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Big Promises—High Cost

Today's economy and job market have increased the need for higher education.

Education provides people with tools to obtain a high paying career and get out of the typical dead end job that seems to take one nowhere. Many proprietary¹ educational institutions show television commercials that are well designed and produced for someone wanting to earn a degree in a “high demand” career field. These commercials make promises that a bright future is within reach and that it is easier than ever to get trained to be an expert in a particular field in a short amount of time.

The emergence of proprietary education corporations like Career Education Corporation (CEC)² and Apollo Group³ are changing the culture of education. They are creating stereotypes of what a degree is worth and changing the demographic of students. These commercials specifically target underprivileged, stay at home parents, women in general, and the unemployed population by airing questionable advertising about the quality and value of education offered at these proprietary institutions. This indicative analysis will use Silverblatt's keys and a cultural studies approach, to explain how and why advertising by some proprietary educational corporations has developed; what has made it so effective in attracting students despite a dismal job placement record and cost/benefit ration; and why it ultimately is having such a negative

¹ The term “proprietary” will be used to describe for-profit institutions such as Apollo Group and Career Education Corporation.

² CEC corporation operates institutions like Sanford-Brown, Le Cordon Bleu and International Academy of Design & Technology

³ Apollo Group owns and operates University of Phoenix, and AXIA College

effect on America's educational culture and the views regarding the value to society of higher education.

How and Why Proprietary Institutions Have Developed the Current Concepts for Commercials:

Proprietary education institutions are in business to make a profit for the organization and the organizations' investors. Sanford-Brown and University of Phoenix are entities of larger companies which are controlled by a governing board of directors constantly looking for ways to increase profit and growth of the organization. Proprietary education companies use intense marketing campaigns, including commercials, to attract potential students to make the initial contact with the institution. Art Silverblatt explains that the function of communication may be motivated by many purposes or functions (32).

In proprietary education, two main reasons exist for communicating to viewers: persuasion and profitability. Silverblatt identifies persuasion as the communicator's objective "to promote a particular idea or motivate the audience to specific behaviors or attitude change" (32). Sanford Brown College and University of Phoenix both present commercials to the viewers to promote education and motivate viewers to make a change of thought in going back to school. "The ultimate purpose of persuasion is control" (Silverblatt 32). The commercials of these two institutions⁴ are designed to direct potential students to their respective institutions, control the proprietary education market, and grow the organization.

The difference between community or state colleges and universities with proprietary education organizations is that the primary function of these proprietary organizations is not to educate, but rather to make a profit from selling the dream of education. The commercials and

⁴ When referring to institutions the author is referring to Sanford-Brown College and University of Phoenix as the focus of this analysis.

strong internet presence from these proprietary organizations is designed to generate revenue. As Silverblatt explains, “In American media industry, profit is most likely an underlying function” (34). In state and community educational facilities, the underlying function is most likely focusing on curriculum and instruction, but in a proprietary organization such as Sanford-Brown and University of Phoenix, the primary goal is profitability and growth. In 2010, proprietary education companies experienced a 21.1% growth which equates to 1.4 million students enrolling in proprietary organizations (Educational Marketer 7). Career Education Corporation, which owns Sanford Brown College, grew 22.5% or 104,505 students from 2009 to 2010, and Apollo Group, which operates University of Phoenix, grew 13.3% or 476,500 students during the same period (Educational Marketer 7). These numbers continue to indicate the evolution of proprietary education sites nationwide.

In order for Sanford Brown College and University of Phoenix to continue to grow, they must utilize the media to produce intense marketing campaigns, which include commercials that target individuals who are not traditional college material; instead they focus on those who are victims of the downturn of economy. As Yeoman notes, proprietary educational institutions “use creative and ubiquitous commercials on daytime television, which get prospective students in the door, and high pressure sales operations that target vulnerable people who probably don’t have experience shopping for higher education” (156). Sanford Brown College and University of Phoenix deliver commercials that target particular races, sexes, and educational levels. The commercials are aired during daytime hours and late night hours which tend to focus on people who are either not working or who are working evening jobs and want a change. According to a published interview with Clarence Harmon, former president of a Sanford-Brown campus, “Our programs were very expensive and they were taught a lot of times by unqualified people, yet

students kept enrolling—lured by daytime television ads promising a quick path to a lucrative livelihood (qtd. Yeoman, 154).

Commercials for proprietary education organizations are constructed to attract viewers who are seeking a change in their life. These commercials begin by implanting the dream into the viewer's mind, while the latent messages of the cost of the education and the time required to make this dream a reality are never delivered to the audience. These proprietary education institutions know that selling education requires cultural persuasion and transference of meaning to potential customers. Sanford Brown and University of Phoenix, according to Holt, use “sophisticated marketing techniques to seduce consumers to participate in a system of commodified meanings embedded in the brands” (71). In essence, the goal of the organization is to persuade the viewer to believe the messages being delivered through the commercials.

The increase in commercials from these institutions has multiple functions on the viewer. The typical commercials from these proprietary institutions go from telling a story and showing visually appealing people smiling and working in a professional environment to the end of the commercial where they are now trying to persuade the viewer to pick up the phone and call or visit the website listed on the screen to get more information. Silverblatt explains that this method can become successful for attracting a diverse audience (36).

Sanford Brown College and University of Phoenix are two of many proprietary institutions that use a wide variety of commercials to attract potential students to their organization. In doing this the companies devote time and attention to audience identification. Silverblatt explains through his media keys that, “media programming may be targeted simultaneously at both a manifest and latent audience” (50). For Sanford-Brown College and

University of Phoenix, the demographics are crucial to the type of message being delivered through the organizations' commercials and how the message is delivered to the target audience. As Campbell, Martin, and Fabos explain, "the subject being researched is the audience for the text, not the text itself" (486). The audience for Sanford Brown College and University of Phoenix commercials is what drives these for-profit schools into continued growth. The particular person who views the commercial can impact the received message he or she gets from that commercial. As cultural studies scholar Douglas Kellner has said, "Members of distinct genders, classes, races, nations, regions, sexual preferences, and political ideologies are going to read text differently, and cultural studies can illuminate why diverse audiences interpret texts in various, sometimes conflicting ways" (8).

Sanford Brown College and University of Phoenix have developed commercials and marketing campaigns to grow the organization and the demographics they target are simulated through the commercials they show in particular demographics. Silverblatt identifies this method as "narrowcasting" or the ability to customize the content of their media presentations based on the background and interests of the audience (51). Many of the commercials produced by Sanford Brown College and University of Phoenix focus on the needs of the given market at any given time, and a variety of commercials are produced and shown at various times to target specific audiences, such as military, women, unemployed, and those who are seeking a career change.

The purpose of the commercials is to generate business and the continued growth of these proprietary organizations is an indicator that people want an education. The University of Phoenix and Sanford-Brown College use narrowcasting to its full capacity by enabling them as Silverblatt identifies in his keys to "develop communication strategies that are tailored to its

audience” (50). The audiences of these commercials are typically those who are unemployed, minority classes, women, and nontraditional students.⁵ The commercials are often tailored to these audiences and shown during the day when they are at home watching soap operas or daytime talk television. University of Phoenix has tended to show primetime commercials in order to attract the “working professional” who wants to go back to school to benefit themselves further and grow in a changing world. The messages of Sanford-Brown College and University of Phoenix will vary depending on the demographics and the audience’s behavior.

Analyzing the Messages:

Everyone wants the American dream of living the worry-free life, and the commercials of Sanford-Brown College and University of Phoenix portray the ability to get an education in a short amount of time with the potential to work in a career one will love. The commercials from both institutions feature “real” people who are looking for a career change and advancement. According to Douglas Kellner, “the textual analysis of cultural studies combines formalist analysis with critique of how cultural meanings convey specific ideologies of gender, race, class, sexuality, nation and other ideological dimensions” (7). Looking at the “Anything is Possible” commercial⁶ from Sanford-Brown College, one can quickly see that the commercial focuses its attention on the stay at home mom, who is now looking to find a career. The University of

⁵ A nontraditional student as defined by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) is one who: Delays enrollment (does not enter postsecondary education in the same calendar year that he or she finished high school); Attends part time for at least part of the academic year; Works full time (35 hours or more per week) while enrolled; Is considered financially independent for purposes of determining eligibility for financial aid; Has dependents other than a spouse (usually children, but sometimes others); Is a single parent (either not married or married but separated and has dependents); or does not have a high school diploma (completed high school with a GED or other high school completion certificate or did not finish high school).

⁶ View the commercial:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hn_2kBW3ppw&feature=related

Phoenix commercial “What If”⁷ focuses on the working professional who tends to live a busy life, and the images of the commercial portray that one can take the school with them wherever they go.

The Sanford-Brown commercial is two minutes and highlights the various health careers in which one can receive training in within a short amount of time, and the people found in the commercial tend to be young women who are now sitting at home during the day bored and looking for a change. The University of Phoenix commercial takes another route by focusing on the image of adapting to the needs of the student who lives a busy life. In thirty seconds the University of Phoenix commercial takes a fast track in getting the information to the viewers and leaving them with an image that one can obtain a degree in a short period of time.

The commercial from Sanford-Brown College uses the theme “Anything is Possible” to attract people who are at home, often unemployed, and unsure of their future and demonstrates the perception that making a phone call for a free brochure can change your life. According to Richard Campbell, Christopher Martin, and Bettina Fabos, textual studies focus on interpretation of the message (484). In this commercial the interpretation is that one could change their life by making a phone call.

The Sanford-Brown commercial begins on a playground with children sliding down a spiral slide. A woman begins talking about the past and viewers to a point where they begin to go back to a time when they had dreams of being something.

⁷ View University of Phoenix commercial “What If?” : <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IU7nJdFweLw>

: 00 Children playing in a park with a woman watching them, a beautiful fall day begins.

Female Actress: *“Remember when you were a kid? Everything and anything seemed possible.”* At this point, the commercial wants the viewer to think back to her childhood days and retain those thoughts throughout the commercial.

:24 The actress gets up from her bench and begins walking toward the camera and says, *“I went to school to get my life back on track...”* a short pause, then she says, *“You should too!”* In fine print under the actress, a note appears: *“The person in this ad is not an actual student or graduate and was paid by the company.”*

: 27 The actress continues to speak informing the viewer to call in and request a brochure packed with information on the variety of health care careers that are available.

: 28 The actress then says, *“It’s [the brochure] is packed with information you need to make a smart decision.”* The screen now shows a three-fold brochure filled with information. The phone number now appears at the bottom of the screen.

: 36 Small print is again posted on the screen. The information is blurry, and hard to read: *“Sanford-Brown does not guarantee employment or salary.”*

- : 38 The commercial now begins to show all the degree programs one can find in the brochure. Paid actors portray patients and caregivers.
- 1:23 The commercial returns to the park as if the viewer has been shown the future of her life and is now back to reality. The actress again reiterates to call for a free brochure.
- 1:43 The actress begins to talk about the hot points that trigger the viewer, “*Short-term, focused, and hands on training. Plus they help you with career assistance and financial aid. It’s easy to get started—all you have to do is call.*” The actress and the commercial tend to deliver the message to the viewer that the viewer has achieved her goals simply by making a call.

As Silverblatt explains, often commercials use illogical premises to sell their product, and in this case proprietary education from Sanford-Brown College. Silverblatt goes on to point out that once these ideas are accepted by the viewer, the advertisement can be very persuasive (137). The commercial becomes very powerful at the end with a voice-over announcer saying “call now!”

In the University of Phoenix commercial, which is much shorter than the Sanford-Brown commercial, the premise of the information is much different. The University of Phoenix commercial begins by asking questions then making statements:

- :00 The commercial begins with a white male wearing a suit coat and holding an iPad. As upbeat music begins playing, a voice-over says, “*What if education could adapt for the world we live in?*”

- :05 Quickly the commercial shifts to a busy office setting and a lady talking to a doctor in a medical setting. The voice-over says, *“Adjusting curriculum to serve the ever changing job market...”*
- :12 Shifting from the job market to the classroom, the commercial now features an instructor helping a student at a computer as another statement is made by the announcer, *“hiring faculty who are still working in the field they teach.”*
- : 17 Leaving the classroom, the viewer is now taken to a vacant airport late at night and a young man sitting in an airport chair awaiting his flight. The man pulls out a laptop computer and opens it up, when the voice returns, *“And to use new technologies to enhance learning’s”*
- :25 The commercial now returns to the classroom with quick images of woman portraying a student asking a question to her instructor, and then the commercial shifts to an elementary school classroom where the same lady is working with children. The blackboard has a colored globe and a room full of students. A student then raises his hand as if he has a question. The voice-over returns, *“If an education could adapt to the way the world works today—could that same education help the world to adapt and work better tomorrow?”* Here the viewer is left with a question to answer.
- :27 The commercial has about two seconds of upbeat music before the announcer makes one last statement, *“University of Phoenix—because an*

educated world is a better world.” The University of Phoenix appears and the company’s website.

The difference between the two commercials is that Sanford-Brown College seems to be making a sales pitch, whereas University of Phoenix is more about making a statement. The University of Phoenix the commercial is carried out by a voice-over, as if viewers are just looking inside of the world they could have if they had a University of Phoenix education. Silverblatt identifies that “media communicators often strive to elicit an emotional reaction from the audience for dramatic purposes” (143).

These two commercials focus on different genres, which are “patterns in premise, structure, plot, characters, settings, and trappings” (Silverblatt 148). In the Sanford-Brown College commercial the premise is set on a playground, then working environments, before returning back to the playground at the end. The structure of this commercial is a story of the actress’s life. The University of Phoenix commercial just shows images of the life of a University of Phoenix student, and most of the material is set in a nonverbal setting, which communication scholars estimate “comprises 65 percent of all communication between people” (Silverblatt 193). The nonverbal images in the University of Phoenix commercial are likely as powerful as the commercial of Sanford Brown College by saying less and showing more, simply because as Silverblatt explains, “even subtle nonverbal expression can have a powerful influence on the public” (197).

The commercials of proprietary education institutions set a standard and deliver a message to attract viewers to the institution. Regardless of the messages delivered on the commercial the goal is to get the viewer to take some type of action—either calling or going

online and requesting information. The political economy of commercials for Sanford-Brown and University of Phoenix is to draw students to the campus so recruiters can then make a hard sale to show them the lavish picture of what the training will give them when they are finished. “Moreover, the domination of public discourse by for-profit corporations may mean that the bottom line for all public communication and popular culture is money, not democratic expression” (Campbell, Martin, & Fabos 486). Sanford-Brown and University of Phoenix are in business to make money, and as the politics of the business change, so will the marketing of the education programs offered by these institutions and the demographic they target. As David Jaeger of Princeton University finds, “Proprietary schools are an easily-recognizable manifestation of increasing heterogeneity in the higher educational marketplace—a process that has been going on since at least the 1960’s” (3). Jaeger also credits the growth of these proprietary schools as a just a “symptom of growing diversity in the education market” (3).

Impact on Students, Education, and Culture:

The increasing number of these commercials is due in part to the changing economic environment and the current political state of the country which is making the need for additional education a necessity rather than a luxury for securing employment. A rising concern of the validity of the commercials’ promises is under the microscope with the former students and potential students due to the various lawsuits pending with these organizations questioning job placement for graduate, transferability of credits and teacher qualifications⁸. The high pressure sales tactics of these proprietary institutions have landed Sanford-Brown College and University of Phoenix in court many times for deceitful practices in promises, credit transferability, accreditation, and job placement.

⁸ View article on pending lawsuits against Sanford-Brown College
http://www.stltoday.com/news/local/education/article_3c4cb200-9ea1-5656-aa18-8dac41ddfa3f.html

As for-profit education expands to meet the demand of unemployed, stay-at-home, non-traditional students, an increasing number of commercials will flood the airwaves. Kellner points out that political economy studies is a “system of production that determines what sort of artifacts will be produced, what structural limits there will be as to what can and cannot be shown, and what sort of audience effects the text may generate” (4). These commercials that target the underprivileged individual, the stay at home mom and the minority populations are effective for the proprietary school’s business plan. In fact, the enrollment at proprietary schools from 1999-2009 has grown by 236% according to the United States Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. The largest of the proprietary schools remains University of Phoenix which enrolled more students in 2010 than all of the proprietary institutions did in 1991 (Department of Education).

The rapid growth of these institutions is focusing on the low income student who is eager to get a degree and enter the work force as an educated individual. The high cost of this dream results in debt that the student often cannot pay back or sometimes the student cannot even find a job that justifies the cost of the education. Sadly, the impact on the students who attend two-year and less than two year institutions is the immense cost. At a four year proprietary institution the student must find a way to finance almost \$25,000 each year, and then only 22% graduate (Bennett, Lucchessi, and Vedder 9). The cost of the high priced education often results in astonishing debt on the individual and in many cases never gets repaid to the lenders, creating a domino effect for the already low- income culture that usually attends these proprietary education institutions.

According to Mamie Lynch, Jennifer Engle, and Jose Cruz, one thing that these institutions can guarantee is “years of student loan debt. What they do not guarantee is a job that

will allow students to pay off that debt” (6). The impact these proprietary schools have on the students is not the fact they are for-profit, but the fact that institutions like Sanford-Brown and University of Phoenix tend to abuse the “social investment, prey on the underserved population and threaten the competitiveness of our country” (Lynch, Engle, and Cruz 1). These proprietary institutions do not deny the fact that they target the low-income, minority population, but instead make the claim that because they do provide such education to this demographic they (proprietary institutions) cannot be expected to graduate large populations of their students (Lynch, Engle, and Cruz 3). The impact is leaving students with degrees and certificates that do not support the debt they incur, and sadly many students never complete their education, only incurring debt that will likely never be paid.

Conclusions:

In the 2006 movie, *The Pursuit of Happyness*, a salesman is left to care for his child, after his wife leaves him. The salesman is then presented with a life-challenging career change that would forever impact him and his son. The movie, which focuses on dealing with the challenges of being uneducated, minority, and underprivileged, is often the story of the students who are targeted in the commercials from proprietary educational institutions like Sanford-Brown College and University of Phoenix. The commercials of these institutions promise a dream most people want to live—being successful and financially secure. Unfortunately, they often leave the student with high debt and a career path that never comes to fruition. New York Times reporter Tamar Lewin; cited federal data from the Department of Education that found only 9% of students attending University of Phoenix graduate within six years, and only 5% of students who

attend online graduate within the same timeframe (1). The rest are right back where they started only now with additional debt that is likely never to be repaid.

The commercials focus on a life changing environment, never explaining to the viewer the ramifications of making that call or clicking on the website of these institutions. The organization's goal is not to care for the student, but rather to ensure growth and generate revenue for the institution's investors. The commercials and marketing of these organizations are the backbone of their success and instrumental in growing the institutions. The number of potential targets for the commercials continues to grow as the loss of jobs increases and non-skilled workers are left without a job and unable to gain lucrative new employment to support themselves and their families. The cost of getting an education is high and the commercials lack the information that a hefty price tag comes with the education. The value of the person is often lost in the institution's efforts to get richer, and the already poor—poorer.

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