

What Are For-Profits Selling? An Analysis of For-Profit Messages in Higher Education

Cecilia Ruvalcaba, University of the Pacific

Lauren Louie, University of La Verne

Jennifer Zarzosa, Henderson State University

Abstract

The significant growth of for-profit colleges and universities (FPCU) in the last 15 years is hard to ignore (Kena et al. 2006). As an increasingly major player in the higher education industry, what makes them stand out from non-profit colleges and universities (NPCU)? This research examined the messages FPCUs communicate on their institutional websites to understand how they portray themselves compared to NPCUs and to evaluate the messages communicated through this medium as it is the top resource for aspiring college students (Ash 2008). Through a content analysis of the visual elements on the institutional websites of 13 four-year FPCUs, we found three main themes that were common in FPCUs communication: Purpose of the Institution, Role of the Student, and Role of Higher Education. Though we found similarities with NPCUs that focus on social mobility in higher education, the dominance of more individualistic and capitalist themes found in the social mobility logic and market orientation focus shaped the way these themes were communicated, allowing FPCU messages to better resonate with their target market. Further research is needed to examine the overlap in focal message between NPCUs and FPCUs, specifically examining how NPCUs have adapted their messages, and in doing so co-opted FPCUs messaging tactics. Moreover, an analysis of how these narratives impact the higher education sector can be investigated.