Chapter 2

How to Sell Hope and Mobility

Ravenwood offers programs of study that are unique and contribute to the overall development of its students. Its [capstone course] empowers students to get up and make a difference in their lives, community and workplace. I will definitely recommend my program to a friend.

I believe that Ravenwood should improve their communication skills, as far as giving information to new enrollees and current students.

The [graduate program] at Ravenwood College is on par with other well-known universities. The fact that it is only one year puts this program above others.

I would like to see an increased focus on strong academics. Considering the importance of accreditation as well as a strong academic foundation, it is extremely important that the degree is competitive within the marketplace. Furthermore, as an alumnus, I am committed to working with the school to accomplish this goal in terms of material and financial support.

It was intense but worth it. I have already spread the word.

What kind of friend would I be if I were to refer Ravenwood College to someone?

Anonymous comments, Ravenwood Graduation Survey 2007–2008

In order for Ravenwood College to continue to exist, the institution needed to locate and acquire new students. As higher education in the United States is voluntary, market-driven, and diverse, all colleges and universities need to fully participate in the sorting infrastructure broadly but also to persuade persons to become part of their particular community. In doing so, they must negotiate both a practical value proposition and the affect-laden landscapes that makes up the lives of prospective applicants. As institutions identify processes of both kinds that work for them, and as they become an established point in the meritocracy, they fall into an enrollment

rhythm. Corporatization in the university has brought the logic and language of markets to these processes, which align with the Jeffersonian paradigm of education and create a somewhat rigid interpretation of institutional mission and risk. In other words, for less prestigious, tuition-driven institutions, building on the markets one already serves is both easier and less risky than attempting radical departures that might not conform with the brand. And yet, it is also risky to be too narrowly focused on a small market, as if it suffers a particular economic setback, it may lead to institutional insecurity.[1] Diversification of student enrollment is a safety net from fiscal risk but also reflects the potential watering down of institutional brand. Administrators are thus constantly balancing competing and contradictory tensions in their attempts to secure fiscal security without sacrificing the mission or brand of the institution. Furthermore, individual counselors tackle similar propositions within the context of their own careers. This chapter highlights how this balancing act took place at Ravenwood College.

Brand, Image, Education

Colleges and universities cultivate brands, which involves a coherent relationship between, on the one hand, instances of brand (or tokens) and its qualities and, on the other, a brand identity (or type) and its qualities given the broader legal and cultural framework that makes such notions meaningful (ontology) (Nakassis 2012). For example, a particular token of the brand (a sneaker) cultivates a particular affective meaning (the desire and will to "just do" something), given our broader cultural understandings (the notion that professional athletes are role models to emulate and represent tough, American individualism). As such, it can be thought of as "the ongoing articulation between brand tokens, a brand type and a brand ontology. Minimally, the brand relationship holds when there is a sufficiently tight calibration of these various levels (token-type-ontology)" (Nakassis 2012, 628). More simply, it is an institutionally constructed set of symbols designed to index certain meanings and associations in the general public:

> Whatever brands are, they are classifications of a particular kind. To speak of brands is to reckon the sameness of and difference between commodities

> and their associated accoutrement. . . . This Reebok T-shirt is different from that Puma T-shirt. This Disney cruise is the same as this Disney film. Brands group together certain commodities . . . while cross-cutting other classifications. (Nakassis 2012, 627)

Although both are institutions of higher education, Ravenwood College is different from Harvard University. In terms of brand recognition, Harvard University is closer to Reebok or Disney than it is to Ravenwood. What meanings and associations was Ravenwood able to foster through its literature (material/digital) and activity? In August 2009, a research group prepared a sobering report that measured Ravenwood's brand recognition. In a survey of undergraduate, adult students in the region,

> 55 percent were not at all familiar with Ravenwood College, while only 6 percent were either "familiar" or "very familiar."
> More than 50 percent associated programs of study with Ravenwood that were not actually offered by Ravenwood College.
> Only 41 percent knew enough about Ravenwood College to rate it.[2]

Ravenwood College was not extraordinary in the ways that made a difference to college rankings and that would make it relevant in the public imagination. In a meritocracy and in a crowded marketplace, it is absolutely critical both to stand out and to activate ensembles of affect. Ravenwood struggled with both.

For years, internal data and anecdotes had suggested that the vast majority of students had heard of the college through word of mouth, which meant a personal referral from an alumnus, current student, or member of the community. Despite having invested significant amounts in marketing campaigns over the years, the college was still having difficulty in differentiating the institution from the 166 institutions within a hundred miles and thus struggled with establishing and communicating its brand. Admissions counselors needed to persuade prospects that Ravenwood was the best option in a sea of institutions despite most of those students knowing very little about Ravenwood or what the institution was like. There were, of course, a number of unique qualities and resources that did differentiate Ravenwood from other institutions, but brand is about not the qualities that one has but rather how one stitches together identity and experience into a cohering narrative

that circulates into and penetrates the public imagination. Ravenwood was not a traditional university and did not seriously seek out high school juniors and seniors as its primary market. Ravenwood sought out working, urban professionals of color. But how to communicate that?

Admissions counselor Aaron was among those who reported that he had ended up with a career in college admissions largely by chance. After completing an MBA, he had gone to Ukraine as a member of the Peace Corps, where he taught English and principles of business. Upon returning to the United States, he was looking for some way to combine his new interest in education with his background in marketing and business. College admissions seemed an interesting fit, and he was hired at nearly the same time that I began my research. In some institutions, there are entire marketing departments dedicated to ad work, but Ravenwood was small and everyone contributed to everything. Aaron had proven himself by writing a thirty-second radio spot and now found himself in charge of the redesign of the literature for a small liberal arts program.

One day in June, I happened into Aaron's office and found him working away intently on this literature. He had brought together material from the faculty of the program and liaised with the ad agency to produce a first mock-up for a cardstock, full-color brochure for the liberal arts program. He had then sent this mock-up to the dean, chair, and faculty; it had been returned and was laid out before him with scrawled comments from each. Aaron had found the experience educational as he realized that the literature was "expensive real estate": every scrap of space was valuable and had to be used wisely.

Many aspects of the brochure were reviewed by the various constituents, and comments were written in with different handwriting. The cover, for example, held a photograph of an attractive, studious young woman who appeared to be either white and/or Latina and was pointing out something in a book to a young, Black man in a sweater and glasses. In the background were what appeared to be two more Latina women, one of whom was middle-aged. A sole comment was scrawled in the margin: "sexier photo." This photo was not changed and appeared on the front of the brochure when it was printed in August.

Other changes, however, were made as requested. A message was written above an image of a woman walking through the center city corporate district: "photo is not our target audience, —Bryant." It was replaced with

a close up of a young, Latino male staring straight into the camera. Professor Bryant had further written in a quote from himself: " 'Our goal is to help students become agents of change in their communities' —Stuart Bryant, associate professor and editor of the [neighborhood newspaper]" on the bottom of one page. When the final version came out, one of the inner stock photos of a young woman of color talking seriously with a colleague had been replaced by a photograph of the smiling, blond-haired Professor Bryant in front of a classroom, with his quote prominently displayed beneath it.

There were a number of factual errors that needed to be changed. "There are no liberal arts articulation agreements," read one comment; another circled a statement about transfer credits and noted "not true." Quotes from Professors Hansson and Stubbs were crossed out, with a note to replace it with "quotes from students," but were later replaced with a quote from a Ravenwood founder about making a "positive difference in the lives of others," which corresponded with a comment scrawled in another location asking for a "quote from [founder's name]." Every word, every image, and every color choice on the piece of literature needed to fit in with the representations of Ravenwood College in order to cultivate the right brand. Although there certainly were decision makers (Dean of Admissions Levitz being one of the most influential), the process through which this material was produced was one not of democratic consensus building or autocratic direction but rather of slow emergence from across a variety of players, stitched together to compromise in some areas while not sacrificing core messaging in others. This aligns with the ways that Moore (2003) has described the division of labor that goes into the production of a "branding personality" as it draws on the expertise sets of designers, social scientists, and management. Such materials needed to suggest the possibility of mobility and success as the result of affiliating with Ravenwood and could take the form of video as well as hard copy.

Ravenwood College ran a series of spots on the cable television networks that received some positive responses from prospects and seemed to be generating some inquiries. As with much advertising, the commercials blended fantasy and reality. The assistant director of admissions, Madelyn, reported seeing one such commercial while watching the National Geographic Channel. The commercial was sandwiched between a show about legalizing marijuana and another about the abuse of crystal methamphetamine. Though not aired in the best context, the crowd of admissions counselors hung on

Madelyn's words as she described seeing the ad come on. The one-minute spot included faces of grave, young-looking people of color, with voice-overs giving excuses not to pursue a degree, followed by a narrator in response. It began:

I don't have time to go back to school	[a still of a young woman's face]
Yes you do!	[from a cheerful narrator's voice]
I can't afford to get my degree	[a still of a young man's face]
Yes you can!	[from the same cheerful narrator]

The commercial went on to mention that Ravenwood had been the "school of choice for working professionals" for over forty years. The music then turned to an upbeat jazz track accompanying video scenes from around the campus: students in classrooms, students working in computer labs, talking professors, and so on.

The scenes were all filmed on campus, but when the commercial featured a crowded hallway with attractive, young, Black, White, and Asian "students" walking together and laughing, it was clearly scripted. Actual student scenes all took place in classrooms and tended to feature older, Black women. In my experience at Ravenwood, when "diversity" was spoken of, it was in the context of recruiting more White students. The ethnic diversity demonstrated in the commercial did not accurately represent the student body's diversity, unless one counted students from two other associated institutions, which I will call "Atlas" and "Geschaft."

Because Ravenwood College offered courses primarily in the evenings and weekends for adult students and had limited course offerings during the day, the administration decided to sublet space to two institutions in order to produce some income from its space during daylight hours. These were the "Atlas Language Center" and "Geschaft College." During specific seasons and times, international students would fill the halls of the college, giving the illusion that Ravenwood was more racially and ethnically diverse than it really was. Further, the classes were segregated de facto.

At night, the majority of classes were filled predominantly with Black and, to a lesser extent, Latino/a students. During the day, the tall, young, mostly blonde, German students of Geschaft College would be taught by

their own instructors in their own classrooms. Atlas Language Center students were largely from East Asia, Europe, and Latin America and were likewise taught by their own instructors in their own rooms. If one walked the college hallways in the evening, one would encounter an entirely different population. One admissions counselor revealed that a student complained because she had been given the impression on a tour that the college was more diverse than it really was and was unhappy to be in classrooms with "all Black students." In conversation, the admissions counselor bemoaned this White student's implicit racism but did not carefully interrogate the institutional role in producing the situation. The television commercial seemingly indexed Ravenwood as diverse in a particular set of ways that largely erased a complex social landscape in deference to a racially diverse fantasy of Ravenwood College that was better suited to the brand.

A number of staff who worked with the Office of Admissions made an appearance in the television commercial: Dean of Admissions Karl Levitz was talking with a student in his office, Andrei (admissions graphic designer) was reading in the library, admissions counselor Nadira was laughing, and Professor Pedicini was talking seriously. During the remainder of the spot, the narrator mentioned the speed of degree completion, the granting of financial aid, the convenient location (there were a few shots of the main entrance and the trendy neighborhood), the evening and weekend coursework, and the school's contact information.

Ravenwood's catalogs and TV commercials portrayed not only fantasies of diversity but working class fantasies of affluence (see Shumar 1997) that evoked possibilities for prospective students. I found many of the images in Ravenwood's advertisements, flyers, catalogs, and related literature to be somewhat typical of institutions like Ravenwood and, at times, even difficult to distinguish from its competition. Like other colleges that had strong career and vocational orientations, less selectivity, and were generally less elite, the literature was filled with images of attractive, young, professional looking men and women (mostly of color) working studiously over a desk or engaged in deep conversation with an older person (likely imagined to be a professor or tutor). All of the various marketing literature was filled with smiling, happy, attractive faces. And like the TV commercials, models were blended into the brochures with actual students and faculty. Many Ravenwood advertisements that I noted on buses and bus stops in the region were essentially made up of a few such smiling faces with text describing pro-

grams, and apart from logo and school colors, the advertisements were not really distinguishable from the advertisements of Ravenwood's competitors at the same bus stop. Other photographs in the literature depicted the city in which Ravenwood was located in a way that was reminiscent of a travel brochure: aerial images of the historic city center, the sun rising over the cityscape, a trendy gallery, and other tourist attractions. What distinguished all of these representations, however, was that they depicted the student as a certain kind of person: a strong individual making choices and investments. The narrative found in the marketing reduced the individual's entire future to a choice about attending college.

Other similar TV commercials from Ravenwood included young actors and actresses of color sitting at bus stops or on benches and being approached by their future selves wearing professional business attire. These professional selves had returned to the past to persuade the past selves to attend Ravenwood. Another such commercial suggested that students would get "more money," "more respect," and a "better future" if they attended Ravenwood. The school was presented as the mechanism through which a specific kind of personal success and mobility could be achieved, a technology for managing prospective students' own risky futures.

The imagined or fantasy students in these commercials conformed to a particular way of thinking about individuals and achievement in a meritocracy. They seemingly lined up very neatly with the traits that Demerath, Lynch, and Davidson (2008) described in high-achieving students, including (a) an awareness of competition in the marketplace, (b) an emphasis on control of self-authorship, (c) individual confidence, (d) advocacy for self, (e) an attachment to success, and (f) a self-conscious cultivation of work ethic. The advertisements were inhabited by exactly these sorts of subjects while erasing sociopolitical history, race, gender, and acknowledgement of structural inequality; they fetishized competitive individualism and ignored structural conditions or constraints.[3]

Andrei, Ravenwood's in-house graphic designer, worked hard to portray Ravenwood a certain way and to insinuate certain ensembles of affect about Ravenwood into the public imagination. In the spring, he designed a simple Ravenwood logo that appeared to be entirely woven from grass with a single daisy. Another image had a flock of ravens hazily forming the Ravenwood College logo. Andrei was always busy doing graphic design work for nearly every department in the college, from commencement programs to

workshop flyers. Many of his images adorned the TV flat screens announcing events around campus, but few made it to the public marketing campaigns. Unlike the advertisements and commercials, these drew on comforting or pleasant imagery (as in the creative iterations of the logo described above) without suggesting any particular aspiration. Much of this work focused on cultivating a cohesive brand about Ravenwood within the Ravenwood community, that is, primarily among the students, staff, and faculty. This sort of work was therefore not focused on recruitment but rather part of the ongoing performance of the Ravenwood brand at Ravenwood.

Andrei, who was also enrolled at Ravenwood as an MBA student, worked closely with the ad agency on more typical marketing campaigns, with which he was generally pleased. He felt that the current advertising campaign looked clean, had a clear and simple message, included a diverse set of people (in terms of age, ethnicity, and so forth), and overall made Ravenwood look like a university. He had seen some advertisements for Ravenwood's competition that did not look like a college at all—they had all the gravitas of an advertisement for a "foot doctor," he said. In contrast, he thought that the current marketing campaign drew upon the "Yes We Can" spirit, energy, and optimism that was still at a high after the Obama election. On the website and in literature, he had worked to eliminate what he called the "flashy" or "gimmicky" images, such as blinking "Apply NOW!" buttons. He was very aware of the need to conform with the conventions of higher education and attempted to divest Ravenwood from those messages that he felt indexed anything that might suggest that it was counterfeit, illegitimate, or not real in some way. Very often, he would be heavily involved with the ad agency, liaising between it and the dean of admissions on various images.

Andrei described the biggest challenge as finding ways to package the intangible concept of "education" with meaningful imagery. He wanted the college to have a certain brand; he wanted to look at an image and get a certain feeling of comfort and then associate that feeling with Ravenwood College. For example, to capture the accelerated nature of the programs, Andrei designed a series of images that drew upon traffic signs: taglines on a bright yellow traffic sign suggested both speed and an urban setting. Dean Levitz described the advertising as "aspirational"; he wanted prospects to look at the image and aspire to be part of it. He wanted the prospective students not only to colonize their own future but to see Ravenwood College as an essential component in bringing that future about.

Although print advertisements have faded in favor of digital as I write this, in 2008–2009 it was still necessary to produce such materials in hard copy. Shumar (1997, 131) describes the ways that institutions began in the 1990s to engage in "aggressive advertising campaigns and computer-designed, individualized, direct marketing campaigns" in order to expand applicant pools that had declined because of population changes. By the time of this study, when dozens of postsecondary institutions had billboards along highways, posters in every subway, and Twitter accounts, ignoring the role of advertising in higher education would have been naive and risky. Indeed, Shumar (1997) saw trends in advertising as producing

> a system of highly prestigious sought-after institutions in high demand, a second layer of less illustrious institutions doing their best to imagine themselves illustrious and a huge number of institutions using all the market techniques they can get their hands on to sell their product to a consuming public. The rapid growth of adult student populations, which is the result of the survival strategies of many universities, shows that the buying public can, and will, be wooed successfully with images of prestige and credentials promising to get you out of your humdrum life and into an exciting new career. (134)

Ravenwood broadly fit into the last category, one of a huge number of institutions drawing aggressively on as many techniques as possible to package themselves as a particular set of experiences.

In order to differentiate the Ravenwood experience from its competitors, many of the faculty and Dean Levitz alike wanted to emphasize the role of the curriculum and the students as "agents of change" in the marketing pieces, although it was not clear exactly how to do this. Professor Richardson felt that although the accelerated nature of degree completion did attract interest, it was married to a progressive curriculum that transformed people's lives. At a town hall meeting, many faculty became enthusiastic when talking about a marketing campaign that would emphasize student capstone projects as "audacious and exciting," because this demonstrated a "strategic attempt to change the world." They felt that these experiences in the classroom had transformed the lives of both the students and the communities and that sharing these personal stories with prospective students should be key to recruitment efforts. The meeting went on for a few hours more, with debates on everything from the definition of "applied scholarship" to

marketing incentives ("why don't we offer a $3,000 discount to anyone who brings in a pink slip?"). Dean Levitz remained at the town hall meeting facilitating such conversations, but many of the admission counselors disappeared after a short time. Many of them felt that the town hall meetings were mainly for faculty, and administrators were far too busy "working" to spend the day in such debates.

The August 2009 marketing report prepared by an outside research group made a number of specific recommendations, but many administrators with whom I spoke found them to be either commonsensical or impractical, or they argued that the recommendations demonstrated that the research group had not "gotten" Ravenwood. For example, the report suggested that Ravenwood should expand beyond serving people of color and instead market programs to professional, White women. Dean Levitz actually laughed out loud at this recommendation, saying that White people rode the busses, listened to the radio stations, and saw the billboards. They also came to the campus, and although "twenty-nine-year-old, professional women from the suburbs have always been welcome," they tended to come in, look around, and leave. Professor Bhatt, chair of the Business Programs, likewise felt it would be unrealistic to make inroads into that market and rather felt that the college should just be comfortable with the fact that it served students of color.

Shifts and changes in the core market segment for Ravenwood were thus problematic for multiple reasons. Such shifts could be seen as a betrayal of the institution's mission but also deeply impractical, unrealistic, or risky. As institutions gain momentum in their particular niche or with a particular profile of prospect, it can become more and more difficult to break into new markets. Despite how much one spent on marketing, only a few White women would ever enroll.

Standing Out: Deploying Scripts and Cultivating a Niche

Every day, Ravenwood admissions counselors needed to articulate why Ravenwood was the best option for particular applicants. According to the staff at Ravenwood, a nearby selective, private institution had all of the selling points needed to recruit potential students; it held all the cards. Selling points included options: the university had hundreds of undergraduate

majors, various specialized programs, and diverse sets of graduate programs. It had renowned faculty, large endowments to cushion them from the economic downturn, an extensive library, and the prestige of the name. Admission was highly selective, cost was astronomical, and a line of young people were waiting to get in. The admissions counselors were likely deeply fluent in all sorts of relevant metrics that elicited their selectivity, from average SAT scores to the number of volumes in the library. In recent years, this university had invested in capital projects to match the physical plant of the institution to its reputation. Thus, the university had not only manicured trails beneath a canopy of great oaks in the shadow of classical buildings but also dormitories that had grown to resemble luxury condominiums and a Starbucks in the library. Parking lots, vending machines, and a good view could not compete with that, and the admissions counselors at Ravenwood did not attempt to do so in any meaningful way.

The local public university system, in contrast, held a mixed position in the talk about higher education at Ravenwood; there was no consensus about its quality or its prestige. At times, the public university system was talked about with pride, but it was also talked about as having once been more prestigious. Some talked about it as the fallback option for locals, meaning that if admission applications were denied by more prestigious national institutions, local students could always go to one of the public colleges. Two of the defining characteristics of this public university system were its size and diversity; there were community colleges, four-year colleges, and honors colleges serving oceans of students. Although one flagship public institution that I visited had a more traditional, attractive physical plant, other institutions were decidedly less immaculate than elite universities and had the feel of a rather large and busy train station or bus terminal. The three traits of these public colleges or universities most often discussed at Ravenwood were their vast population, massive and complex bureaucracy for handling that population, and very low cost (sometimes less than a third the cost of attending Ravenwood). Also critical, some of these public institutions pursued the same mission of service and social justice for disadvantaged students that Ravenwood did. Ravenwood could and did compete for students with these public universities and colleges.

This was not an equal field, however. Many administrators that I encountered at the public universities had either never heard of Ravenwood College or confused it with other colleges or institutions. Ravenwood, however,

constructed much of its marketing and recruitment with the assumption that if its prospective students were considering any other institution, it was most likely a public college. In fact, many students had attended other institutions before Ravenwood, and many of those students mentioned public ones. It seemed as if a number of smaller institutions with less prestige, like Ravenwood, spent a lot of time recruiting disaffected students from these public institutions. When discussing recruitment for new degree programs at a meeting in December 2008, Academic Dean Carla Martinez drummed the point home several times when speaking with the admissions staff: "I need colleges. Think about community colleges, [public college]. Those students are going to the [public university system]. I need to find out where those students are going." Public colleges were on everyone's mind.

If marketing campaigns were not successfully communicating Ravenwood's unique character and brand, than at least admissions counselors would be able to verbally deploy scripts that would.[4] Such scripts had been refined and revised in the face of economic crisis. Surviving a difficult fiscal moment in its recent history had highlighted how important it was that Ravenwood manage future risks. Persuasive recruitment scripts and marketing images were being deployed to suggest that students could cultivate and actualize a future at Ravenwood that would be prosperous, upwardly mobile, and, by implication, happy. Although grounded in a particular geographic space, and as with many other marketing campaigns (see Meneley 2007; Meneley 2004; Munn 1986; Wilk 2006; Wiley 2007), the selling of Ravenwood College included a distortion of time and space, with an emphasis on fantasies about the future. Failure to take such an approach with prospective students would have been risky for Ravenwood.

As such, in their everyday activity, admissions counselors did not need to deploy scripts that persuaded prospective students that Ravenwood was better than some selective research university, but they did need to persuade students that Ravenwood was a better option than local public institutions. Ravenwood knew the profile of its students and had cultivated marketing materials and scripts that spoke to them: the adult, working, female student of color. Even the ways that the curriculum was structured and courses were offered reflected the average undergraduate age of just over thirty-two, and this clearly differentiated Ravenwood from the public options.

In the fall of 2009, for example, Monday through Friday, there were only 126 undergraduate courses offered during the standard eight-hour work day

(9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.), whereas on those same evenings, in the four hours from 6:00 to 10:00 p.m., there were 152 courses offered and an additional fifty-four courses on Saturday alone. This allowed students to attend courses wholly on evenings and weekends without ever needing to attend during typical working hours. This option was thus a powerful selling point for those adult students who had full-time day jobs. Another practical selling point was that because the summer included a full complement of courses, it was possible to complete a four-year undergraduate degree in under four years, while attending courses exclusively in the evenings and weekends.

The selling of Ravenwood College combined talk about the possibility of future success and economic mobility, practical advantages, and the unique character of the curriculum, which were crafted into progressive Learning Community (LC) Clusters. Students enrolled not for a single course but for a cluster of courses that integrated material from a variety of disciplines into a single theme for the semester. The capstone project for the semester explicitly linked the coursework for that cluster. The founders had designed this curriculum to speak to the needs of adult, working-class women, feeling that it better modeled the integrated nature of human learning. This curriculum design limited choices; there were no elective courses in the degree programs at Ravenwood, and although one had some choice in terms of which LC Cluster to take, one was unable to opt out of any courses within that cluster. One would think that this lack of choice could potentially be a disadvantage to recruitment, but, in fact, it was often positioned as a selling point; speakers at recruitment events (faculty and administrators alike) often explained that one need not worry about taking irrelevant courses (such as art history) or about which course to take or when. This lack of choice contrasted sharply with the larger institutions, where there were hundreds of majors, hundreds of potential courses to take in any given semester, and highly flexible programs of study. Furthermore, the structured program of study, close-knit cohorts, and accelerated speed contrasted sharply with the perceived weaknesses of the public university system in particular. It also meant that every alumnus of a given degree program had completed precisely the same courses (although likely with different instructors). Admissions counselor Nadira, an alumna, was very effective at crafting these broad strands into a cohesive script about attending Ravenwood.

Nadira frequently shared with students the story of how she had attended a local community college for a year before coming to Ravenwood. She excelled

in Ravenwood's programs, completed her bachelor's degree, and then went on for her master's degree at Ravenwood (which followed a similar structure). After three and a half years of study at Ravenwood, she had earned a new master's degree and started a new business. She then ran into an old classmate she had known back in the community college, and she learned that he had not yet finished his associate's degree. She had been astonished. She thus argued that although Ravenwood College was much more expensive than the community college, students in the public system had to contend with limited and arbitrary course offerings and inconvenient schedules, and consequently, an associate degree could take five years to complete. Nadira also felt that public institutions were rife with bureaucratic confusion: huge course bulletins, headaches related to closed courses, complex systems of prerequisites, opaque degree requirements, and a massive, confusing bureaucracy that made you feel like you "were in high school again." She was clear that it was not that Ravenwood students were not savvy enough to handle such bureaucracy but rather that they "should not have to." Nadira's assumptions about the public university were anecdotal but very much informed the arguments she would make for attending Ravenwood. Public institutions were painted as being massive, bureaucratic, intimidating, and rigid, in contrast to Ravenwood's small cohort and a human-faced, student-centered curriculum that would lead to faster completion. Of course, the cost was much higher.

As an admissions counselor and alumna, Nadira often drew on her own life story as a woman of color who had struggled with, but cherished, her schooling. She felt that many "poor" and "ethnic" students were hesitant to take out loans, which largely meant that they would limit themselves to only public institutions. Loans, according to Nadira, were practically required for attending a private college, which was a shame because she felt that private colleges offered a lot of "nifty benefits," such as the accelerated programs and alternative curricula of Ravenwood. Ravenwood was thus positioned as better meeting the needs of particular kinds of students but only being able to do so as a private institution that would cost more.

Cole was hired as a tuition planner working in the Office of Admissions in order to fulfill many applicant needs, including teaching financial literacy, helping prospects through the financial planning process, and recruitment. During the application and recruitment process, Cole would meet with students to attempt to demonstrate how and why Ravenwood was such

a good investment. This was further necessary because Ravenwood College had nearly no endowments, was completely reliant on tuition to cover its expenses, and was much more expensive than the public institutions with which it was competing. Ravenwood's tuition rate was between $450 and $800 per credit, which translated into between $15,000 and $26,000 per year for most students (program dependent).

Like Nadira, Cole informed prospects that at most colleges one would be unable to both work full-time and go to class full-time, as you were able to at Ravenwood. Therefore, in a four-year, liberal arts college where students were graduating on average after five or six years, they were not only paying for five years of tuition but also forgoing a full-time salary that could be as high as $30,000 a year. At a college with similar tuition rates, the cost of attendance might therefore be $50,000 in tuition + $150,000 that they would not have earned in wages because they could not work a full-time job. Although Ravenwood College was expensive, it allowed students to earn a full salary while they attended and made it easier for them to graduate more quickly. According to Cole, this helped some students to "get past the sticker shock." Cole was therefore positioning the college not only as meeting the needs of particular students but also as being the wiser fiscal investment.

Although not literally scripted, there were a number of such lines of argument that had been crafted for the adult student that seemed to work less effectively for more traditionally aged prospects. After years of recruitment for Ravenwood, Dean Levitz was fairly adamant that the college's student population was the working adult; he was not interested in targeting high school students. A couple of admissions counselors, such as Maggie, disagreed and spent some time nurturing relationships with high school counselors, looking for younger, "focused" students. Maggie, who had worked with Madelyn at a competitor before coming to Ravenwood College, had experience and connections with more traditionally aged, college-going students. Maggie said that at her previous employment, she was part of a strong, organized team, where all student contact, from tours to telephone calls, were literally scripted and monitored—whereas Ravenwood was looser and more informal. At Ravenwood College, admissions counselors worked independently and needed to structure their own time and experiences, but like anywhere else, at its heart it was a sales position, and so, according to Maggie, "our job is to paint a pretty picture."

In her former job, Maggie had the chance to develop relationships with young kids as early as their junior year, reaching out with scholarships or special summer programs to entice them. At a private college in the region, one admissions officer I interviewed described the institution's "in-depth communication plans" to engage even high school freshmen:

> The name studies have shown that if you are not on a student's list, college list, going into their sophomore year you have no shot at them—you have minimal shot at them . . . [and so some programs begin] very very early on. I do programs in [local community] for eighth-grade parents, for going to there and planning things for college for high school. And I do a presentation on college, and it's just so they can start thinking about it.

Unlike Ravenwood, this other institution was engaging students at much earlier ages, so that its name would be thought of as an option. Maggie's former job was at a proprietary college, which was both similar to and different from Ravenwood; she said that they both were "opportunity schools," by which she meant that they targeted prospective students wherever there was opportunity: particularly those who were rejected by or had dropped out from other colleges. Her previous employer, however, had a lot more resources and had both admission counselors (who assisted prospects through the admissions process) and an "outreach team," which spent all of its time on the road at college fairs and high schools "generating leads." As an admissions counselor, she had only to follow up on inquiries from students who had already expressed an interest in the college, whereas at Ravenwood she had to find those leads, follow up with them, guide them through applications, and so on. Still, she felt that her job mostly involved being pleasant and following up with people, admitting, "This is not a good thing to say, but Admissions is a job that a monkey can do if it's taught how to do it, know what I mean?" And yet, it also required articulating, elaborating, and deploying these persuasive scripts, as demonstrated at the *Cambia Tu Vida* event.

Ravenwood's *Cambia Tu Vida* recruitment event had all of the most obvious and essentialized markers of Latino culture, including a live Latin band and delicious Latin food. In fact, the food was so delicious and staff members were so busy snacking and chatting around the catered meal that even when prospective students arrived, staff practically ignored them, leaving

them to wait awkwardly for the open house to begin. Sometimes the messaging at Ravenwood was not well scripted.

After a particularly prolonged moment of anxiety where several admission representatives argued among themselves about who would initiate the session, faculty from the two major schools were introduced. Although they overlapped in their messaging in many ways, each of them drew on different primary strategies for connecting to students and for provoking aspirations in attendees.

Dean Martinez of the School for Social Work began. She spoke in broad generalities about the available programs in a way that emphasized a few features. First, she emphasized the tight cohort nature of the programs along with a few catch phrases from the college marketing literature. She then referenced and deployed identity politics scripts as a successful woman of Puerto Rican descent. She mentioned that the college had "people like yourself," and she explained how proud she was at graduation when she saw "people like us" getting their degrees. She specifically mentioned President Obama and Supreme Court Justice Sotomayor several times. Finally, she emphasized that the goal of the college was to help students "move up and move on." To my ear, her tone and manner were somewhat flat and the themes became repetitive. She did not describe courses, programs of study, career opportunities, or alumni stories.

In contrast, Professor Bhatt of the School for Business and Technology was a dynamic and entertaining speaker. He began with a brief statement about the current state of the economy layered in the jargon of economics and business management and then said evenly, "If you understand what I just said, then you don't need to come to Ravenwood." He then asked the audience what percentage of businesses failed in their first year, which, of course, they underestimated. He then asked why it was that such businesses failed. His answer was that individual business owners did not have the core skills and knowledge sets required to let those businesses succeed. These were among the skills and knowledge sets that Ravenwood would offer; and Bhatt went on with examples. Water, he suggested, was essentially all the same. Whether it came from a tap or from a bottle, it was H_2O. And yet, business professionals had successfully utilized marketing and branding techniques to persuade various markets that there was a substantial difference between one bottle of water and another and, of course, that different prices were thus warranted. This was genius, he felt, and was representative

of the skills and knowledge sets they would acquire as business students in Ravenwood.

Professor Bhatt's talk was far more persuasive. In fact, during the question and answer portion of the open house, a number of students said that they had arrived planning to study social work, but after the talks, they were considering studying business. During the event, both Dean Martinez and Professor Bhatt suggested that it was important not to decide on a major at that moment but rather to resolve to go to college. Nonetheless, Professor Bhatt whispered to me later as we left the open house that Dean Martinez was going to "kill" him, indicating that he also perceived his talk as having been far more persuasive. To a certain extent, the attractiveness of business over social work reflects the particular strengths of the programs and speakers involved, but several features of the talks given the responses of the prospective students are also suggestive of how race and ethnicity are spoken of in the context of aspiration and education.

Like the prospective students and Dean Martinez, Professor Bhatt was a person of color, with descent from the South Asian diaspora of the Caribbean, but he did not explicitly talk about his ethnic subjectivity. He emphasized instead market-based notions of skill, knowledge, and self (see Urciuoli 2008). Like Dean Martinez, his talk suggested the possibility of movement and success, but he never explicitly identified this possibility as connected to a particular class of person although the recruitment event was designed to target Latino/a applicants.

Although he also did not describe courses, programs of study, or alumni stories, Professor Bhatt did deploy a number of scripts that cultivated a subject in Ravenwood aligned with meritocratic-individualist models for achievement and engagement that were also seen in the marketing literature. The students were encouraged to embrace risk and risk-taking as a fundamental aspect of self not only in the present but as a way to "colonize the future." Demerath (2009) explained self-ascribed authority "as a kind of reflexive feedback mechanism that justified and reinforced students' identities and practices, including their aspirations and achievement orientations" (87). Subjects are required to control and discipline themselves as they take authority of their lives. The myth of a color-blind, modern America[5] is tied up with understandings of the competitive, objective marketplace as the only meaningful context in which agents make choices. Race and ethnicity may be ever present but may be deployed only in very particular conditions and

in strategic ways that do not contradict the supposedly meritocratic marketplace. Professor Bhatt was seemingly familiar with the delicate social terrain in which the discourse of race and ethnicity could be deployed effectively.

Ravenwood also struggled with finding ways both to recruit more students and to do so in a way that resonated and aligned with its educational mission. Dean Martinez shared with me a "Recruitment Strategies Report for the School for Social Work" that identified several areas for recruitment to Ravenwood, many of which most typical colleges and universities most likely never consider. Among these were an Ex-Offender Recruitment Initiative (never initiated) that worked to identify individuals serving time who required "educational opportunities as a condition of release." Another included recommendations for the Welfare-to-Careers Program for those receiving public assistance, which had been implemented. The Welfare-to-Careers Program was not advertised or pulled into the public brand, although there was information about it made available discreetly on the Ravenwood website. There were also a variety of initiatives that utilized the connections of existing faculty or staff, faculty phone-a-thons, and the development of articulation agreements, which would make transferring credits from other institutions far easier. Certain programs or aspects of the college that did not align with traditional notions of merit were not emphasized and would be recruited for quietly. Another example was the Ability-to-Benefit Program, which permitted students without a general equivalency diploma to obtain one while attending college-level courses. Dean Levitz once noted that another college openly advertised a similar program on its website, whereas at Ravenwood it was positioned more discreetly. Dean Levitz wondered if Ravenwood College should follow suit but later dismissed the idea as it did not align with the desired brand. This was the paradox for Ravenwood; such efforts resonated with the mission of the college to reach out to and support marginalized persons, but it contradicted the deeply entrenched, Jeffersonian paradigm of higher education as identifying the "best." It was thus unclear how to reconcile such contradictions.

Such contradictions would often arise when the contrast between one's current position in the social structure and the aspirational scripts used in recruitment were stark, such as at another recruitment event I attended with a local community organization that served the homeless. There were about five employees from the small organization and about thirty clients, and the discussion centered on a specific scholarship that would cover all

expenses for those who completed the community organization's program successfully. Professor Stubbs and Professor Bhatt were the primary speakers along with the tuition planner (Cole) and a current student; admissions staff largely held peripheral roles, such as welcoming guests and introducing speakers.

Professor Stubbs effectively engaged the audience by suggesting that the program allowed students to both "improve the world" and pursue a career at the same time. He said, "helping others is transformative for yourself." He spoke mostly through vignettes about students he had known and said there was a "special spirit" in Ravenwood. He recalled former students as old as sixty successfully completing the program, which acknowledged "their life experiences," and respected them as adults. He also briefly mentioned Obama and Sotomayor before moving on to talk about the Ravenwood literature and sample course schedules in the participants' folders. Professor Stubbs described Ravenwood as a "special" place outside of the established social order—a place where the possibilities for college even extended to the homeless. He drew connections between his audience of prospective students (who were adults and mostly people of color) and individual models of success, through both local anecdotes (former sixty-year-old students) and through successful people of color who had national prestige (Obama and Sotomayor). Because poverty and race and ethnicity are often conflated in American contexts, Stubbs was able to draw parallels between prospective students and President Obama by erasing important differences, such as Obama's highly educated, international, and credentialed preparation. In so doing, he engaged his audience and opened up the possibilities of success, achievement, and mobility, in ways that seemed to me to be more effective than those of Dean Martinez.

Professor Bhatt spoke next about the economy with optimism. He suggested that there were always "dips" in the economy and that "we always manage to come out of it." The business program, he suggested, would teach them how to take advantage of the boom that would inevitably come. As in *Cambia Tu Vida*, he drew on some of the same scripts about the number of new businesses that succeeded. The answer was two out of ten, but this time he pointed to the individuals' inability to manage themselves as the source of that failure.[6] Just as Professor Stubbs had called on possibilities, Professor Bhatt stoked aspirations by opening up inclusive, professional possibilities through schooling. "Money will come," he said to a group of homeless per-

sons in a program potentially offering a scholarship to some of them. "There will always be someone willing to take a chance on you," he continued, drawing parallels between both the possibility of the college granting access and a future investor offering money. Ravenwood was bundled up with representations of possibility, aspiration, and success in which even the fact of homelessness was considered assailable. This is particularly stark if one considers the structural challenges and risks that one faces as a homeless person. Ethnographic works from Liebow (1995) to Bourgois and Schonberg (2009) demonstrate the brutal, isolating, and demeaning conditions of living on the streets in the United Sates, and for the homeless, it is far less likely that there will always be someone willing to "take a chance on them."

Cole, the tuition planner, spoke next about "how to make it work for you." He described his job as one that empowered prospects to take control of their futures and to ease anxiety about paying for a private college. He then took a number of questions from the audience. For example, he reassured one person that bad credit history would not affect their ability to get a student loan and that financial aid had not been cut because of the economic crisis; this was then followed by more specific questions about the financial aid process.

Finally, a young woman who had completed the program from the community organization and received a full scholarship to Ravenwood spoke about her personal experience. She talked about her understanding of what it was like to be homeless, her fear in going to college, and her stubbornness to keep working at it until she got it right. She said that she eventually realized that she was not "dumb," and she told the audience that after some time, they would "fit in" like she had. She talked about her willingness to use the tutoring center and referred specifically back to Stubbs's speech by agreeing that there was a "special spirit" to the place, that she had grown, and that the audience would learn to feel good about themselves. The student seemingly embraced the inclusive message of the previous speakers and spoke to the personal transformation that she had experienced; she was the embodiment of these possibilities. She acknowledged that she had not had the symbolic markers associated with college when she had begun. She had not fit in, but over time and with assistance, she had acquired those markers. The dean of admissions then offered thanks and discussed deadlines and exams to great applause, after which there was mingling, eating, and laughter. The promise of success and personal change was in the air.

In many ways, it is admirable and extraordinary that these two institutions (Ravenwood and the nonprofit community organization serving the homeless) would work to provide a postsecondary credential for those struggling with the reality of homelessness. However, these sorts of representations of possibility were still meritocratic American Dream sorts of stories available for the few through competition. They did not question the structures that allowed the attendees to become homeless in the first place or that might keep them that way. Rather, the speakers fully embraced the notion that a few of them could be provided the opportunity (as individuals) to follow traditional paths to economic security (a college degree) with a little support from all sides. The American status quo remained unexamined. However, it is important to remember that this was not some philosophical dialogue about mobility in the United States but rather an attempt to persuade persons to invest significant time and money in the institution. Ravenwood College was not inexpensive. Although this open house focused on a scholarship that would cover expenses for these homeless, prospective students, I had heard these same arguments before. They were part of the persuasive scripts that Ravenwood staff and faculty drew on regularly to recruit students. About 80 percent of students were willing to take out student loans to finance their education at Ravenwood College. These facts lead to an inescapable question: did the "special spirit" of Ravenwood merit the cost of attendance? The admissions team needed students to feel that the answer to that question was yes.

But one of the big questions for Ravenwood was where to locate these prospective students. The vast majority of colleges and universities knew this answer: in high schools. As such, a good deal of undergraduate admissions work at most universities included developing strong relationships with local high schools and high school counselors. As we have seen already, however, there was not a single catchment area for Ravenwood, and more creative strategies need to be identified. Everyone was aware of this, as when during a town hall meeting a professor responded to the president's great optimism about the new veterans bill going through Congress at that time: "Where do you think the vets are? They're not in [the trendy neighborhood of Ravenwood]." So where could you find the vets? Where could you find any working adult with a high school diploma who was hitting a ceiling in career advancement?

As senior admissions counselor, Bernard actively organized and managed the various recruitment events that the college had participated in or was considering participating in; a large binder labeled "outreach" was an attempt to document where the prospective students were. He said that the events were really a result of trial and error: if attending an event or college fair yielded students, then they continued; if not, they didn't. This approach was logical, flexible, and easy to manage. The information cards and sign-in sheets were coded for event, and when the inquiry's information was entered into the computer systems, that code went with it, although Bernard did not know which codes went with which event, as that was controlled by the director of student records. Admissions counselors also engaged in what they called "drop-offs," some of which were described as terribly awkward. Essentially, the admissions counselor identified an organization of any kind in which prospective students might be found. These ranged from community colleges and high schools to libraries, private companies, and community organizations of all kinds. They preferred that there were already established links in the organization (for example, current students or alumni might be employed there), but at other times such links would have to be forged through a cold call to the human resources department. Admissions counselors would then gather all kinds of materials from their private hidden "stash," the supply room and literature dispensers to bring with them. They would then visit the organization (always within commuting distance of Ravenwood) and drop off the materials for display. Whether holding an event on campus or off campus, however, it was necessary for admissions counselors to engage in a good deal of impression management.

Stevens's (2007) ethnographic depiction of a selective college highlights how the institution's image was carefully cultivated, refined, and managed by the Office of Admissions. At different points, the director of admissions described both the receptionist and the man who mowed the lawn as some of the most important people in the college because they had such a powerful impact on prospective students' first impressions (Stevens 2007, 30). Although staff members at Ravenwood were sensitive to their image and impression, far less time was taken to script or polish the messages. As someone who has worked in higher education administration (and is frankly a little neurotic), I was often aware of or thinking about what students or prospects would see. As a participant observer, I would sometimes engage in simple image

refinement; throughout the day, I would find myself straightening up brochures, files, stacks of paper, and literature that had been left in uneven piles. I would straighten out chairs and move the bag of promotional materials out of the view of the reception area. The receptionists, many of whom spent the day browsing the Internet at the front desk, were largely work-study students with only a vague sense of the academic programs and were not frequently active in polishing appearances. In fact, Ravenwood's limited resources, staffing, and constant pressure affected the degree to which moments were scripted.

I accompanied Aaron, Maggie, and Professor Kucharski to a large, local community organization with over five hundred employees to make a presentation about the college, which was a somewhat frequent strategy. In this particular organization, an executive had gotten a poor impression of Ravenwood graduates through a bad experience with one alumnus, and so Maggie had worked hard to mend relations and to make a presentation emphasizing graduate-level study for the unit that this executive supervised. With Maggie in the lead, we were led into a large boardroom where we set up the event. Food and refreshments were brought in, and we put an information packet filled with Ravenwood literature and promotional items (pens and highlighters) at each seat. Certain promotional items (such as the pens) were very popular, and admissions counselors hid private stashes both in their offices and at home, which was where Maggie's had come from.

When the employees came in, Maggie spoke very smoothly and capably, seeming to work from an internal script that she had used many times before. She talked extensively about the founders as "pioneers, reformers, and revolutionaries dedicated to women's education." She briefly described the history of the college (I noted a few minor errors in benchmark years and names) and then read off the names and credentials of certain faculty.

Maggie's speech specifically drew on specific arguments for education: she suggested first off that the economy was being "trashed," that we were moving toward a depression, and that there was little job security, thus implying that education was a means to mitigate economic risk. She also suggested that work for the public good was not only productive but also personally fulfilling and that with President Obama coming into office soon, there would be a lot of opportunity for those dedicated to communities and the public good.[7] By this point, she was speaking a little quickly and went on to say that the application fee would be waived for "today only" before introduc-

ing Professor Kucharski, who spoke briefly about the graduate programs at Ravenwood. Aaron, who by that point had been working as an admissions counselor for only a few weeks, gave a brief, nervous presentation before the floor was opened to questions and the food was served. There was a good deal of conversation and discussion, and a number of the roughly forty guests had questions for the admissions counselors, although very few talked to Professor Kucharski. All the questions asked were about admissions requirements: financial aid, deadlines, needed documents, transfer credits, and so on; no one asked about the size of the programs, academic content, curricula, faculty, or course design.

At a small, graduate open house on campus in June (with three attendees), Dean Levitz spoke about his close connection to the graduate programs from his work at Ravenwood in the 1980s. Many administrators, like the dean, had a personal connection to the institution and shared that connection by drawing on personal narratives with prospective students. Dean Levitz had a very soft speaking voice that required you to lean in to hear him carefully, but his messages were clear, concise, and articulate. He did make it clear that low grade point averages would not preclude admission, describing this not as an open admissions policy but as a sensitivity to the needs and expertise of the adult student and the understanding that people mature in different ways.

All of these various scripts were deployed in different times with different persons to persuade individuals to apply. Although the context was certainly precarious and uncertain, the scripts had been cultivated over time by the staff and seemingly worked well enough to ensure that Ravenwood had enough students to continue to exist.

Finding a Niche within the Niche

Maggie often spoke fondly about the support and resources of her former position, particularly when we would see entire strings of buses plastered with the advertisements for her former employer. Maggie was also clear, however, that some of her experiences in Ravenwood were far more rewarding; she had been there long enough to see some of the students she had recruited graduate from Ravenwood and then come back to thank her and praise their academic programs. That was something that she had never seen

while she was working for the proprietary college. In fact, she said, there had been a lot more of a "give-me-all-your-money and we're going to claim-we-have-all-this-but-we-don't" attitude at her previous job, although from what she had heard through the grapevine, that was starting to change. In contrast, she felt more secure that Ravenwood was offering a positive educational experience.

Regardless, Maggie felt that some focused high school students could potentially be a great market for the college, and although the dean disagreed, she tried to "sneak" them in from time to time. These students were outside of Ravenwood's niche, and the dean would not allocate resources to their cultivation. From the point of view of Dean Levitz, spending resources on reaching new, unproven markets was too risky. Although it did not actively target a high school population, Ravenwood College would occasionally prepare recruitment tables for large college fairs or specific events where other colleges and prospective students were attending. Many of the admissions counselors reported dreading the questions that younger prospects would ask: "Do you have nursing?" "Do you have a basketball team?" "Is there a gym?" "What are the dorms like?" Despite its low academic ranking and prestige, admissions counselors reported that some parents were interested because Ravenwood lacked so much of the extracurricular student life that might be a distraction for their child; the children, however, often proved to be intractable.

Maggie knew that they were playing a high stakes game. One student who enrolled and graduated from the college would bring in $50,000 over the course of his or her studies, so if she spent a few thousand dollars and was able to recruit just one high school student, it was enough to cover all of the expenses. She wanted to develop the high school student as her niche within the niche. This approach was not without precedent.

Assistant Director Madelyn, Maggie's friend and former colleague, had successfully carved out her own niche within the niche: she was the resident expert on international students. Madelyn, who herself was a European national residing in the United States, had been trained on international student advisement and saw potential for Ravenwood to expand. Curriculum was a critical aspect of recruitment, including for international students. For example, international students (F1 status) were restricted from working while in the United States, unless work experience was built directly into the curriculum. The LC Clusters of Ravenwood included different levels of clin-

ical and internship curricula, theoretically creating a way through which an F1 student could be authorized to work nearly every semester of his or her study. Madelyn had carefully crafted an argument to the administration for expanding international student populations while developing specific recruitment strategies and persuasive scripts to applicants, leading to an increase in international student enrollment from twenty-two in 2007 to seventy-five in the fall of 2009. As Madelyn was the expert on international students, she was not only expanding a niche for the college but establishing an irreplaceable role for herself within the office. More and more she was able to dedicate herself nearly entirely to developing the international marketing and recruitment activities, which culminated in a March 2009 recruitment trip to China. The trip was organized through an American company that had been arranging admissions counselors' travel on recruitment events throughout the world for about twenty-five years. Madelyn's trip included events in Shenzhen, Nanjing, Shanghai, and Beijing and cost about $9,000.00. Her report about the trip made a series of recommendations on "strengthening relationships" with key institutions, continued participation in international recruitment events, developing of relationships with international recruitment "agents," increasing "visibility and presence" in China, and expanding recruitment to include the Middle East, Turkey, and India. She offered city-by-city, institution-by-institution breakdowns of which potential students attended the events, which were largely set in various Chinese high schools and colleges. Once again, each recruited student could potentially yield $50,000 for the institution, and so she argued the cost of such recruitment trips more than paid for themselves.[8] Madelyn found that the highest interest in Ravenwood College came from its MBA programs, rather than any undergraduate degree; her taking on the role of "international expert" and familiarity with the MBA program led directly to her chaperoning an MBA student trip to London and Paris in July of 2009. For two years, Madelyn and Dean Levitz had also been attempting to break into the large, local Russian community and had finally worked into some local Russian Orthodox churches and Russian community centers. There were some ads for Ravenwood in local Russian newspapers and an event in August, but very few Russians actually enrolled in Ravenwood. Regardless, Madelyn was able to position herself as an authority for a particular niche within the institution.

Other admissions counselors had also been able to position themselves as experts in particular segments or niches of the student population, either

purposefully or accidentally. At a staff meeting in January 2009, Dean Levitz announced that the president of Ravenwood had gone down to Washington, DC, for an orientation about the new veterans bill that was working its way through Congress. This bill would grant recent veterans an amount equal to the most expensive public institution in the state; thus, if the most expensive public institution cost $15,000 per year, veterans would receive a benefit of $15,000 to attend any institution in that state. Ravenwood's president, thrilled by the bill, decided to equalize the playing field with the local public university rates through internal funds, by waiving the difference between Ravenwood College's tuition and that of the public ones so that Ravenwood could offer an essentially competitive rate. At this meeting, Dean Levitz asked his staff to begin brainstorming other ways to recruit and serve veterans because every college in the region would attempt to recruit these same students.

A short time later, Aaron was surprised when he was identified as the person responsible for all veterans admissions issues and was required to train himself on all aspects of veteran recruitment, affairs, and benefits. Dean Levitz had selected Aaron because he had been in the Peace Corps, and that was the closest thing that they had to a veteran in the Office of Admissions. By May, Aaron was appearing in flyers and advertisements on bus stops, wearing a crisp clean suit and standing in front of an American flag. When he asked my opinion, I suggested that the materials gave me the impression of an election ad for a young congressman and also the impression that Aaron himself was a veteran. His direct e-mail and telephone number were listed on the materials, and his title was listed as "Veteran Advocate" for Ravenwood College, which made him very nervous. Over the summer, the college would spend over six figures on marketing to veterans; by that point, Aaron had still not mastered veterans issues and was worried about receiving phone calls about benefits or programs that he did not fully understand.

Aaron organized and ran an open house specifically for veterans in July 2009, in which professors, deans, and cheese and crackers were readily available. At first, it seemed as though there was a strong turnout, but as time passed it became clear that many were there to see a visiting nurse providing immunization shots,[9] and many of the students waiting for her were enjoying the refreshments for the open house for vets. In the end, only two veterans attended, whom Aaron met with one-on-one instead of in the open

house format. As the veterans bill covered only post-9/11 veterans, and the two prospects were Vietnam War veterans, they were not even eligible for the benefits advertised. The various professors and deans who had come to speak were not pleased. In a tight economic climate, Dean Levitz was building arguments for his staff by encouraging these specializations within the Ravenwood niche, even if they did not always work out as intended. It takes a degree of foresight and political savvy to mediate bureaucratic systems in this way, and the dean was able to do so effectively.

Like Aaron, Louisa was under a great deal of pressure as an admissions counselor to recruit from her particular niche and also to achieve clarity in her role. Seventy-five percent of Louisa's salary was from a Title V grant, giving her a unique position in the Office of Admissions to increase the enrollment of Latino/a students.[10] When I first began my time in Ravenwood, I had noticed mysterious brochures and literature on something called "Pathways" that always confused me: sometimes it appeared to be a program, but the text never described exactly what it was about. When I asked, most admission counselors could not tell me about it and would direct me to Louisa. Louisa herself did not seem to know what the Pathways program was and would direct me to Dean Levitz, who vaguely sketched out the program as a collaboration with another college. I also had heard that there was a Title V grant used for a computer lab and a Title V committee, but I was unsure what the connections were between all these pieces—neither was Louisa. One day, Dean Levitz was unable to attend a meeting with the director of admissions with the college that was jointly operating Pathways, and Louisa did so in his place; she was asked for a recruitment plan and brochures about mathematics education. Mathematics education? She was confused about what her role should be and afterward went to find the original grant itself and read it, only to discover that "I was doing the job completely wrong—I was not doing what I was supposed to be doing."

Apparently, the college had received a joint grant with another college to develop a master's degree in mathematics education, through which both institutions were supposed to enroll ten to fifteen students in 2010. The partner college, which had no graduate degrees, was supposed to "funnel" some of its mathematics students into education rather than technical or engineering careers. Ravenwood was supposed to hire the faculty, organize the program, recruit students, and prepare a website about the program, which would allow students to move seamlessly from undergraduate programs (either at

the partner college or Ravenwood) into the mathematics education program; this was the topic of the literature and brochures I had found titled "Pathways." Ravenwood had already spent grant money on a state-of-the-art mathematics computer laboratory for this program, while Student Services was supposed to be developing a bridge program for Ravenwood students who did not have the proper mathematics prerequisites to enter the program. As a condition of this grant, Ravenwood had to demonstrate that it had a Hispanic population totaling 25 percent of total student enrollment, which was why Louisa had been asked to recruit in the Latino/a community. Louisa had known none of this.

Louisa had spent her first year on the job working on recruiting Latino/a students (through events like the *Cambia Tu Vida* event) and "brand awareness" in the community, without ever realizing that the mathematics education program even existed. Throughout July she had worked tirelessly on organizing a role for Ravenwood College in the local Hispanic Heritage Festival, while also taking three courses a week in her own graduate studies (at a local, selective institution), recruiting students, and (literally) sleeping at her desk on her lunch hour. In the summer of 2009, Ravenwood was just over 21 percent Hispanic, and Louisa knew that although she had a different role than some others, she was consistently the recruiter with the lowest number of students. Louisa found herself cultivating specific niches but without a full sense of why. Dean Levitz was able to quite skillfully manage the bureaucracy by encouraging the niche specialization described above, which would help him to retain vital salary lines. Operating in this way was simply practical given the precarious position of the college.

The Provocative Space between Counseling and Sales

Implicit in college recruitment is the assemblage of ideas and ways of knowing that can be learned and the fluidity of professional aspirations connected to these assemblages. As previously suggested, Ravenwood College is a progressive institution with a mission and history dedicated to promoting social change and empowerment for communities traditionally living in poverty. Because Ravenwood offered only a few, largely vocational majors for undergraduates, the question of fit for prospective students became far more consequential than in an institution with hundreds of majors. For me, some of

the programs seemed to resonate very closely with the mission (as in education, social work, and so forth) while others did not (as in business). My own training and values suggested that there was a contradiction between this mission and such academic programs, and I was not sure why an open house would target both areas of study at the same time. Both *Cambia Tu Vida* and the homeless outreach events demonstrated for me that prospective students could imagine themselves in a variety of professions—that is, they could imagine a variety of selves populating the future. For many of these prospective students, there seemed to be little contradiction between a self who was dedicated to providing counseling and services for poor families and a self who found an innovative way to persuade people to purchase bottles of water in bright packaging.

One way to interpret these findings would be that, as marginalized people of color, prospective students were susceptible to well-crafted arguments—that a smooth and interesting talker would be able to sway them easily from one way of thinking to another. This was important because there were few majors available, and thus someone may approach the college with an interest that did not align neatly with one of these. On occasion, admissions counselors spoke about these processes in just this way, but I find it *unlikely* that being susceptible to persuasive arguments is unique to marginalized people of color. Rather, I would argue that different persuasive scripts are deployed by all Offices of Admissions across the United States as tailored to their particular market segment or niche and thus represent a critically important aspect of college recruitment.

At Ravenwood, the ability to persuade prospects and students into different majors or programs was something that all admissions counselors reported struggling with on an ethical level. Essentially, they all aligned the work they did and liked doing with "counseling" and distanced it from "sales"; this binary was articulated again and again. Nadira, for example, was adamant that she could but would not do whatever was necessary to "make the sale." She would not "convince someone interested in interior design that she should go into the business program because it's the same thing" or that in order to "succeed" in interior design you needed to have a background in business and thus persuade a prospect to enroll therein. She would be clear to her students that there were no interior design programs. In her own words, she was not going to "turn rice into potatoes," which was something that she associated with proprietary colleges.

Again, Nadira herself was a graduate of Ravenwood, who had completed studies in the School for Social Work and gone on to start a somewhat successful business. She had taken the position in the Office of Admissions because as a Ravenwood alumna, she wanted to "give back." She reported that if she had felt the pressure to persuade students like that, she would have just "walked away" because she did not "need" this job. She would not mislead or "sucker" students into Ravenwood, and she did not feel pressure to do so, although she could not say how other admissions counselors felt. She saw her role as primarily career counseling, and what her students did was to "allow me to dream with them."

Aaron agreed. He suggested that he was not afraid to tell someone to apply somewhere else if he felt the applicant and Ravenwood College were not right for each other. He thought his priority was to be a counselor and not to worry about numbers, although he also was not sure that other admissions counselors agreed and so never told anyone else that. Louisa agreed. She stated that if she worked with a student interested in nursing,

> Potentially, I could persuade that student to still apply here and do a bachelor's in social work, because I can sell it, right? Because there is a sales piece, I can sell it, you know. "With this (degree program) you can do this," and "you can do that (academic program) and go on to do this (career path)."

She insisted, however, that none of it would be right for someone interested in nursing. She felt that she encountered many prospects who were "right on the edge" and that it would be easy to "push them over," but it would not be right for them. Maggie contrasted her experiences at her previous proprietary employer with her current job, indicating that at Ravenwood she was not as required to "sell." Another counselor, Jaleel, had previous admissions experience at yet another proprietary college and resigned because he felt it was too "sales-y." These exchanges highlighted that all of the admissions counselors seemed to feel that persuading too effectively would have been ethically questionable, and each found her or his own way to demarcate ethical boundaries, despite a lack of consensus on exactly where those boundaries lay. Still, all of these voices seemed to reinforce the notion that the prospective students were easily persuaded—that they were either unclear of their own aspirations or unclear as to how to pursue them.

When admissions counselors provoked aspiration in their prospective students, it was for a future self that was "successful"—but successful in what seemed less relevant. In this, Ravenwood's students do not seem that different from the masses of college students thinking about their investment and their own futures in uncertain economic times. Ravenwood's prospective students, fueled by popular discourses on mobility and success, were seemingly seeking a vehicle to take them "there"—and Ravenwood College was just such a vehicle. The "there," however, was a fluid destination.

Urciuoli (2008) described the ways that disparate and diverse skills are made commensurable within the market logic, both in terms of their market value and in the ability to acquire them as commodities. Further, the skills discourse is also penetrated by the logic of quantification, which fits in neatly with an understanding of education in the marketplace:

> The deployment of quantification rhetoric becomes part of the loose association of terms in this register, suggesting that all these disparate skills are commensurable. Their commensurability lies not in explicitly comparable qualities but implicitly in the notion that they can be assessed and inculcated in the same ways. This presupposition of workers as a set of measurable capacities is, in effect, an update of the Enlightenment notion of an abstract human that can be segmented into pieces. (217)

I am concerned here with how disparate personhoods and futures are made commensurable vis-à-vis the recruitment activities in which institutions of higher education engage. Nursing is then potentially like social work, interior design is like business, and even social work is like business in the sense that they each require the acquisition of unique skill sets and the investment of time and money, and they will eventually yield a dollar amount in future income. Therefore, all of these arguments resonate with the understanding of the self as a future project constructed to manage risky markets. In order to be successful, institutions of higher education need to lay out arguments that fold themselves into the self as future project. For institutions with national recognition and prestige, there is less need to articulate those arguments; they are implicit (almost ingrained) in the American mythology about success. For institutions that lack the symbolic capital, these arguments need to be laid out clearly to prospective students. Staff and faculty

must be able to cultivate a space for the institution in prospective students' imagination. As Ravenwood had learned, failure to do so could yield enrollment disasters.

Conclusions: Caveat Emptor

Circulation into and through Ravenwood was both premised on and shaped by deep and powerful meanings that the institution sought to cultivate. In Moore's (2003) examination of a marketing firm, he describes the notion of "brand as promise" through the following "parable":

> "Imagine you are going to a party," began the marketing chief, "and you want the people you meet at the party to think you are beautiful. How to create that impression? You could go around at the party, and tell everyone you meet that you're beautiful—but that would be a strange approach," she began. Instead, fashioning the (external) brand means "Working out the logic, the story, finding the words that will elicit this [impression] from our customers, that will create this impression about us in the minds of others." The "method," she explained, was storytelling: construct a story, but leave it unfinished, "so that people reach this impression about us, and think of it as their own." (p. 340)

The faculty and administration at Ravenwood College seemed to be serious about providing individual students with pathways to economic mobility, but at least in the recruitment activities I observed, they told these sorts of unfinished stories about meritocratic individualism. The desire for success and the drive of aspirations are not unique to the prospective students of Ravenwood College, nor is it only under the guise of the market that educational desire is enacted.[11] Ravenwood's marketing materials and persuasive scripts told stories about the lives and futures of prospective students that were meant to suggest that success was at hand, and these stories tied up the colonized future and sense of self with market logics, brand, college recruitment materials, and activities.

As Nakassis (2012, 629) noted, "Brand offer themselves up to us as tools for self-actualization and, thus, as the very context of sociality and community" (Nakassis 2012). The analysis of brand requires an interrogation of classificatory schema whereby particular instantiations or tokens of brand (e.g., a

particular pair of shoes) come to be associated with the desired identity or type (e.g., the notion that consumers of these shoes "just do it"). But this only makes sense given the cultural ontology and juridical structures in place that can recognize and enforce things like intellectual property, trademark, and copyright, respectively. The application of brand to higher education is far more complex.

In traditional, industrial corporations, a tangible product (token) is fashioned and consumed in ways that ideally align the product itself with the desired corporate identity. People purchase the tokens, which are then folded into their narratives about who they are, even if only in a very superficial way. Unlike in such contexts, I would argue that the token of higher education is not some material product, nor even commoditized forms of knowledge that are imagined as material, but rather a future version of the student him- or herself; the consumer is the token or rather will be. Thus, a particular instantiation of the "Harvard" brand is the "Harvard" alumnus. Although any brand engages in fashioning a particular fantasy about one's self, the brands of college and universities are fundamentally more powerful and deeply penetrative in that through the process of consumption a student literally becomes a token of that university. These tokens then become a part of the recruitment effort and are folded into persuasive scripts about success and achievement to bring in future generations of students. It is no surprise that institutions are able to charge so much in tuition as what they are selling is a fantasy of one's self and one's future to begin postgraduation.

The question, therefore, of admissions becomes all the more complex because in evaluating a particular applicant, the representative of the college or university must ask whether this particular person will become a suitable token for the brand. This is yet another way to think about the "niches" and "market segments" described earlier in this chapter. It is true that these questions relate to both whom these arguments can be cleanly and persuasively laid out to and who is likely to enroll, but it is also about having students and alumni who are logically consistent with the college's brand. This suggests that although institutions of higher education have moved more toward the corporate, profit-making model, the broader ontology is fundamentally different from the logic whereby consumers purchase footwear and actually aligns precisely with the Jeffersonian paradigm of education. As schooling (as a system and network) largely acts to sort students into like piles, there are significant consequences to being admitted to a particular college and

being affiliated with the students therein. Part of the challenge that a less selective college like Ravenwood faces is that the profile of student is largely being reproduced along lines determined by outside forces, often related to the use of persuasive scripts and institutional momentum with certain populations. Because every student was needed, however, I observed no questions about applicants aligning with brand or institutional identity during the admissions process—which meant that such brand identities needed to be crafted after the fact. The result was a sense that the institution had less control over what the brand was; every applicant who met the minimum requirements would be accepted, and thus those stories needed to be folded into institutional ones, even if they were not logically consistent with these stories. Of course, this was a challenge that any college or university might struggle with, but there were stronger mechanisms in place for controlling this process in institutions that were more selective. Thus, by virtue of this process, the more selective an institution was, the more carefully it could craft a brand. Ravenwood's lack of brand recognition made it less selective, less prestigious, and tuition driven, which in turn prevented it from crafting a brand that could gain wide recognition.

Ravenwood was selling itself as the means for students to change their lives through their own initiative as reflected in titles like *Cambia Tu Vida* and "Making Your New Year Resolution Come True." Each of these reinforced the meritocratic individualism found throughout the public discourse about colleges in America, that with hard work and as the result of specific choices one would be able to secure a more stable and profitable personal future. The college was selling mobility and the American Dream. Furthermore, admissions counselors had elaborated persuasive scripts that seemed to work with those who matched the profile and which might not work as well with others. This was critical because the verbal repertoires deployed by admissions counselors and faculty at Admissions events needed to align with the brand that was being circulated in the media. Admissions staff thus encountered challenges in their everyday activity that paralleled some of what could be seen in the media.

Furthermore, the possibility of mobility resonated closely with the mission of the institution but was fundamentally at odds with the privilege-making culture of higher education. Admissions counselors at Ravenwood were not fluent in the various metrics and rankings that marked privilege in higher education and did not incorporate such numbers into their persua-

sive scripts. Although some were well practiced in crafting inclusive messages that encouraged aspirations for mobility and achievement through schooling, others were less so. The fact that they were willing to pursue any prospective student further reflected that Ravenwood had been unsuccessful in gaining name recognition, the ongoing anxiety over financial stability, and the institutional mission to reach nontraditional students. The nontraditional, potentially controversial, potentially embarrassing efforts (such as recruiting homeless or incarcerated persons) were to be found exclusively in spoken scripts and internal documents for particular audiences; they were not part of the brand of Ravenwood.

Individuals make choices, but a culture of meritocracy highlights these individual choices above and beyond any other contextual factors, which are rendered irrelevant or meaningless. The world we inhabit in which people can be transformed into bundles of numbers that are meaningful to the infrastructure is only made possible given this worldview. Colleges and universities invented neither aspiration nor market conditions. In the current marketplace, they prosper when potential students entwine market logic with aspiration vis-à-vis their institution. Ravenwood College actively highlighted this connection for its potential students in both its recruitment materials and activity, while erasing meaningful economic, political, social, and cultural contexts. This was necessary to managing future institutional risk.

Although I do argue that the particularities of Ravenwood mediate the ways that these activities are enacted, I resist here a conclusion that positions Ravenwood as either exceptional or an aberration. For example, other institutions may not have entwined Barack Obama's political discourse of hope with recruitment scripts, but I imagine that other institutions drew on other discourses relevant to their history, student population, and so on. Likewise, when working with a prospective student that is likely to attend college, it is important to persuade an applicant to attend this or that particular one, and the finest mark of distinction is to be an applicant's first choice. The "early decision" policies of many institutions serves to guarantee a seat in an incoming class at the applicant's supposed top choice. If such applicants are accepted, they are, however, required to withdraw their applications from any other colleges and universities. Thus, within the framework of fetishized, competitive individualism, for an institution to be someone's first choice serves as a point of pride, but it is also a way to manage the risk of future enrollments. At Ravenwood, the scripts that needed to be deployed

were less about becoming the first choice among many institutions but rather about the decision to attend college at all. The project of intertwining aspiration and personhood with institutional narratives appears to be a key aspect of this process.

Attending to how these local persuasive scripts emerge from bureaucracies in relation to a historical moment is one way that ethnographic investigations can contribute to understanding how aspiration and identity become mutually entangled in institutions of higher education. Thus, individual students are encouraged to see their future in terms of their relationship with Ravenwood, and administrative staff see the future of Ravenwood as being closely tied to its student profile. Institutions (including faculty and staff) become deeply entwined with their students (including prospects, current students, and alumni) in an intimate dance to the tune of a future fantasy. It is a precarious dance, and with consequential missteps, but it is one that applicants and institutions must learn.

Other institutions of higher education that are equally subject to the vicissitudes of the marketplace must perceive their economic position as risky and thus must craft persuasive scripts that emerge from their own circumstances and an awareness of their brand. As such, other institutions engage in similarly persuasive arguments in which prospective students are folded into an imagined, future, successful self, and the case of Ravenwood represents a detailed analysis of how one institution struggles with making the argument that most colleges need to make: that future risk can be managed and that success is the result of individual choices, first to attend college and second to attend this college in particular. But when prospective students are persuaded to apply to Ravenwood College, it is only the first step toward becoming a college student; after the persuasive arguments are deployed is when the sorting machine in the educational infrastructure is truly activated.