay. Yeah, I've been noticing that a lot of the kind of the types of schools that have tended towards branding seem to be state schools. A lot of the time bigger state schools. And I guess what I was hypothesizing why that is is

because they're going for more quantity versus quality. So they're kind of-- I don't know what thoughts you have on that.

Kosmacher: Hm. That's an interesting question. Well--

Interviewer: Bear in mind, other types of schools-- Harvard, I know, has adopted the branding framework as well, which I thought was interesting because they have very prominent name recognition.

Kosmacher: Yeah. Right. Well, you know, there's levels of what I would call marketing anxiety at work. Like when you're at the top, your anxiety is how do I stay at the top? And if I start inching below the top, what will that mean to my constituents, to my alumni, to my faculty, to my fellow senior-- you know, to the leaders of the college? Do they take a subjective measure of success like moving up or down the U.S. News rankings by two or three spots and suddenly feel the anxiety of thinking that somehow that's a negative reflection on the college? So I think that's one of the drivers for branding. You know, frankly, to me, one of the things that work for state institutions is that they are under tremendous financial pressure. Because funding has dried up for public higher education. State level funding and whatever federal level funding was making its way to the state public universities is dramatically declining. So they're feeling anxious because they have to find a way to compensate. So they probably have leaned on the-- Well, I don't want to be too judgmental. But, they could conceivably have felt an anxiety, an urge to use the notions of branding because they feel like they have to become so much more savvy so much more quickly to suddenly compensate for losses in funding by, you know, appealing to more students, increasing their enrollments, justifying tuition increases. So, it's interesting that you've observed that, that you've seen that at work with higher ed-- with public institutions. But that would be my speculation about why you may be seeing that trend, is because I think they're in very desperate times right now. So they're needing to turn to some kind of seeming solution that can really turn the tide for them relatively quickly.

Interviewer: Yeah, and I think this kind of delineation also-- this more relates to your job, I guess, what outlets of communication that people employ that even can define what kind of school you are.

Kosmacher: Right.

Interviewer: Because I think that you've seen, I'm sure, commercials on TV for state schools. Maybe I'm wrong, but I feel like a school like Vassar would never put out a TV ad.

Kosmacher: Well, I mean there are elite private institutions like Vassar that aren't. But there are the schools that are not in the U.S. News top fifty, who are doing commercials. And these are excellent schools. In fact, when I worked for Gehrung Associates, our clients tended to be schools that didn't have the name recognition advantage of a school like Vassar. It was a school that may have been younger, didn't have a hundred fifty years of reputation to lean on, or a school, for whatever reason, never gained the public imagination to ascend the rankings, kind of consciousness, the pecking order. So, these are schools that are academically very strong, but are looking for ways to kind of elevate themselves in a way that they can't simply by being able to lean on a hundred

fifty or more years of reputation that a school like Vassar has been able to acquire. So, you know, we're in a very privileged position. I get calls constantly from all sorts of media outlets asking us to advertise. In a given week I get two or three calls. Media outlet X and media outlet Y will email, "We have a special education edition of our publication coming out, would you be interested in advertising?" We say no because-- And then the explanation I give is that all of our advertising of that kind is conducted through the Admissions Office. We invest our marketing effort for prospective students through the Admissions Office. Through the staff there. We don't take out space ads of any kind for prospective students. But, right now, we have the privilege of doing that because we have so many more applicants than we have spaces for at Vassar. You know, we have the good fortune of being able to offer admission to less than twenty-five percent of the students who actually apply. You know, I would never hope that the day would come when that would change for Vassar, probably won't come anytime soon. But if your college, through whatever variety of circumstances, offers admission to fifty percent of their applicants or even more, you know, you have to find a way to kind of elevate a prospective students sense of what your school will offer them. Because then you are basically being compared to a lot of other schools that already are in the top fifty or the top twenty-five or the top ten of U.S. News rankings. And where the sense of prestige that comes along with a degree from that school isn't a given. So I don't necessarily even begrudge a school from taking out television ads. It's all about the way they present themselves. Now of course when you're doing television, the nature of medium doesn't lend itself to much time or space. So inevitably, a TV ad is going to be a little more on the branding side of the spectrum because of the medium that you're working with. Radio, I think, is maybe a little more flexibility, but not that much.

Interviewer: Mhmm.

Kosmacher: So really, coming back to where I began in this work, media relations is being perceived as a way to earn what's called third-party credibility. If you can successfully present a story idea to a journalist, which they then on their own volition choose to write a story about, then you are gaining the credibility of their choice to recognize something happening at your institution as being newsworthy. Mokay? You're not advertising yourself to the constituent, to the potential student. They're learning of you through a third party. So that's really what my primary job is at Vassar, is trying to interest journalists in things happening at the college. But ultimately, it's up to them to decide whether it's newsworthy or not. Twenty percent or fewer of the story ideas or the contacts I have with journalists suggesting a story idea that they might find of interest end up being written. My success rate is very low, which is typical. And I'm really the only person doing it for Vassar at the national level. You know, we've hired consultants to do the kind of work that I used to do when I was working for a PR firm. But internally, I'm the only one at Vassar right now who would be identifying interesting and important things happening at the college that I think might be newsworthy to a journalist at X media outlet or Y media outlet. But then it's ultimately up to them to decide whether they're convinced of it, and then they

would write a story that would appear in any newspaper, magazine, or online media outlet that you might be reading on a given day. Or, you know, public radio, commercial radio, TV. You know, CBS evening news.

Interviewer: Yeah, actually, how do you choose what stories to kind of choose for press releases? Kind of what are you trying to highlight when you choose them?

Kosmacher: It's really the same approach applied whether I was working for the PR firm or working internally here at Vassar, is really to identify the priorities of what the institution is about at this given time. And in some regard it's also about trying to-- Let's use Vassar as an example. It's helping the public know things about Vassar that it may not generally know, okay? Now Vassar was a women's college until 1969, and even though it's been almost forty years now since it went coed, there's still many people who don't know that Vassar is a coed college. So, in the back of my mind, when I'm thinking about stories that I might potentially bring to the attention of a reporter, I think about a story that might include one of our male students. Just to contribute to that aspect of what we're trying to bridge in the knowledge gap about Vassar in the general public. Okay? So, here's another phenomenon. A college is often best known because of its famous alumni. Now they themselves might not necessarily represent the standout academic programs of the college, but they happen to be famous, right? Meryl Streep. Lisa Kudrow. You know, two of the most well-known actresses right now. Both of whom have come to be known as Vassar graduates. Now, that's all well and good, we're very proud of both of them. You know, academically, they were strong students here, and we know that out in their professional lives, they're among the best at what they do. But the fact that the first professor who was ever hired at Vassar was an astronomer, and that we've had a lineage of outstanding science at the core of Vassar since the day that the college opened its doors in 1965, is something that by contrast the general public knows little about. So, that's been one of my higher priorities in terms of bridging the knowledge gap about Vassar. Is looking for stories that exemplify our strength in the sciences. Now, that also intersects right now with the construction of our new science building and the renovation and upgrading of our new science buildings. Because we're fundraising for that. We need to educate our alums and excite our alums about the heritage of the sciences at Vassar, because we're needing our alums to invest contributions in helping us finance the important upgrades that are being undertaken for our science facilities. But we also are wanting to attract out-of-state students who are interested in studying the sciences at Vassar. So, you can see that the topic of seeking out let's say really strong science stories serves multiple purposes. It bridges the general public knowledge gap about Vassar. It appeals to students who we want to come to Vassar, because this is a unique way to be able to study the sciences at the undergraduate level. We want to engage and excite our alums about sciences at Vassar. We also want to-- You know, because the college, for whatever reason, has become to be known as more of an arts and humanities college than a sciences college, we want our faculty to feel like their level of excellence is recognized publicly. That's another great way to leverage strong press coverage, is you give the institution more self-esteem. The people who work here, the people who teach the subjects, certainly

feel better knowing the biologist at Vassar is getting recognized for their work. Especially at a college where the general public may more readily associate with the arts and humanities than with the sciences.

Interviewer: Yeah, I was actually talking with Mr. Borus about the different kind of stereotypes, incorrect stereotypes, that surround Vassar like white, rich hipsters from New York, or--

Kosmacher: That's these days.

Interviewer: Yeah. Yeah.

Kosmacher: As opposed to what I would call the earlier era at Vassar, which I like to refer to as the white gloves and pearls era.

Interviewer: Oh, wow. I haven't heard that.

Kosmacher: You haven't heard-- Well, you know. When it was still a women's college, it did have a probably-- a fairly skewed student body toward the wealthy. So if you have a sense of what that imagery evokes. You know, we think of the Rose Parlor and three o'clock tea that was conducted in the forties or fifties compared to today. You know, that's a loose stereotype that I evoke just for fun. But tell me what David Borus was talking to you about.

Interviewer: Oh, he was just telling me about the kind of funny things. Like he'd be at a college fair and some dad would come up and say, "Oh, I wish I could send my son." And he's like, "You can."

Kosmacher: Yeah.

Interviewer: So, I guess my question is to what extent-- how do you research those knowledge gaps and how do you target them and keep them in the back of your mind when you're--

Kosmacher: Well, I think periodically there have been focus groups conducted with prospective students in different locales around the country. That would have been kind of a joint project between the Admissions Office and our office. It's probably Susan DeKrey and David Borus teamed up on that. I think we try to talk to, just as a Communications Office, we try to talk to a lot of the various Vassar constituents as well. We talk to a lot of alum. Quite a bit. You know, we are in close touch with the faculty, because it's important-- really, the only way that we have meaningful things to say about the college, is by being able to learn about what's happening here from the faculty. They're the ones who are, you know, creating fruit of the college in their teaching and their research. So, you know, I, myself and other people in the office, we meet with faculty members on a regular basis. We also urging everyone at Vassar to keep us abreast of things that they're participating in or that they hear about that they think speak well of the college. Let us know about it. You know, if we get a good tip-- we function like journalists, if we get a good tip, we're looking, we want to find out exactly what it's all about. And then, if we find out it's really got something very strong to say about the college, then we think about all the different ways we might get that story told. Internally, through our Admissions publications. For our publications for alums. But also, if I'm convinced that something of this kind might interest a journalist, then I'll present what I've learned about. You know, professor's research, interesting student project, or some quirky tradition at Vassar. I might bring it to a journalist and see if it would interest them as well.

Interviewer: Okay. One of the questions I had prepared for earlier was-- So we have Vassar, which is obviously a huge name, but I actually read an article in the Alumni Quarterly that was talking about how Vassar had more potency as kind of a name in the past because it was a pioneering women's college.

Kosmacher: Right.

Interviewer: And it said kind of opening the doors to men kind of diluted its reputation. Do you have any thoughts about that, or do you think it's true or untrue?

Kosmacher: Well, it certainly changed the identity of the college. The word dilute I could see certain people using to describe the effect it had on identity of the college. Because Vassar probably had a very singular identity. It was the first comprehensive women's college. It was the first of the Seven Sisters. Those are things you can't create. And, you know, when Matthew Vassar founded the college, he wasn't thinking, "Oh, I'm creating the first of the Seven Sisters." I mean, he was abundantly aware that he was creating the first comprehensive women's college. And I think he did for all the right reasons for public and social good. But, I think as much as he did that, he also created a really great institution of higher education. So when the time came when they said to the college to become coed, it did change one of the easier ways to think about Vassar. The easiest way to think about it is as a top women's college. So that easy label went away when we went coed. So that became the challenge for us, how do we think of the evolving institution? It's no longer a women's college. It's a college that pursues A) excellence. Any less, absolutely not. It's a college that now is pursuing excellence in a different way. And, you know, I think what would be interesting for you is to talk to somebody who was involved in the decision to go coed. Because talk about a communications decision, you know, an identity-changing decision. There was nothing bigger. There's even a book that I can lend you.

Interviewer: Yeah, definitely.

Kosmacher: It's called *Full Steam Ahead in Poughkeepsie*. If you can imagine what the people who were making that decision had to grapple with. They realized what they were preparing to give out, that singular identity, that instant Vassar women's college prestige. And that then would create a whole new array of challenges for the institution. You know, if you look at the trends, if you look at the numbers, on the basis of let's say what was the average GPA or the average SAT scores of students who were admitted to Vassar pre-coed, post-coed, and, you know, early post-coed, now. There's probably some dip, I think, no doubt. There was a-- we let go of our instant excellence reputation by bringing that in because people had to start thinking about Vassar in a different way. But I think, for the institution what's been very gratifying is that forty almost five years later, we've now reascended in terms of all the excellence criteria that are quantitative. That Vassar would have maintained when it was still a women's college. And here we are, a coed college. So I think that is the-- what's really prevailed in a really important way for Vassar is that, you know, the sense of dilution, you might have been able to quantify for the first twenty to thirty years of coeducation. But by now, there's absolutely no difference quantifiably between the women's

college Vassar and the coed Vassar. And, you know, they weren't even keeping numbers the way now-- we weren't keeping numbers then the way we are now. It's arguable to say we're actually more-- our numbers are even more distinctive, more selective now than they were even when we were still a women's college, so.

Interviewer: So is that continuing to grow-- the numbers?

Kosmacher: I think that right now, they're at a very strong plateau. That is the way that I would describe them. One of the phenomenon, at least to me, one of the most crucial phenomenon at work in higher ed right now is the ability to apply more easily to many colleges. Through the common application, in particular. Where all you have to do is fill out one form, and then you can check off if you want your grades, and your SAT scores, and your essays-- can all be instantly sent to ten colleges. You know, and all you have to do is pay through a credit card for ten application fees. It completely changed the mathematics of higher education. Admissions, and reputation. Because-- the intersection is the way the U.S. News goes about conducting its rankings. They have become the gold standard by which people measure the excellence of the college. But they've chosen very particular mathematical criteria. They've decided that if you offer admission-- the smaller percentage of applicants that you offer admission to, they have decided that that is the most significant way to quantify the excellence of the school. That's very subjective. Now, you know, they're also-- and this is a lengthy conversation. A school like Vassar, because it has the advantage of a one hundred-fifty year reputation, we end up having many students who apply to Vassar who probably have no intention of ever going here. Either because they're overreaching. You know, they're simply-- they have the opportunity to apply to ten schools. "Oh, so I'll apply to three or four schools that I probably won't get into, but, hey, it doesn't take that much I just check them off in my common app and Mom and Dad will fork over another three hundred dollars for application fees. And low and behold, I'm applying to Vassar, as well as schools that are probably a better match for me." Now, it's kind of a self-fulfilling prophecy, it feeds on itself. It's easier to apply to more schools who have more built-in reputation, end up attracting more of these frequent appliers. So that's how we've ended up having so much more applicants. If you look at the trend of how many more applicants we've had-- let's say the past ten to fifteen years, that is the number one driver for that. It's because there's a capacity to more easily apply to many more schools. Plus, the economy was going very strong. So people were not hesitant to plunk down another two, three, four hundred dollars for their children to apply to four, five, six other schools using the common app. I haven't talked to David about this, but I would bet that there may be-- that people are applying to fewer schools, the economy's bad. You know, don't have money to spend as loosely as we did. Even the parents, who are prestige-obsessed about which college their children go to, even they, I'm sure, are less inclined to plunk down seventy dollars for, you know, an application to Vassar than they may have been three or four or five years ago. If they really don't think their children don't have a chance of getting in. Because they just don't-- everyone's spending money differently. So, that's a-- this is to me-- we're privileged to be able to be a

magnet for over-appliers. Because we have this hundred-and-fifty year reputation of excellence. But the schools that are the bottom, the middle, or, you know, further down the pecking order, they're the schools that are less likely to have the multiple appliers. Because the chance of getting into a school in the middle or lower down the line, it doesn't matter that much. You know, if you're applying and you know that five schools have a fifty to seventy-five percent acceptance rate, you're probably not going to apply to a lot of them because you're pretty confident you'll get into at least a couple of them. You don't have to hedge your bets as much.

Interviewer: Mhmm.

Kosmacher: Or, kind of reach for the brass ring and think, "Well maybe there's an outside chance I could get lucky and get into Vassar." Right? But it's easier to do that when the economy's good, it's easier to apply to a lot more colleges. So again it feeds through the prism of U.S. News. So as long as they consider the most significant criteria in their rankings formula to be admissions selectivity. Schools like Vassar will always be at an advantage. But is that the best way to measure Vassar's excellence? I don't think so. It has to do with what happens in the classroom, right. It doesn't have to do with the fact that, you know, we're lucky enough that we can say no to more of our applicants than another school.

Interviewer: Yeah, I have looked at, as part of this whole process, kind of looked at what the U.S. News used to calculate the rankings.

Kosmacher: Yeah.

Interviewer: I don't remember off the top of my head, but I thought it was interesting.

Kosmacher: Well, you should read a little bit. There's a huge debate about-- I mean, we don't publicize our U.S. News ranking. U.S. News has also been a racket.

Interviewer: A what?

Kosmacher: They're a racket. You know, the magazine itself doesn't even exist anymore. Maybe it's a monthly now, it used to be a weekly. It used to be a thick-- this is the U.S. News college rankings. It's a franchise. They're college rankings publications are what finance their company. They're news output is minimal now. The company that was-- that started out as a news magazine, is now primarily a media company that makes a lot of money off of ranking colleges, ranking hospitals, ranking high schools. They realized that's what they made their money on advertising, you know. And being able to sell to prospective students and their parents publications that compare colleges to one another. So, here's another interesting phenomenon. We, the privileged, there's almost a consensus-- if you go to any of the top twenty-five or even the top fifty U.S. News schools, if you go to their websites, you won't-- U.S. News sells you-- they'll sell you the right to put their little badge on your website. To signify that you are a top ten, top twenty-five, top fifty U.S. News-ranked school. You won't see that badge on the top fifty schools. Because these are the schools with built-in prestige. But you will see the badge on the fifty to a hundred, the hundred to a hundred-fifty schools. Because they're looking for a marketing advantage. And the Association of the U.S. News Ranking gives them an advantage. Here's another way that U.S. News--

[Fire alarm goes off]

Kosmacher: I should probably get going in a little bit. But here's another way that U.S. News subdivides its product. So not only do they have categories-- Okay so they have not only-- Here, here we are. That's national liberal arts colleges. Here's Vassar. Tied for number ten.

Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Kosmacher: Okay, but they also have been able to sub-divide their categories of colleges to also include best regional universities.

Interviewer: Mhmm.

Kosmacher: So Villanova now gets to pat itself on the back like they're the number one best regional university in the North, okay?

Interviewer: Uh-huh.

Kosmacher: There's a whole nother group of schools that they can now buy the U.S. News badge to put on their website.

Interviewer: So dividing the markets to capitalize on the--

Kosmacher: Exactly. It's money-making for them. There's statistical integrity to a certain extent in what they do there. They have a guy whose job it is to oversee the statistics for their rankings.

Interviewer: Mhmm.

Kosmacher: But, they're doing it in the service of finding a way to sell this product.

Interviewer: Mhmm. That's so interesting. Yeah, I'm just going to turn this off.

Kosmacher: You should do a little internet searching about the U.S. News rankings and just what the--

## Second Interview

March 6, 2013

Interviewer: Okay. So, in general, how did the WBC event go?

Kosmacher: Well, it seemed to bring people together well. The perception of the college as being an inclusive, welcoming place for people of all backgrounds was certainly strongly reinforced, and that's certainly a key message that we want people to associate with the college. In terms of media relations, we had five different media outlets on campus that day, all of whom filed stories that seemed to highlight the important things that we were trying to accomplish by organizing that rally and the related activities. So, you know, things, I would say, went well.

Interviewer: Were the media local media or national media?

Kosmacher: The outlets that visited campus that day were from the Hudson Valley.

Interviewer: Okay.

Kosmacher: Yes.

Interviewer: And--

Kosmacher: But there have been a-- as you're aware, there have been a range of coverage that has occurred just about the decision by Westboro to protest at Vassar that has drawn the attention of press outlets outside of the Hudson Valley.

Interviewer: And how do you think the coverage, and what's being said on social media as well, is going to affect Vassar's image? I know it's going to increase, as you said, the message of inclusion and acceptance.

Kosmacher: Right.

Interviewer: But also kind of more how the perception of Vassar as not being an all-girls school anymore, it's kind of died down?

Kosmacher: Well every occasion where a story like this appears, it certainly contributes to a building impression of the institution. So, you know, certainly from the standpoint of people knowing that Vassar is coed, if they didn't already, to see a photo of a large gathering of our students where there are many male faces certainly helps to serve that goal. I think that mostly the press coverage has helped remind people about the college's principles, the fact that-- and certainly from our standpoint, you know, the way we talk about that Vassar was created to provide access to women who never had access before. So the themes of inclusion dovetail exactly to the roots of the college. That we were created to make access more possible to top higher education. And then we have created and maintained an institution through those hundred and fifty years to be able to remind people that this is an institution that seeks people from all walks of life to participate in an educational experience, you know, is always a top goal of ours. So, you know, it's certainly not something we sought out in any way. You know, this is-- we were conscious about not patting ourselves on the back when this all came about, because obviously the impetus for this occasion was a hate group seeking to stigmatize the college. So we just chose to respond to people who asked about how we were addressing the protesters, but we weren't using it as an occasion to push out announcements that were self-congratulatory about the college.

Interviewer: Okay, and last time we discussed how people thought it was important to respond in the Vassar way. And how do you think the school's response reflected the perception of the Vassar way, in terms of what people were actually doing on that day. With the human chain, and going to go see the--

Kosmacher: Well, the first thing that came to mind when you asked that has to do with how the decisions were made about what we would actually do the day that Westboro came here. And, you know, I was certainly a participant in a variety of planning sessions. And I would consider it a highly democratic process. And one in which students played a very prominent role. So, to me, that is an important insight into the way Vassar works. That on an occasion as significant as this where the eyes of the region, the country, or even the world to some extent, were on us, that Vassar students were in the very thick of decision-making. And their ideas, their suggestions were leading the process in many regards as significant in deciding what we were going to do as any other idea that was put on the table. And I'm not sure what else really comes to mind for that question. But, for that matter, we also made our students who were leading the DoSomething organization as available for interviews as we were-- as we did to anyone else from Vassar. In fact, we encouraged them to be available to speak on their own behalf. Rather than, for example, having me speak on behalf of the college to the exclusion of others. So I think again it shows the degree to which we are

democratic in the way we make opportunities possible for people here involved in things like this, be able to speak on their own behalf and on behalf of the college. And it's not all strictly funneled through me.

Interviewer: Yeah, just a little logistical question. I went to a couple of the beginning meetings.

Kosmacher: Yes.

Interviewer: And the second meeting I know Dean Roelke was there, I think as a representative of--

Kosmacher: One of the big student meetings?

Interviewer: Yeah. And it kind of seems like-- and maybe my impression is wrong, which is why I'm about to ask you.

Kosmacher: Yeah.

Interviewer: That the students had kind of gone forward and were like, "Let's discuss this." And kind of Dean Roelke was at the second meeting, "Oh, you know the administration's doing something too." And they're like, "Oh, yeah that's great." And so collaboration with-- the students kind of forged ahead with their response, and then secondarily had a collaboration with what the administration's response was. Was that the case?

Kosmacher: Yeah, I think that's a pretty accurate description. And I think, the way I observed it is that-- recognizing that there are things that the students were motivated to do, and things that the college had to consider that bring the goals and priorities of each together in these planning sessions. And I think it ended up being a very productive process, because I think it's just natural that the constituency of students doesn't think about considerations that we have to. You know, legal considerations, logistical, personnel considerations. I think students were very effective as summoning the resources they had access to, social media, their own clarity about what their mission and purpose are, and then communicating that to fellow students and inviting them into the process. And it was interesting when because there were times when, for example, the question of where the big rally would be held were discussed. And students talked about some of their ideas for a location. And at a certain point in one of the meetings very recently when the weather was really wet and the notion of using the quad as a location became less viable because it was so swampy. And the idea of holding it on the main campus drive was floated, and it was actually floated by somebody in the administration. And all that came with that decision, closing the main gate etcetera, became discussed. And one of the student representatives said, "Well, actually, that's an idea that somebody floated at one of our meetings, but we never imagined that we could bring that about." And I think that's kind of a good example that the idea came to the mind of students, but they don't have the involvement in the logistics of bringing it about. So, then they're going to marry their ideas to the willingness of the college to make that a combination came about the conditions, I think was a good example of how the two kind of parallel processes found a way together in productive.

Interviewer: Okay, well. Those are all the questions I have.

Kosmacher: Okay, good.

Appendix E  
Interview with Administrator 1  
March 7, 2013

What five or six words would you use to describe Vassar?

Relationship-centered, meeting-oriented, welcoming, and inclusive. Also, socially-just, socially-responsible, and a socially-conscious community. That's what we are or what we strive to be.

How would you characterize Vassar's identity?

Vassar attempts to highlight individuality, so to think about a collective identity is interesting. As an administrator, I would say Vassar has an identity as a community of critical lovers. Lovers of the institution and lovers of each other. The love for this place is incredible.

How would you describe Vassar's personality?

The words wonky and quirky always come to mind. You know, if Vassar was a music style, it would be like Ryan and Macklemore, you know what I mean?

How would you describe the typical Vassar student?

I would say academically motivated, and because of that, and because of the way the school is situated, my assumption is that by the time they're about to graduate they're good writers and critical thinkers. I think they come with that, but that we hone those particular skills here. I think generally we have some pretty great kids. A lot of schools talk about apathy, and when we talk about apathy, it's definitely not about involvement with the school. We talk about apathy as it pertains to the world matters and things beyond the campus. I would never call our students apathetic.

Appendix F  
Interview with Administrator 2  
March 7, 2013

What five or six words would you use to describe Vassar?

Independent, creative, thoughtful. Maybe progressive?

How would you characterize Vassar's identity?

I think Vassar is aspiring for the epitome of a liberal arts college and the education that goes along with it.

How would you describe Vassar's personality?

In clinical terms, I would say it probably has a personality disorder. Somewhat all over the place, yet obsessed with details. Very dramatic at times, while also very somber at times.

How would you describe the typical Vassar student?

I don't think there is such a thing as a typical Vassar student. I wish there were because it would make my job easier.

What associations do you think Vassar has?

Let's see. All-women's college, very liberal, very avant garde, no rules, kind of a druggy place. But with very bright, capable students.

Appendix G  
Interview with Faculty 1  
March 7, 2013

What five or six words would you use to describe Vassar?

Small, intellectual, rich. But I use that as rich in opportunity, not in a monetary sense. Community. A challenge.

How would you characterize Vassar's identity?

I would characterize it as a small village with lots of shared goals, but lots of different personalities.

How would you describe Vassar's personality?

Vassar as a thing? Curious, inclusive, engaged.

How would you describe the typical Vassar student?

I think I would use those same words. I think the faculty and the staff both have the same sort of curiosity and approach to the world where they want to learn about it and interact with it.

What associations do you think Vassar has?

I think people outside Poughkeepsie don't think about it very much. Hidden, or something, maybe. I think people in Poughkeepsie see it as a walled or gated community.

Appendix H  
Interview with Faculty 2  
March 7, 2013

What five or six words would you use to describe Vassar?

Liberal. Excellent. Community. Hard-working. Creative. Innovative.

How would you characterize Vassar's identity?

Creative. Liberal. Committed. Privileged. I think it's a school that's committed-- has a history of being committed to providing equal educational opportunities. It's got a strong feminist history. Innovative curriculum I think it challenges students intellectually and not just academically.

How would you describe Vassar's personality?

Funky, creative, artistic, talented. Open. Fun-loving, but also serious.

What associations do you think Vassar has?

I think it's varied. So, I think those who don't have much contact with the college in the local community think of it as elitist, snobbish, privileged. Those in the community who have the opportunity to work with faculty and students are impressed by how dedicated and committed students are. I work with a citizen's group working on mass incarceration, and there are a number of Vassar students and faculty who work with it. Those who have met people from Vassar have a very positive view of Vassar, so a lot of the Vassar interns and volunteers.

Appendix I  
Interview with Faculty 3  
April 1, 2013

What five or six words would you use to describe Vassar?

I couldn't possibly describe the whole institution in five or six words.

How would you characterize Vassar's identity?

Vassar is so multidimensional and multifaceted it would be impossible to describe it in a few sentences.

How would you describe the typical Vassar student?

I wouldn't even say that there is a typical Vassar student.

Appendix J  
Interview with Faculty 4  
April 1, 2013

What five or six words would you use to describe Vassar?

Small, elite, northeastern, liberal arts school.

How would you characterize Vassar's identity?

It's hard for me to differentiate between Vassar's identity and its personality. But, I think of our identity as one in which we value inclusiveness, intellectual seriousness, and intensive contact between between faculty and students. Also, there's a pervasive sense of collegiality and even friendliness, among faculty and administrators, in particular. I think we compare ourselves, on the one hand, to "peer institutions" like Williams, Amherst, Middlebury, etcetera, but also to traditional, elite, East Coast research universities like Princeton, Harvard, etcetera.

How would you describe Vassar's personality?

I would cite many of the same values mentioned above, i.e., inclusiveness, seriousness, etcetera. I guess I would add that faculty and administrators have a strong, but healthy, sense of protectiveness with respect to students.

How would you describe the typical Vassar student?

I'd describe the typical student as smart, progressive politically, creative, privileged in terms of class background, intellectually curious, and interested in the politics of gender and sexuality.

What associations do you think Vassar has?

I think a surprising number of people still think of Vassar as a women's school. Even if they know that it is coed now, the fact that it used be an all female school is a common association, in my experience. Besides this, I'd say your "average person" thinks of Vassar as an excellent, small, teaching- and student-centered liberal arts school. I think Vassar also gets thought of as serving an upper-class population. I'm thinking of the Simpsons episode with some Vassar jokes. I have a friend, for example, who refuses to pronounce the word Vassar in anything but an over-exaggerated "high class accent," whatever that is.

Appendix K  
Interview with Vassar Student 1  
December 1, 2012

What do you feel you are getting from Vassar?

I feel that Vassar has given me an avenue through which I have been able to explore my passions and my talents that may have been latent before coming here. To be more specific, Vassar facilitated my involvement with stand-up comedy. If not for Vassar, I wouldn't even identify myself as a stand-up comedian now. Because Vassar is a liberal arts college, I've been able to take classes in virtually anything. I've been able to take a screen-writing class, even though I'm not a drama or film major. I found that I really like it, so I'm taking an advanced screen writing class next semester. So maybe that will turn into something more.

Do you feel that the price of the Vassar tuition is comparable to what you are receiving in return? In other words, is it worth it?

I don't think I can answer that question. I don't think my response will be justified because my parents are paying for it, and they've always told me that my college tuition is taken care of so don't worry about that. I don't feel the pinch so I can say, "Yeah, invaluable." But, to be honest, no. I don't think it's worth it. Don't get me wrong, I love it. I think it's given me experiences that I couldn't replicate anywhere. I couldn't do stand up comedy in front of as supportive a crowd in New York City. But \$300,000? I don't know. It's a little pricey.

How do you think your Vassar education is going to benefit you in the future?

Well, definitely, superficially, the name. I think that's a significant component. And looking back to my freshman year, it's clear that I've grown and matured. I'm reading the same readings that I read freshman year, and I have such a more nuanced understanding, and I'm writing papers and things that I couldn't even conceive of three years ago. So, you know, there's definitely been like a growth, intellectually and creatively. I think, how will it benefit me in the future? Creatively, definitely. Part of my growth at Vassar was the development of my comedic voice. It's taught me more about the world. It's cliched, but it's taught me about the underlying structures and patterns and hierarchical patterns of society. So I guess, it's made me more aware, more sensitive.

Why did you come to choose to come to Vassar?

It's location. I wanted to be near New York City. But I also wanted the small liberal arts college experience. Because I did get into NYU, but I chose Vassar over it. It's emphasis is on the arts. I thought I wanted to be a drama major.

What associations do you think Vassar has?

Meryl Streep, hipster. Artsy. Theater. White. Privileged, elite. Lisa Kudrow. I think those are the big ones. Oh, and girls school.

What does Vassar mean to you?

I mean, it means a lot. Because, to me, it was a portal to America. As of right now, it has been my entire American experience.

Appendix L  
Interview with Vassar Student 2  
December 5, 2012

What do you feel you are getting from Vassar?

I feel like I'm getting a pretty good education. But I'm also getting a lot of experiences. The small school experiences, which is exactly what I wanted, like a close knit community.

Do you feel that the price of the Vassar tuition is comparable to what you are receiving in return? In other words, is it worth it?

Yeah, financial aid is pretty good.

How do you think your Vassar education is going to benefit you in the future?

It definitely will help when I'm looking for jobs and when I'm applying for graduate and medical schools. Because it is a good school, it's gonna benefit me greatly. Vassar has a great community. If you have a connection with a Vassar person, it's a great thing to have when you're trying to get a job.

Why did you come to choose to come to Vassar?

I chose it because it was not Madison, Wisconsin, where I'm from. And it also was far enough away from home. And it was a good school. And it was something different from what anyone in my family had done before. And it was a pretty, pretty campus.

What associations do you think Vassar has?

It depends on where you're from. In the Midwest, if I say I go to Vassar they'll give me a blank stare. But if you say it out here, people will say, "Oh wow, good job!" It either has no connotation for you, or it means you're getting a good education at an elite institution.

What does Vassar mean to you?

It means a lot of different things. It is my education, which is a big thing. More than that, it's kind of like a home.

What five or six words would you use to describe Vassar?

Surprisingly multifaceted. Intelligent. Pretentious. Successful.

How would you describe the typical Vassar student?

One of the things that I would say-- I think the students here are really driven to succeed.

How would you characterize Vassar's identity?

It depends on what people are looking for, where they're from, what they study here, what jobs you're trying to get. Vassar's a well-known school on the East

Coast, but in other places it's not as well-known. So Vassar's identity depends on who's looking at it.

How would you describe Vassar's personality?

Not to be offensive, I would say that it's a little uppity but it pretends it's not.

Appendix M  
Interview with Vassar Student 3  
December 5, 2012

What do you feel you are getting from Vassar?

Above everything, it's a really supportive environment for me, away from home. It allows you to really think about what you want to do.

Do you feel that the price of the Vassar tuition is comparable to what you are receiving in return? In other words, is it worth it?

No. Thankfully, it has a need-blind financial aid policy. But, honestly, if not, schools in the United States are just extremely expensive. It's something that's happening all over the world.

How do you think your Vassar education is going to benefit you in the future?

Probably, the most important thing is the people you meet. Building a professional network starts from here. That is probably the most important thing that you're going to cultivate in these four years.

Why did you come to choose to come to Vassar?

Because I really did not know what I was going to study. And they gave me a really good financial aid package.

What associations do you think Vassar has?

Girls school. Most of the people where I'm from don't know about it, so you would probably have to explain to them what it is from scratch.

What does Vassar mean to you?

I don't know yet. It's something I keep on redefining every year.

How would you describe the typical Vassar student?

Very independent. Diverse interests.

Appendix N  
Interview with Vassar Student 4  
November 28, 2012

What do you feel you are getting from Vassar?

Not so much an education, but maybe building relationships with people. A lot of it is the people that you meet here and what you're learning from them. They have a lot more to teach you than what books can. That's not to say I'm not learning things academically, but just that it's a combination.

Do you feel that the price of the Vassar tuition is comparable to what you are receiving in return? In other words, is it worth it?

No. I don't think my education is worth \$50,000 a year. I think the idea of Vassar and the idea of education in general has been inflated over so many years. Apparently, \$50,000 isn't even how much it costs, it's actually \$70,000. But because of the endowment fund and because alums donate money, the cost is subsidized. Education is the way out of poverty, it's the way we can fix our world. It's one of the most valuable commodities.

How do you think your Vassar education is going to benefit you in the future?

This doesn't mean anything outside the country. Maybe here, the Vassar name means something and it's relatively prestigious. I've had internships in different places in the world, and in terms of where I've been--going to Vassar hasn't necessarily helped me in any shape or form. Vassar molded me into the person that I am maybe. But if anything, Vassar may prevent me from flourishing in a lot of places.

Why did you come to choose to come to Vassar?

I had no other option. I got into great schools in England, but at the end of the day I wanted to come to America. It wasn't Vassar, but the idea of going to America. I wanted freedom to choose my own course of study. Many people who I talk to are like, "I love Vassar," but I don't feel the same way.

What associations do you think Vassar has?

To an older generation, it's a well-accredited school that produced these bright, independent, intelligent women. Vassar women have done a lot, it's a very progressive school. It's very ahead of its day. Vassar was among the first schools to have a women's squash team--a previously male-dominated sport. Looking at the history of Vassar, fabulous. In the modern day, I don't know what it is. It's very obscure. The percentage of people who know it now is less. I get that it's a small liberal arts school, but Vassar isn't on the map. Other schools who are higher ranked have more name recognition. Vassar really lets you do what you want. Honestly, in our generation, I don't exactly know, because I myself didn't know what Vassar was. People think it's an all-girls school a lot of the time.

What does Vassar mean to you?

Animal-friendly, feminist-loving, hipster. Independent thinkers, liberal but almost too liberal. Open-minded, but open-minded to a very certain thought process or mindset. At the same time, Vassar is my home. I may be criticizing it all the time, but I feel comfortable here. It depends on what you make of it. It's the people, not the institution. That's not to say that the institution hasn't given the fundamental base for these experiences.

How would you describe the typical Vassar student?

I don't know if I know. We're predominantly white, upper-middle class. Socio-economically, I think it's diverse. But ethnically, no.

Appendix O  
Interview with Vassar Student 5  
December 5, 2012

What do you feel you are getting from Vassar?

A sense of my position in the world. So, I've gotten a good gauge of how privileged I am basically. Taking different women's studies courses, and the prisons course I was just in or my Soch class.

Do you feel that the price of the Vassar tuition is comparable to what you are receiving in return? In other words, is it worth it?

Yes. My mom always says you can't put a price on education. And I do think that the things I've learned at Vassar are specific to my experience here, so it's not that I can necessarily learn these things outside of this environment.

How do you think your Vassar education is going to benefit you in the future?

I probably understand people a little bit better than I did coming into Vassar. Not only understanding where I stand, but also other people's privilege. So understanding when I interact with them and why they do the things they do.

Why did you come to choose to come to Vassar?

On all the interviews I went on my senior year, at the end when they ask do you have any questions for us. First, the Vassar person was the only one who understood the question. Basically, I asked: what kind of person will I be when I graduate? I remember the Tufts lady was like, "Oh, we don't really make a certain type of person at Tufts." What I meant was, what does everyone who goes through Vassar leave with? The Vassar interviewer lady was like, "You leave with a sense of your position in the world. And you'll definitely leave more aware of the issues going on and you'll leave with a set of tools and skills that will help you address those issues." I liked the idea of growing and becoming a better person.

What associations do you think Vassar has?

Liberal. Do people think we're pretentious? Probably not. Critical thinkers. Isn't that every institution of higher education? I don't really pay attention to what other people think about us. I don't care. Maybe a blog says we have a beautiful campus.

Appendix P  
Interview with Vassar Student 6  
March 7, 2013

Why did you choose to come to Vassar?

My mom went here, so I always knew about it. I'm a theater major, and I wanted a small school. I like the community here, and it's not too far away from home. It's in the Northeast.

What five or six words would you use to describe Vassar?

Eclectic, fun, driven, passionate, intelligent.

How would you characterize Vassar's identity?

Socially aware, or attempting to be socially aware. I'd say pretty accepting.

How would you describe Vassar's personality?

Loud.

How would you describe the typical Vassar student?

Driven.

What associations do you think Vassar has?

Gays, a lot of gay guys. Super hippy. Very accepting of gays and lesbians. Weed.

Appendix Q  
Interview with Vassar Student 7  
March 7, 2013

Why did you choose to come to Vassar?

My brother graduated from here. I heard about it from him, and it fit the things that were important to me, the school size, the values of the school, its closeness to home, the fact that it was an actual campus, not too urban and not too rural.

What did you mean when you said the values of the school?

What Vassar as a community finds to be important, I also find to be important. Respect for others and helping others to succeed.

What five or six words would you use to describe Vassar?

Understanding, aware, eager to be involved, driven.

How would you characterize Vassar's identity?

I would say that it's a place that focuses its attention to make sure that all students have the equal chance to succeed.

How would you describe Vassar's personality?

Quirky, and confident in ourselves. Self-confident.

How would you describe the typical Vassar student?

Very academically curious, driven, but for themselves, not for anyone else. Passionate, fun.

What associations do you think Vassar has?

A very large, prominent gay community. Very liberal, a large female demographic, definitely academic.

Appendix R  
Interview with Vassar Student 8  
March 7, 2013

Why did you choose to come to Vassar?

I'm from California, what appealed to me about Vassar was to get away from home. Out of all the schools that accepted me, Vassar was one of the pretty good ones. They had a good ranking, and they gave me a lot of financial aid.

What five or six words would you use to describe Vassar?

Liberal, creative, weird.

How would you characterize Vassar's identity?

In an academic sense, Vassar is very free about their academics. Some of the schools back home require you to take some classes, but here you can take whatever you want. Which is really good for me because I didn't know what I wanted to do.

How would you describe Vassar's personality?

The people who go here are very unique, a little more out of the ordinary than people you'll meet elsewhere. It gives Vassar a very interesting personality, the student body.

How would you describe the typical Vassar student?

They're very open-minded about a lot of issues, very nice.

What associations do you think Vassar has?

A women's college, a large gay community, liberal.

Appendix S  
Interview with Vassar Student 9  
March 7, 2013

Why did you choose to come to Vassar?

I applied early decision because I walked on campus and just knew.

What five or six words would you use to describe Vassar?

Creative, hipster, welcoming, accepting, and home.

How would you characterize Vassar's identity?

Vassar has just been a great experience. Great academics, and great people.

How would you describe Vassar's personality?

The personality of the people here? Eclectic.

How would you describe the typical Vassar student?

I don't know if there is a typical Vassar student, but if we're talking about stereotypes, I guess hipster and smart.

What associations do you think Vassar has?

All girls school, super liberal, really impressive academically.

Appendix T  
Interview with Vassar Student 10  
March 7, 2013

Why did you choose to come to Vassar?

Because my mom went to Vassar, and I was looking to use baseball to get into the best academic school I could get into. Compared to other similar liberal arts schools, Vassar was the best fit. It was close to home and near my family.

What five or six words would you use to describe Vassar?

Free-spirited, unique, creative, impressive, and naive.

How would you characterize Vassar's identity?

I think that it has a very mixed identity. You carve your own identity here, you can use it as a backboard to create your own. It can help you get to the place you want, but they put a lot of pressure on the students to create their own path.

How would you describe Vassar's personality?

At times very friendly. Very focused, and very intelligent.

How would you describe the typical Vassar student?

Focused on their studies, likes to keep very intimate relationships with small, close circles. Unsure what they want to do, but excited to find out about what their future holds. Passionate about the people they care about and things they care about.

What associations do you think Vassar has?

Liberal, quirky. In the realm of high academia, prestige.

Appendix U  
Interview with Vassar Student 11  
March 7, 2013

Why did you choose to come to Vassar?

I applied E.D. [early decision], and I chose Vassar. I had in my head that I wanted to go to Hamilton, but I visited there and I didn't like it. My dad happened upon a pamphlet from Vassar, and I came here and visited. It fit, and I was really lucky.

What five or six words would you use to describe Vassar?

Beautiful, historic, flexible, social, arts-oriented.

How would you characterize Vassar's identity?

I feel like Vassar holds this identity of being a former women's college and being a big activist institution and being a rich kid, liberal arts experience. And from being here, I feel like different forces are working the identity to be different things. I think Vassar-- After being here for four years, I think Vassar as a whole, Vassar wants to be a place where people can be anything and use education to open doors to different experiences.

How would you describe Vassar's personality?

Quirky, accepting. I think it depends on what you're involved in. I'm arts-oriented, and that's validated here. I think the personality is upbeat, it's outgoing.

How would you describe the typical Vassar student?

Either motivated or previously motivated. As in, people who were motivated in high school, who know what it is to be motivated. Quirky, a lot of people who were a little bit out of place in high school I think end up here. But not like wildly out of place, just a little bit. Creative.

What associations do you think Vassar has?

Women's college. I think it's interesting the juxtaposition between how everyone thinks it's a women's college, but that image is not perpetuated here. I think the administration tries not to emphasize that because women's colleges don't receive as many applications, so it's better to emphasize science or sports. I'm not saying it's wrong, though. It is the way it is. People also associate it as a very gay campus, a very arts-oriented campus. Some people probably think it's Ivy League or near Ivy League. Prestigious, expensive, and a beautiful place.

Appendix V  
Interview with Vassar Student 12  
February 15, 2013

What five or six words would you use to describe Vassar?

Diverse, loving, intellectual, non-pretentious, and comfortable, I'd say.

How would you characterize Vassar's identity?

I think Vassar's a place where you can be yourself, and be intellectual, and not be judged by anyone on how you think or act.

What do you feel you're getting from Vassar?

I think the education I'm getting here is topnotch. I came from a place that wasn't very diverse, my high school was really white. And a lot of the stuff that people talk about here, trying to be accepting and not to throw around gender words, all these things are really acceptable from where I came from. Teachers would call people gay. How to respect other people-- I never had to be careful about what I said. And I had to adapt. So I had a little bit of culture shock coming here. Learning how to be with people who were really different from you. And probably more important than my education when I leave here is learning how to get along with people.

How do you think your Vassar education is going to benefit you in the future?

I have faith that I'm going to get into a good grad school. I think the small classes are helping with my skills for speaking in class. I get so much feedback on papers, that's immensely helpful. My writing is really improving. I know I'll succeed somewhere good because I'm getting a good education. I had high expectations when I came here, and my teachers have been phenomenal.

Why did you choose to come to Vassar?

A few reasons. The main one was it felt really intimate to me. I got into Berkley too. I toured Berkley. Everything felt distant, there's fifty-five thousand people there. Then I came here, and everyone feels interconnected in some way. Everyone is together in their goals and in helping each other. It's hard to explain to people who don't go here, but it feels like a family to me. I felt that when I visited, even just for a few hours. The culture that we foster here is really loving. It's funny talking to my dad about why I came here, because it just felt different.

What associations do you think Vassar has?

Liberal. Women's college. I think-- I've actually heard quite often, privileged. I hear people say scholarly. Pretentious, I've heard. I'm going off of things I've actually heard. What else? People think it's rural, like in the middle of nowhere more than it already is.

What does Vassar mean to you?

It's starting to feel like home to me, I'm a freshman. It means opportunity. I feel like it's a real blessing. It means friends, and I think learning about myself is a big one.

How would you describe attitudes toward religion on campus?

People don't understand it. A lot of people say there's a disdain for it, but I call it a misunderstanding. One time I got back from church, and a friend asked where I went. I said I went to mass. And she asked, "Like in a church?" I said, "Yeah!"

And she said,

"Really? That's interesting." Almost as if it were such a rarity that someone went to church. There's also-- I found that a lot of the liberal nature of this school puts a lot of hatred on the church in general, the Christian church. A lot of times I'll just be having a discussion and I'll mention going to church and people say, "Oh you must be conservative." It's a misconception. One can be spiritual and not be against contraceptions. We just go to one church with one priest, and we don't have any interaction at all with the church at large. Yet a lot of hatred directed at the church at large is directed at the people who go to church. The WBC was particularly worrisome to me, and if people think that the interpretation they have of the scripture is the right one, but it's wrong. If people understood it better there wouldn't be such a disdain for it. I'm trying to find the right word for it, because a disdain suggests an active anger towards it. It's almost like there's like a tint to their opinion of it. When someone brings it up, it has a darker tint.

Do you ever feel uncomfortable?

I'm kind of weird because I'm never afraid of confrontation. But I'll say this. If I was the average Joe, I would be nervous to bring it up in conversation. There's enough of an estrangement associated with it that some people could probably not want to mention it.

What do you feel about inclusion here?

I have a lot of friends who are conservative and religious who live in my dorm. Who have all said alongside me that Vassar is very accepting to everyone, except for people who are conservative or religious. It was strange to me watching the presidential debate, because people were laughing at everything Romney said. I said, "Can you stop, I'm trying to listen." I felt uncomfortable in that situation. You say you're a conservative and people jump on you about all these sorts of things. And it doesn't even facilitate discourse. People seem to team up on what's really a minority here. Especially for religious and conservative people, they say you're imposing your beliefs on other people, without even asking what my beliefs are. I think that's part of the problem, jumping to conclusions. I feel uncomfortable expressing what my beliefs are. I've noticed a bias to the readings we get here, as well. It's not as much as a problem for me, I don't mind arguing with people and putting myself out there. I'll tell you an anecdote, there's was this girl I was making friends with. We were getting along really well. She asked me what my political views are, and I did something I've never done. I lied to her. As someone who wants to be a future politician, I

lied to her. I always said I would never do that, but I was so interested in the prospect of dating this girl that I lied to her. Because I knew what she wanted to hear. I was talking to a teacher from my high school, and he says it's funny how colleges praise themselves on being so diverse, except in cases of religiosity and conservatism. It's almost as though we are-- we all believe that diversity is a good thing. But a lot of people believe that conservatism is a bad thing. So they ostracize this part of the community. Teachers making Sarah Palin jokes in classes. I think I remember one instance of a church joke. Only one though, so not a sample size. And there were side comments, and people chuckle. But I think this highlights the double standard, if people made an Obama or atheist joke, what would happen. Our freshman class president sent out a biased email about gun control, which everyone agreed with so no one took issue with it. I had a problem with the bias. I'm not okay with it, it defies the very principles we hold here, which is the acceptance of the smallest minorities and the most estranged. We say we're going to take those people in. My parents asked if there's anything at Vassar you don't like. I said, it's beautifully diverse in so many ways, except for a couple.

Any other thoughts?

Just a funny fact. Once I went to church, and there were eleven people there. Which just goes to show that not a lot of people go. I went to a religious ceremony with my girlfriend, and there were thirteen people there. Those numbers are astonishing because we have twenty-four hundred people who go here. If you had a statistician run the numbers, they would say something was strange because this is such a distorted representation.

How would you describe Vassar's personality?

To me, it has a Santa Claus type feeling to it. It just feels like if something-- Come on, it's okay, come on, I'm Santa. Warm, compassionate. Hospitable.

Appendix W  
Interview with Vassar Student 13  
April 18, 2013

Why did you choose to come to Vassar?

I wanted a place where everyone was different. Where everyone was weird, and had their own quirky fact about themselves. Their own weird passion, or something like that. I wanted no person to be like any other student at the college. And I didn't really want to be friends with people who were exactly like me. I wanted to be friends with people who were completely different and had their own interests and passions.

What five or six words would you use to describe Vassar?

Trees. We're an arboretum. Homey. Intimate. Vintage.

How would you characterize Vassar's identity?

It's an open environment. It's incredibly open. You can do whatever you want. You can be yourself at Vassar College. Everyone's weird. Everyone.

How would you describe Vassar's personality?

Outgoing. Aware, hyperaware. Maybe sometimes too aware. Probably pretty flirtatious.

How would you describe the typical Vassar student?

Eclectic. Passionate. Open.

What associations do you think Vassar has?

Girls. We go to school with a ton of girls, that's what people always say. Gay. Unemployed. Liberal. Extremely liberal.

Appendix X  
Interview with Vassar Student 14  
April 18, 2013

Why did you choose to come to Vassar?

Part of the reason was so I could play basketball here. I viewed it as a very good school with a good reputation and a good name. When I came here, I felt like there was a historic feel, a feeling of importance that comes with legacy of great academic excellence. I thought that I was going to receive a really good education here and become smarter.

What five or six words would you use to describe Vassar?

Aware. At the same time, I'm going to say secluded. I want to say, conscious. Sheltered. And my final word is wealthy.

How would you characterize Vassar's identity?

I think Vassar's identity is one of a historic, academic institution that is inclusive or presents the image of being inclusive to a diversity of people, regarding race, sexual preference, gender. I think it's a progressive-thinking institution, and it cultivates progressive thought processes. Or it has those kind of people here. I think of it as very exclusive, but at the same time it tries to be inclusive of many different identities.

How would you describe Vassar's personality?

Open. Liberal. Flamboyant. Fun. Intellectual.

How would you describe the typical Vassar student?

Obviously I don't think there's a typical Vassar student, but I think because Vassar makes-- or places issues of gender and racial inequality in the college discourse, I think the Vassar student is more aware and sensitive to those issues than maybe a student elsewhere. I think a typical Vassar student is less geared toward professional life after college than academic learning at college.

What associations do you think Vassar has?

I would say they ask or joke about how it's a girls school. They assume that there are a lot of gay people here, that it's liberal. But also I think that they think that it's a good college.

Appendix Y  
Interview with Bard Student 1  
April 4, 2013

How would you describe Vassar?

Vassar looks collegiate. Liberal, but preppy. It's flat. Classic brick buildings. The library is impressive, and it seems like the school has lots of money. It's a bubble in the demographically poor and "sketchy" city of Poughkeepsie.

Do you know any stereotypes about Vassar? If so, what are they?

They're fast-talkers, often have their own made-up slang language.

How are Vassar students different from the students who go to Bard?

Vassar is more diverse than Bard. It's less grungy.

Appendix Z  
Interview with Bard Student 2  
April 4, 2013

How would you describe Vassar?

It's work hard, play hard. It seems like Vassar sets up the formula for a perfect "college experience" in that all the buildings are big and beautiful, all the events are planned out and organized, and all the students dress the part of students, but in that way it seems like more of a direct extension from high school.

Do you know any stereotypes about Vassar? If so, what are they?

There are many straight guys? Students are very wealthy?

How are Vassar students different from the students who go to Bard?

Vassar students seem more mainstream compared to Bard students who are all about not being mainstream. Also, Vassar students seem to keep their academic life and their social lives very separate, where I feel like at Bard they blend together more. Bard students seem more into music events rather than classic "parties." There are less drugs at Vassar, and also less leaving the campus which I think makes a big difference in the student social scene. All-in-all Vassar students are more outgoing.

Appendix AA  
Interview with Marist Student 1  
April 11, 2013

How would you describe Vassar?

I don't know, Vassar kids are known as lightweights, I guess? A lot of people at Marist actually don't really know that Vassar exists. It used to be an all-girls school?

Do you know any stereotypes about Vassar? If so, what are they?

People think it's an Ivy League school. They think it's a good school with smart students that's hard to get into.

How are Vassar students different from the students who go to Marist?

I would say that Vassar students are more globally aware and conscious and active, whereas Marist is pretty active in the ministry and with things on a more local level.

Appendix BB  
Focus Group Transcription  
April 4, 2013

The moderator introduced herself and gave an introductory speech about the nature of the focus group.

Participants each introduced themselves briefly.

Participants were asked to write a paragraph about who they were and share these paragraphs aloud.

Student D: I am fat. Most people think I'm crazy for saying so, but, firstly, I can't be held to their obese American standards. I'm not American. Secondly, I hide it pretty well. My weight has been a big part of my life for such a long time that I've forgotten what it's like to not be thinking about it. And here I am, eating cheese pizza and non-diet Coke. And it's pretty fucking good.

Student F: I am dot dot dot-- Well dot dot dot-- Uh dot dot dot. Geez, I'm not used to encountering such a broad question or a statement in the early evening with a slice, or two, of pizza in my hand. Suffice to say, I'm still discovering. I don't really know well enough to say in a sentence or two. Maybe this might tell you more than if I really tried.

Student H: I really tried, and I just wrote-- I am a musician and a writer. I love to travel, though I don't usually get to unless I'm playing music. Like as a job. And I'm six feet tall exactly. And white exactly. And I'm left-handed, I'm twenty-one years old.

Student C: I am ridiculously hilarious and witty. I am very healthy except for when I am not, which is about ten percent of the time. I am mostly interested in people and surrounding myself with good ones, or at least those that I deem good. I am a choppy writer, but my dance moves flow. I'm generally intelligent, but don't really have an area of study or expertise at which I excel, but I'm very okay with that. I like bugs.

Student G: I am a daughter. I am unsure about what I'm doing next year, more than unsure. I'm really lazy, probably related to point number two. I am interested in the intersection between the arts and social justice. So that means from restorative justice to implementation of community development and stuff like that.

Student B: I said, I'm nineteen years old, not quite as good at English as I am with Spanish. I'm a cross-country and track runner, and an avid Real Madrid fan. I like James Bond. I'm also very into literature, lately Russian literature, but my favorite writer will always be Hemingway.

Student A: Yeah, mine's kind of cheesy. I am a freshman who is trying to learn new things and have revelations every day. Everything that goes on around me is part of a learning process. I am someone who is trying to put myself out there and try new things while having fun with it. I do this by writing, traveling, by being

in a comedy group, and by taking the opportunity to get to know others around me in the process.

Student E: Oh, right. I'm terrible at public speaking, but I am a Chicagoan born and raised. But I'm aspiring to find a career in advertising and marketing, and because of this I hope to relocate and become a New Yorker, at least for a while. I am relatively spontaneous. I love to travel and try new things. I wish that I could freeze time so that there would be more of it to do everything I want.

Moderator: Okay, great. Well, we're going to complete another writing activity.

Participants were asked to write a paragraph about Vassar and share these paragraphs aloud.

Student H: Vassar is, or was, an acquired taste, for me at least. I think because of the environment I came from at home as a freshman, and the many big and small differences that I met here. That being said, after leaving for the whole of my sophomore year to attend a state school in Maine where I'm from, and coming back for my final two years, I've been lucky enough to gain valuable perspective on the school. And in that time, it has become my home, the center of my friendships, growth, and my pride.

Student E: I think about how my appreciation for Vassar has also come from having experiences in other colleges. Whenever I go visit friends who are at bigger state schools, I just know it's not for me. So when I come back to Vassar, even though it's not perfect, I've really to appreciate the qualities that made me choose it.

Student H: Yeah.

Moderator: What do you think the main differences are between Vassar and other state schools?

Student E: Just most notably the size. I guess-- state schools are bigger, but the people are so much more homogenous. Everyone seems kind of the same, and at Vassar I feel like people really feel like they can, you know, be eccentric, be themselves, and there's actually more diversity here. Which I think is nice.

Moderator: Do you guys feel the same way? Have you guys visited other state schools?

Student C: I think that it's like I definitely know the difference between Vassar and state-school kids, and pretty distinct. But at the same time, I don't think we're as diverse as we claim to be or say we are in terms of Republicans, or whatever. Or like we're diverse in a very liberal way, I guess. Or just to a certain extent, and then the second that someone is like, "I'm conservative," people really react to that.

Moderator: Yeah, definitely. I think diversity-- Well, what do you guys feel about diversity at Vassar?

Student D: Isn't it like eighty to ninety-something percent white?

Student C: Yeah.

Student D: I mean, does much more need to be said?

Moderator: Were you going to say something?

Student H: Well, I was just going to say. I think there's something to be said about categorical diversity, like race or, I don't know, I guess like political standpoints or something like that, and just kind of like academic mindset? Or like, life mindset? I don't know. When I went back to Maine, obviously, it was less diverse because Maine in itself is ninety-nine percent white. And so, technically it was less diverse. But it was also less diverse, I think, in the mindsets of the kids and how they looked at college. They look at it like a functional way to get a job that pays twenty-thousand dollars more than they might have. Whereas I think kids at Vassar are allotted-- or like afforded the ability to diversify in the sense that they can almost do anything with their Vassar education. So, they might let their personalities run rampant. Whereas that kids who were at the University of Southern Maine, were just like all-- they like to party, they like to have fun, and they just want to-- They're probably working a job on the side, and they're just trying to get through school. It's not the same level of like-- college is just a world of freedom for us, but college is like high school again for them. Just trying to get through it because it gives you something. So, I think it was less diverse in race and in focus.

Moderator: Does anyone else have any more comments on that?

Student C: On a unifying characteristic, I'd say, is just in general a sort of enthusiasm and passion for learning in whatever field that people are in. Which, that field is diverse, people have different interests. But generally, at least almost everyone that is not apathetic. They're very interested in one thing.

Moderator: Anyone else? Okay. Did anyone else want to share what they wrote?

Student G: I can. Yeah. Okay, Vassar has been home for the past four years. It's been a place to grow and meet new people that are unlike myself. It is a resource. And then, I wrote another section that said Vassar is not a safe space for everyone. And maybe it's because I just left my black feminism class, which is a very angry class sometimes. It's taken me a long time to learn my privilege in having felt that it's been a safe space for me in the past four years.

Moderator: Any comments? Does anyone feel the same way as Student G, in terms of this being a safe place for them? Or a safe space?

Student H: I didn't think it was at all my freshman year. Sorry, I'm not about to cry. One of my big things when I came freshman year was like, I am a lot more conservative than a lot of the kids who came here. And when I came here, the big motto, all the Student Fellows were talking about it, was open-mindedness, you know, diversity, acceptance, tolerance. And, me and my friends who were like-- I have this one other friend who's pretty conservative, and we decided that there was diversity in almost everything here. Except for in diversity of opinion on that sort of subject. So, I didn't feel safe at all to-- If I thought things were strange, or if I thought things were-- Which I feel is a very normal thing when you come to a brand new place. I think it's going to be abnormal to you, which maybe is not like a politically correct word. But if I were to express any sort of feelings, it would be very taboo. So I really didn't feel safe in expressing myself at all. I think it's changed a little bit since I got back, and I don't know if that change is in me or in the school. But I totally agree. I think I had the opposite like at the beginning I

didn't feel safe, and now I kind of feel like-- Maybe that's just kind of like a yolo thing. Don't really care anymore, but-- I definitely get it.

Student G: That's what I mean by privilege, because I've never been-- Of course I've been on the outside of certain things, but coming into Vassar and being from Manhattan. Even just being aware of the area. I've never been confronted with Vassar as a non-safe space. And finally in my last semester of my senior year I'm starting to realize that there have been other experiences, other than my own, here at Vassar that have not necessarily been unpleasant, but just have been-- you know what I'm trying to say.

Student H: Yeah. I just think, for example, my freshman year-- I just think there's a lot of stuff people say around here-- that it is such an open space, that you can say things, yes, but it's not an open space to have some sort of retaliation. Or like, not retaliation, but like backtalk. Because even some of the environmental projects, for example, they would be so passionately talking about organic food and stuff. Which I am fully all about. But they would say things about how horrible, you know, a non-organic farmer might be. And those are my parents you're talking about. But if I were to bring that up, it'd be kind of like, "Ooh. He's not a good farmer. He doesn't know about agriculture like we do." I'm probably like, "Dude, you're from like Manhattan or something. You've never even been on a farm." I don't know, I don't like that type of thing. And it kind of used to set me off a lot.

Student D: I haven't felt that way so far. I've felt like in classes and in spaces outside of class I've been allowed free reigns, I guess, in regard to what I can or cannot say. And I've actually found that often if I offer a more conservative standpoint on things it's taken into consideration. Like whether or not they really take it into consideration and really think about it is another thing. But, I mean, they do show that point of view respect, if that makes any sense.

Moderator: Okay. Does anyone else want to share? Who wants to go next for the Vassar descriptions?

Student F: I'll go. Vassar is the time I stepped out of Vassar and saw it reflected. It's the knowledge, the good and the bad. The people, the good and the bad, and how you pass by them in our four-year escapade. Finally, it's the picture I'll draw in decades to come when I think back about how all of this has shaped me.

Moderator: Are you trying to speak to-- You've come through a journey here?

Student F: Yeah, I mean. Come junior year, it's all sort of-- not senior year, but it's still sort of coming back to you.

Moderator: Mhmm.

Student F: You begin to sort of become reflective on what you've learned since everything is sort of reaching an end-point and you sort of see that in the coming of the future.

Moderator: No, definitely. Is there anyone else share his experience of this journey? You've learned a lot about yourself here?

Student C: I was very-- yeah, but I also wonder how much you would learn about yourself just at this age in any setting? You know? I wonder what the comparison is. I have friends who just didn't go to school who are just working and also learning a lot about themselves and doing other things and learning more about

the real world. And I think that that's also-- we should give credit to that experience as well.

Moderator: Yeah, I think that's a great example that leads into a question I wanted to ask you guys later, but I think it's relevant now is, how has Vassar changed you? How have you incorporated what you see in Vassar as a part of yourself? And I think we might go around and speak to that really quick. Did you want to start off, Student C?

Student C: How has Vassar changed me?

Moderator: Yeah.

Student C: Can I not answer first?

Moderator: Definitely. Has anyone else thought about this before?

Student H: I think, though I was definitely resistant to any change at first, and I think that's what-- Because I felt like sort of brainwashed at first, which isn't necessarily the case. But I think last year, I had real, actual, physical-- not physical, but tangible changes in my opinions about social issues. I think they were black and white, but they actually just like switched like maybe over the last six months or so. It wasn't necessarily Vassar's ideology being smashed down my throat. It took me a while to be like, "Oh, everyone here isn't just rich. And close-minded. And doesn't want to talk to me because I'm neither of those things." Or, I guess maybe I am close-minded, but I don't know. So, I guess it took a little bit to-- I think I had the opposite reaction when I came here. I didn't think people were the same as me. And they didn't want to accept what I did. So I kind of reverted to the same thing, I didn't want to accept what they did because they're such and such type of people. But I think last year was the first year when I cut that out a little bit. I think it's because I started joining the Axies. So I had a population of people that I respected and would hear from finally, and who also happened to be your normal Vassar kids. So, I don't know. It allowed me to-- I guess I became more liberal in that sense. I think it was a shift that was valuable and to be noticed. Not one way or the other, just the fact that it has changed me. Vassar definitely did something.

Moderator: Definitely. And Student A, I know you were saying that you've been absorbing your experiences here.

Student A: Mhmm. Well, I think just being here at Vassar is a change in itself. Because a lot of the things that I've experienced here, even in my freshman year, I've never experienced before. I was put in a lot of situations where I would have to think new things that I probably wouldn't have been accustomed to. And, I think that one thing that Vassar strengthens that I used to have, and I still have, is just paying attention to detail. Or really trying not to take anything for granted. And just absorbing everything around me and having a fond appreciation for it. Yeah.

Moderator: So do you think Vassar kind of gives you a trigger for that mindset where you absorb more?

Student A: Right. Yeah.

Moderator: Okay. Anyone else?

Student E: I think that Vassar is really inspirational in the sense that there's so many people here who do so much with their summers and the jobs they get

after. I think it's really pushed me to pursue things that I otherwise would have thought were so far out. So, I think that's what caused to do some of the things that I've done during the summer work-wise. And I think that's pretty cool.

Moderator: Would you say Vassar has played a part in making you a bit more adventurous, a bit more ambitious?

Student E: Yeah. But at the same time it's also very intimidating. Because you can't live up to some of those standards. But it's more inspirational, I'd say.

Moderator: Student B.

Student B: Yeah, you know, I guess at Vassar-- I used to think I was so smart. I guess I kind of do still think I'm so smart. But, you know, the quality of the professors, or at least the professors I've had, is incredible. You know, they've definitely shown me that the more I learn the less I know. Which is-- or the more I realize that I know really very little. And, you know, I've kind of gone from "I'll probably get my masters" to "I'll definitely get my PhD." Just in one semester. It's definitely changed. Just on the academic side, Vassar really inspired me. All my professors have gone above and beyond any high school teacher I ever had. They're just incredibly brilliant people. I've probably just been very very lucky, I'm sure there are some bad professors somewhere. But I haven't run into them yet, I'm very lucky.

Student G: So, maybe it's just where I'm at right now. Being a senior and getting ready to pack up and go. But I reflect back on my freshman self often. And I'm so glad I'm not that person anymore because of how much more aware I am about important issues that I just didn't even-- I'd been ignorant to before. So, I think it's definitely the courses that I take. Also, the passion that people have. Yeah, it's inspiring. I know more about what I need to be concerned more about. I wasn't really concerned with much when I was a freshman, except really myself. Yeah. There's more work to be done. And I'm ready to do that work, and knowing what that is is helpful.

Student F: On the other hand, I think your experience definitely differs depending on the academic course you take. For instance, I'm majoring essentially in a language and in a natural science. So, I can talk to you a lot about the nervous system in Japanese, but I couldn't really talk to you about other aspects of an education where you learn about other cultures, other ideals. It's just-- I think the amount of growth that you can undergo in your four years here definitely depends on what you decide to learn also.

Student C: I think it's also in that regard has taught me to-- It definitely does matter what you study, because your skills in whatever department are relevant. But it's taught me to learn from the people around me and to really recognize that there's a wealth of information in even any friend and any discussion. And to just really pull all that I can, and I guess use everyone for the valuable information that they can teach. Inside and outside the classroom, but mostly outside.

Student G: Can I just piggyback really quick? So, I think that's a really important point to bring up. One of my housemates is-- Econ? I don't know. Something like Econ? And, she's not going to see this tape, right? No. I don't know--

Student C: Some math-y thing?

Student G: Yeah, something that's black and white, I guess. And I've taken different Soch classes or women studies' things. And she's always like, "My favorite part is when you come home from a class, because you bring the conversation back. And I get that part of the Vassar education from you." And, also, I've realized-- she said this the other day, I realized that part of the education is also expanding on it or explaining it. Or having to reiterate what happens in the classroom setting. Just, it's nice that people are wanting to listen to you. Because it helps me cement the things that I learned.

Moderator: So, Student D, do you feel that Vassar has changed you in any particular way?

Student D: I think I've become very good at faking it. In all aspects, I think. Just because I really want to say that it's American culture that I just can't seem to mesh with. But I'm not entirely sure. Maybe it's Vassar? I really have no other extensive experience, I want to say. Last year was pretty miserable for me. But I think you just learn to suck it up and get on with life. And you fake it. I think Vassar's done a really good job of teaching me how to do that.

Moderator: Okay. And kind of going off of that, in terms of how Vassar has changed you, did your knowledge about Vassar coming into the school-- did you identify, "Oh, I see that Vassar is like this, X, Y, and Z, and I want to become more like this typical Vassar student." Did you see Vassar as being a place where you could fulfill what you would see as being your ideal self or someone that you wanted to become?

Student G: I can start. So, I was super lax about the college application process. And I found three schools-- or like four schools that I was really interested in. That I went to visit. And then the rest, I had my friends flip through a college guide and then whenever my finger would stop, I would apply to those ones. So, I didn't really care much. And even the ones I had picked out-- So, it was Vassar, Tufts, Wesleyan-- I don't even remember the fourth one I was interested in. When it came down to deciding which one I actually would go to, I decided based on the interviews that I had with the people-- the alumni that I guess that you meet. And the question that I asked them at the end was like, "What am I going to walk away from when I'm a senior? What does your institution-- what do I get from this?" And the Vassar alumni told me, you get a sense of awareness, which I guess is what my last answer was. But a sense of your role in the world, be it understanding what your privilege is like even having this education, or-- I don't know. Just knowing what the possibilities are for you.

Student E: I also didn't pick Vassar based on students at all. I came for a tour during the summer, so there was no one here. And the tour guide was good. But I think I mostly liked the school because the aesthetics. The beautiful buildings and the campus. When I first came freshman year at the start, I was also just like, "Wow, I made a mistake. I'm not sure that I fit in here." But I think it just took time to really find the group of people I meshed with and the activities that I could take part in and enjoy. I don't know if I picked it because of people.

Moderator: Yeah. As freshmen, fresh off of the application experience, what do you guys think?

Student A: Well I was convinced to go to Vassar after attending the Focus Week. I think it was a weekend where you stay overnight, and you take part in all these activities. And I think it was there that I was able to get a sense of that's what I wanted in a liberal arts education. Where I'm able to have a very involved curriculum, academically but also a place where I will have enough time to really discover myself and what my interests are, and what I want to use my future. Because my twin, she decided to go to Dartmouth. So, two different environments where she's always busy academically. And she's not as able to really do the things that I do in terms of having a lot of extracurriculars or having a lot of free time, and just exploring the campus. And I think that's something that's really important for me. Something that I really hold dear today, that I have the ability to take part of the things that I wouldn't have been able to take part in if I went to a school that was very strict academically. Like a constricting force. Not to say Vassar is-- that the academics are different. They're still great academics, it's just that there's not as much pressure to take as many courses or core curriculum or any of that.

Student B: I, honestly, I wasn't going to go to Vassar. I was going to go to U Chicago. Actually, Columbia was my dream school for a long time. And then, I don't know where it changed to U Chicago, and U Chicago was my dream school. It was going to be either that or Georgetown. I got accepted to both. And then my dad, who made me apply to Vassar, I hadn't even really heard of it. I mean I had, but it was kind of like my dad was just like, "Oh, apply to Vassar, apply to Vassar." And I was like, "Alright, dad." And then I just-- U Chicago started turning me off to going there, just the interviews I had. As a place where "Fun goes to die." It really is the place where fun goes to die. And I just-- I didn't even visit Georgetown. I just passed through Vassar, and, you know, after my visit-- I took a tour. And then I just walked out and I was like, "Yeah, I'll go here." Everything just meshed with me, and I felt like I could go here. And, I did. It was very impulsive. But I'm pretty happy with the choice.

Moderator: Was it the vibe of the school that really attracted you, or did you talk to a student?

Student B: No, I didn't talk with any students. Yeah, I guess I liked the vibe. I really liked the architecture. Honestly, if I were to point to one thing, it would probably be the architecture. As bizarre as that sounds, it just-- I just really liked the architecture. Especially like the bauhaus-- Ferry House. I'm a pretty huge fan of the bauhaus movement. You know, when you narrow it down like that-- At the time, it just felt like I should go here. And so, I mean I'm happy with it.

Student E: This is a little unrelated-- or, it goes back to my first point. Visiting friends at the University of Chicago is one of the things that makes me love coming back to Vassar. Being like, I'm so glad I don't go there. So, good choice.

Student D: It's interesting I guess that everyone has referenced how it's such a beautiful place, because I never had the opportunity to visit beforehand, and when I came for the first time for international orientation, I was just like Jesus Christ this place is fugly. And I think, had I taken a tour, I probably wouldn't have had this romanticized image of Vassar in my head and I probably wouldn't have applied. I think--

Student C: I agree, I don't think it's beautiful. I think that's really overused to describe it. It's very nice. Everything's nice, and there's certain buildings that I like. But something about it doesn't really have a cohesive aesthetic. Which I don't care about. I just don't think that college campuses are beautiful things in general. I don't know. But it's a very nice place to study, and I like that there's the arboretum or whatever, and the Sunset Lake, and you can feel like you're not in a city and whatnot. But, yeah, I agree. I don't think it's-- I came here, and I was like, "Wow, this is so amazing," as a freshman. But it was also just 'cause some sort of vibe. Some random feeling. I also had a great tour guide, which I think makes up a ridiculous portion of everyone's opinion about what kind of college you want to go to. She was super hot and funny, and I was like, "Wow, I would love to go here because everyone is just like her." And then in the "Why Vassar?" thing, I was just like, "It felt right. Just 'cause it did." I had a good feeling about it in general. But, if I'm being honest, I also knew that it's a good name. That's what I wrote. It's a good name to have on a resume. It has a good reputation, and that does, you know, with however much I disagree with all that surrounds that idea, it is helpful if you want to succeed. And, yeah.

Student F: I remember-- I think this might have been Focus Weekend, but I sat in a developmental biology class. And, so I sat in the back, because, you know, got to give the actual students priority here. But, we were talking about-- I don't even remember, but I said something about a point. I remember it was a very stupid point. But, the professor was like, "Yes"-- he pointed, and he was like, "Yes, good point." And then after class, you know, I was preparing to leave, and he was like, "Hey, you." And he gave me a fist bump. And I was like, "Whoa! That's so cool!" And I think that was a really-- made me want to come here. Yeah.

Student H: My experience was pretty random, like some of these other people's. My high school didn't really have any college culture at all. As strange as it sounds, almost all people enter the work force or go to the military or something like that. So it was probably, maybe, five kids who went to liberal arts colleges. At all. And so-- But they did have a poster of Vassar at the guidance office, and the library was on it. And, so I literally applied to like, number one, number seven, number eleven, number twenty-four, number fifty-two on the liberal arts rankings, just because someone said liberal arts. And I spent less than half an hour here on campus, because I was actually toured Marist with my friend from home. So I basically had no idea about it, but it was the highest-ranked that I got into. Or that I didn't get on the wait list for. So I was like, "Okay. Let's do it." Because I don't know, I think I come from slightly different experiences as far as college culture goes. My parents talked about it, yes, but my stepmom didn't graduate college, my dad went to a small state school in Vermont. It's just like not a big thing. We don't do SATs or anything like that seriously. So I'm incredibly lucky to have gotten in, it's ridiculous. I have no idea how it happened. And so I just came in the end, after we figured out the money. So, I don't know. Yeah. I think actually when I boil it down, it's 'cause of the poster. I just have a memory. 'Cause the library is beautiful.

Student E: Yeah, that's a great poster.

Student H: Literally though. That's the only reason I ever thought of it.

Moderator: Did anyone else have-- we're coming to the end of our time, did anyone else have any other descriptions of Vassar that they wanted to share?

Moderator: Has anyone not read their descriptions? Did I get them all?

Student D: Oh, me. Vassar is a crock of shit. I suppose I should've visited beforehand. Not that that was an option. At the end of my four decadent years here, I'll probably be mostly unprepared for the real world and still harping on about the prison industrial complex, as if enough people in the world give two shits. If anything, Vassar has taught me how to fake it.

Moderator: Student B?

Student B: Most of it was covered, you know. I just said, nice place. I like the architecture. I like how it's just different, you know. That's the thing, like you were saying. It's just weird. It has all these styles that shouldn't be together. And, you know, some people might see that as ugly, but-- my mom's an architect, so.

Student C: So you know.

Student B: No, not so I know. Just she always dragged me around to stuff like that, and I always thought it was so cool. But, that I said, it has rigorous academics. It's a school with lots of money and a great competitive name. You know, I also said it seemed welcoming, for the most part. Harmless. And, you know, my alma mater, I guess.

Student A: It was basically covered. I just said that Vassar is a place in the middle of nowhere. It was the complete opposite of what I was used to in Queens, New York. And I think that's one thing that I enjoyed about it because it was detached, and I think it gave me the tools I need to grow without feeling rushed. Because I always felt rushed when I was in high school, getting from A to B. Bus, train, whatnot. And I think Vassar's location, for me, was ideal, because it's not-- it's detached in the sense of location in Poughkeepsie, but, I mean, at the same time, if you want to encounter civilization, you just take the MetroNorth or whatnot. I guess for me, it was between Vassar, NYU, and University of Virginia. And Virginia was too far, and I felt like I would be completely apart from family. And it would've been too different for me. And NYU was just too busy because it was in the city. And Vassar was sort of the right medium. It had the right distance, and it wasn't too busy. And it served my needs.

Moderator: Awesome. And I know-- Student B, I wanted to come back to-- you mentioned it was kind of a weird place. If you guys had to characterize Vassar's, how would you describe what the personality is here?

Student H: Trying. People are trying, not like too hard. People are trying a lot of weird things.

Student C: Experimenting. I actually don't think it's very unique. I think a lot of people say it's unique. Just in terms you can compare kids at Vassar, Wesleyan, Oberlin, Bard. Just, you know, a lot of schools that are pretty similar in caliber, I guess. And it's a lot of kids who, yeah, are unique and everyone has different varied interests. But there's something cohesive in the-- I don't know. It's a lot of upper- to middle-class, liberal-y kids. So it's not unique in that way.

Student A: Yeah, I think for me it was definitely different in terms of background and all that. Because coming from Queens, it was very racially diverse. People of different financial backgrounds. And then coming here, I think what was

interesting to me was everyone brings something different to the table. Whereas it seems that-- I think I'm going to start rambling, and it won't make any sense. I think that even though people say that it's not as diverse, for me, it's that I met so many people that even though it's not as racially diverse, or, you know, financially. They have different mindsets that they were able to bring to the table, and I got to learn something out of it. And then my status as biracial, coming from someone who couldn't really come here without financial aid, I was able to bring something that other people would be able to learn from. So it was a learning process, and I think that's-- I didn't really think about diversity when I was coming to Vassar, because I feel like there are so many different types of diversity that I was able to learn from. So, I still appreciate it a lot.

Moderator: Okay. So, we only have a few minutes left. I told you guys we're getting out at seven. So I'm going to try to keep to that. If anyone has any final thoughts? Anyone want to share anything else?

Student G: I think it's worth mentioning-- I don't really know what I want to say about this, but the fact that we are in Poughkeepsie. Something about our student body being in the middle of this location that has so many different issues. It makes me feel weird. That I'm doing something that the purpose is to not have me end up in Poughkeepsie. Or like the people in Poughkeepsie. It makes me feel uncomfortable that it's happening so close to-- you know.

Student B: It's kind of like Yale and New Haven.

Student C: There's a lot of college towns like that. And just sort of the intellectual work that people do-- I've been getting more and more pessimistic, I'm sorry. But the sort of political work people do on campus and in classes and the opinions and beliefs that are expressed here. And then to see that the-- how that relationship between Vassar kids and Poughkeepsie, and the attitudes toward Poughkeepsie are drastically different. For example, I don't know, someone who claims to be all for equality or racial equality and whatever, more equality between socioeconomic classes, but is extremely rude to the janitor in your building. There's that sort of hypocrisy that happens a lot.

Student G: There's also a severe lack of relationship between Poughkeepsie and Vassar. I mean we have view programs--

Student C: And they exaggerate it so much.

Student G: Yeah.

Student D: I think it's things like this-- Not specifically the issue that you raised, that helped expedite my disillusionment with Vassar. Things like this really really helped that.

Student G: Like what?

Student D: Things like you just mentioned, how there is this sort of--

Student C: Divide?

Student D: Yeah. This weird sort of divide that you would think, given what people say, wouldn't be there.

Student G: Right. Given the student body, I would think that there would be more of a relationship between Vassar and Poughkeepsie, and the fact that it's not there, I think is a reflection of the intellectual work that we do versus the energy we're willing to put into things that are right next door.

Student D: I wonder if it's just the student body. I mean there is administration as well. And I mean, I can't say I know what part they have to play in all of this. But I wonder if they care at all.

Student C: I think they care about wanting to seem like they care.

Student D: Look good.

Student C: Yeah. I mean it's like when you go to an Admissions thing, "Yeah, there's a lot of community involvement." I mean, there are programs, and I'm not saying that there bad programs or whatever. But the situation's fucked up and there's a huge disparity. And don't really do anything about it, except for tutor kids occasionally.

Student A: Well, I mean, I'm part of the VAST program that tutors at the middle school. The reason why I do that is because Poughkeepsie reminds me a lot of my neighborhood, and I felt very connected to it, in the sense that I wanted to take part of doing something to feel more connected to that. Because I did feel a lot of people didn't feel as connected to Poughkeepsie. When I go outside of the campus and somewhere else, it's like a completely different world. You notice that. When you walk out of Vassar, you know you're out of Vassar. And for me, it would sort of disorient me. And then I wanted to become accustomed to it, so I did VAST. And the students I met there-- I mean it was such a great experience for me because I was able to do what I could, and the students that I tutored, we had a great relationship because I have a-- I tutor a Hispanic girl, and we're able to talk about our problems and relate to each other. And I think that was super important. But they also voice their concerns about Vassar. Because they don't feel as connected to Vassar as we feel about Poughkeepsie. So it's a mutual thing. And I think things should be done to improve that, and hopefully they will have more programs that will be more hands-on.

Conclusion, Debriefing, and Wrap-Up.

Appendix CC  
Focus Group BFI-10 Questionnaire and Demographic Survey

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

I see myself as someone who...

- |                                       |                   |                            |                |                |
|---------------------------------------|-------------------|----------------------------|----------------|----------------|
| A. ...is reserved                     |                   |                            |                |                |
| Disagree strongly                     | Disagree a little | Neither agree nor disagree | Agree a little | Agree strongly |
| B. ...is generally trusting           |                   |                            |                |                |
| Disagree strongly                     | Disagree a little | Neither agree nor disagree | Agree a little | Agree strongly |
| C. ...tends to be lazy                |                   |                            |                |                |
| Disagree strongly                     | Disagree a little | Neither agree nor disagree | Agree a little | Agree strongly |
| D. ...is relaxed, handles stress well |                   |                            |                |                |
| Disagree strongly                     | Disagree a little | Neither agree nor disagree | Agree a little | Agree strongly |
| E. ...has few artistic interests      |                   |                            |                |                |
| Disagree strongly                     | Disagree a little | Neither agree nor disagree | Agree a little | Agree strongly |
| F. ...is outgoing, sociable           |                   |                            |                |                |
| Disagree strongly                     | Disagree a little | Neither agree nor disagree | Agree a little | Agree strongly |
| G. ...tends to find fault with others |                   |                            |                |                |
| Disagree strongly                     | Disagree a little | Neither agree nor disagree | Agree a little | Agree strongly |
| H. ...does a thorough job             |                   |                            |                |                |
| Disagree strongly                     | Disagree a little | Neither agree nor disagree | Agree a little | Agree strongly |
| I. ...gets nervous easily             |                   |                            |                |                |
| Disagree strongly                     | Disagree a little | Neither agree nor disagree | Agree a little | Agree strongly |
| J. ...has an active imagination       |                   |                            |                |                |
| Disagree strongly                     | Disagree a little | Neither agree nor disagree | Agree a little | Agree strongly |

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Class Year: \_\_\_\_\_

Sexual orientation: \_\_\_\_\_

Where are you from? \_\_\_\_\_