

# THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers visit <http://www.djreprints.com>.

<http://www.wsj.com/articles/an-education-in-sloganeering-1443655643>

OPINION | COMMENTARY

## An Education in Sloganeering

The school where I teach is a study in institutional puffery.



E. Gordon Gee, former Ohio State University president. *PHOTO: ASSOCIATED PRESS*

By **HARVEY J. GRAFF**

Sept. 30, 2015 7:27 p.m. ET

Universities have always engaged in relentless self-promotion. But the relationship between rhetoric and reality has become ever more tenuous, and the line separating honest aspiration from fabrication fainter.

The Ohio State University, where I teach, is a particularly dramatic example of this devolution. Not that it is alone—since its claims to uniqueness are based on imitating others.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the university's slogan, "Do Something Big," morphed into "Do Something Great." The urging of the former was deemed too ambiguous.

“Vision 2020: Access, affordability and excellence” is the tagline of the new president, Michael Drake. (He is an ophthalmologist.) This translates into freezing in-state tuition, increasing efforts to privatize major assets, offering small grants to undergraduates, and creating “economies and efficiencies.” Those most often mentioned are purchasing toilet paper from one vendor and doing color-copying double-sided. Not mentioned are substantial staffing reductions, nor the overabundant and overpaid administrators whose reduction is promised but not realized. Staff and faculty salary increases continue at lower than national and peer-institution averages.

The Medical Center’s cancer hospital seeks “a cancer-free world”—a biological impossibility, as cellular mutations are a regular part of the natural world. The university’s chief wellness officer, aka the dean of College of Nursing, wants Ohio State to become the “healthiest university”—whatever that means. The Department of Human Resources changed its name to Talent, Culture, and Human Resources. Nothing else changed. Student Life is a host of slogans, from Financial Wellness to Creating the Extraordinary Student Experience.

Especially egregious is the linked promotion of “One University” and “From Excellence to Eminence.” These slogans are associated with two-time former university president E. Gordon Gee, whose retirement was mandated by the Board of Trustees in 2013.

The main goal was to create “One Ohio State University”—a single-minded institution with all departments, offices, faculty and staff focused on mutual success. Mr. Gee wanted to “create the environment and the culture which allows all of these folks who have this massive amount of intellectual acumen to connect together to create new ideas, new opportunities, new ways for thinking about the world.”

None of that happened. Mr. Gee left office having initiated little and the rhetoric evaporated, surviving occasionally in empty phrases on the Student Life and Senn-Delaney ad-agency websites.

Ohio State remains one of the most fragmented and divided large universities in the U.S. Its many fine resources and talents are rarely brought together. If anything, these problems have worsened in recent years. Administrative numbers grow, with salaries to match. Bureaucracy worsens. The resources necessary to support teaching and research, and advance the university, diminish.

The real bottom line: There must be substantial truth in advertising. Few other

institutions carry this responsibility so clearly. Without it, the contradictions to the mission of the university—however defined—are just too great.

Oh, yes, the beleaguered Arts and Sciences College truthfully promotes “Donuts with the Dean,” in limited quantities, of course.

*Mr. Graff is professor of English and history at Ohio State University.*

Copyright 2014 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our Subscriber Agreement and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit [www.djreprints.com](http://www.djreprints.com).