THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF BUSINESS & MANAGEMENT

Integration of Students in Publicity Strategies: Opportunities, Challenges, and the Way Forward for Private University Colleges in Ghana (Part I)

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Abstract:
This paper is derived from a three-part qualitative study that focuses on integration of strategic stakeholders in publicity activities of Private University Colleges (PUCs) in Ghana. Existing discussion on publicity strategies is narrow and leaves out the role of students as stakeholders. The purpose of the study was to assess how students could be effectively integrated into publicity activities of PUCs in Ghana. The objectives of the study were1) To find out the opportunities for integration of students' as stakeholders in publicity activities of PUCs; 2) to explore the challenges of the integration process; and 3) to examine the way forward for addressing identified challenges. A qualitative approach was used for the study with in-depth interviews conducted in obtaining data. The study concludes that even though the management of the selected PUCs admit that students are key stakeholders and have a role to play in publicity activities, they have not been properly integrated and this is evident from the lack of existing policy framework that consciously addresses the issue. It is recommended that publicity theorists must develop a comprehensive framework that informs the integration of students' in their publicity activities in a coordinated manner. The proposed framework must address issues like conceptualization, management and evaluation of integrated student publicity. It is evident from this study that a proper integration of students in publicity activities will inure tremendously to the benefit of the PUCs particularly in an era of increasing competition, lack of government support and sustainability concerns.

Keywords: Integration, publicity, stakeholders, framework and public university colleges

1. Introduction

The liberalization of Ghana's educational sector since the return to constitutional governance has served as a stimulus for proliferation of tertiary educational institutions including Private Universities Colleges in Ghana (PUCs). This phenomenon has given graduating secondary school students several options to select from which universities colleges they want to attend to acquire the relevant skills and knowledge for national development. It is an undeniable fact that awareness creation is critical to the success of making informed choices about one's educational progression. PUCs use different traditional marketing communication strategies such as publicity, advertising and sponsorship to reach out to their target audience. Among these traditional strategies, publicity can be said to the simplest, cost effective and most efficient.

Publicity is the deliberate attempt to manage the public's perception on a subject with the ultimate goal of promoting client's product or service (Eisa, 2003). Another scholar adds that publicity includes: 'a series of positive messages about an organization or its employees designed to improve the image of the organization or brand' (Egan, 2007:249). This awareness creation process may be a newspaper article, a mention in a magazine, radio or television interview, among others. These are all non-paid visibility that can illustrate either positive or negative image to the general public. A study by Shahidand Imran in 2010 on the 'Impact of promotion on students' enrolment: A case of private Schools in Pakistan' found four promotion variables namely: school appearance, public relations, publicity and advertisement (print and electronic media). These four variables were found to be the main forms of promotion used by private schools for recruiting students. Another related study by Omboi and Mutali in Kenya in 2011 on the subject: 'Effect of selected marketing communication tools on student enrolment in private universities in Kenya' found that print media and alumni networks were rated highly as the most effective marketing communication tools to provide information to prospective students.

Again, a research conducted by Bowen, Gogo and Maswili in 2012 on the subject, 'Marketing strategies that attract and increase student enrolment in institutions of higher learning: Case of private universities in Kenya' concluded that, advertising using an institution website, advertising using the various media stations, use of social networks such as

Facebook, encouraging word-of-mouth, career fair involvement, open day on campus and Alumni support are marketing strategies that can offer opportunity to attract and increase enrolment of students. These findings help us to appreciate the publicity options available to institutions in the context of integrated marketing communications.

In addition, Bylon and Bede in May 2013 researched on the subject, 'The role of marketing communications in student enrolment in private universities in Ghana' and found that advertising was the most important tool in attracting students to enrol in public universities in Ghana. However, a recommendation was made for the consideration of the other elements of marketing communications which are equally important. Now the question is, how has researchers explored the role of students in a coordinated and well-planned publicity activities aimed at increasing numbers and resources for management purposes? The issue of effective integration of stakeholders particularly students in publicity initiatives have not been fully explored. Most of the extant literature tends to scratch the surface of the matter leaving a significant gap in literature to guide research and practice. The purpose of this current study was to assess how students, who constitute one of the key stakeholders of tertiary education could be effectively integrated into publicity activities of PUCs in Ghana. The objectives of the study were1) To find out the opportunities for integration of students' as stakeholders in publicity activities of PUCs; 2) to explore the challenges of the integration process; and 3) to examine the way forward for addressing identified challenges.

2. Empirical Review of Literature on Publicity Perspectives

2.1. Publicity in Perspective

The concept of 'publicity' is the deliberate attempt to manage the public's perception on a subject with the ultimate goal of promoting client's product or service (Eisa, 2003). This means that publicity is used as a communication tool for making a product known to the public. Egan (2007) describes publicity as 'a series of positive messages about an organization or its employees designed to improve the image of the organization'. These reamplifiedby Jobber (2010) who argues that publicity can be defined as communication about a product or an organization by the placing of news about it in the media without paying for the time or space directly.

Publicity offers a number of benefits to organizations irrespective of size, mission and financial muscles. Cleary (2014) identifies seven benefits in organization's marketing tools including costs. Publicity is virtually free and Cleary rightly notes that 'Apart from the costs accruable from media distribution, liaison, preparation and distribution, the cost for publicity is virtually free'. This view is very critical because there is evidence of PUCs struggling to meet operational costs due to factors such as 'unhealthy' competition from the traditional public universities, lack of government support, and dwindling number of fresh applicants. Some of the benefits of publicity include the flexibility of being noticed, forming strategic alliances, enhancing organisation identity, building your credibility and boosting your effective competitiveness.

2.2. Integration of Students: The Stakeholder Argument

Stakeholder theory was propounded by Edward R. Freeman in 1984. The theory suggests that the purpose of a business is to create as much value as possible for stakeholders. In order to succeed and be sustained over time, executives must keep the interests of stakeholders like customers, suppliers, employees, communities and shareholders like the employers to be aligned and going in the same direction. Innovation to keep these interests aligned is more important than the easy strategy of trading off the interests of stakeholders against each other. Hence, by managing for stakeholders, executives will also create as much value as possible for shareholders and other financiers. Evan and Freeman (1988) in their work, 'Stakeholder Theory of the Modern Corporation' indicate that, stakeholders have their jobs and usually their livelihood at stake; they often have specialized skills for which there is usually no perfectly elastic market. In return for their labour, they expect security, wages, benefits and meaningful work. In return for their loyalty, the corporation is expected to provide for them and carry them through difficult times.

In the context of tertiary education, students are regarded as one of the key stakeholders. Their existence and contributions cannot be underestimated. As the largest stakeholder group of PUCs, students are expected to follow the instructions of management most of the time, to speak favourably about the university, and to be responsible citizens in the local communities in which their institutions operate. Where they are used as means to an end, they must participate in decisions affecting such use.

2.3. Controlling and Empowering Students for Publicity Strategies

According to Palmer (2008), there are two basic approaches to managing people for task. On the one hand, management of the School can supervise students closely and make corrections where they fail to perform to standard. On the other hand, management can make students responsible for controlling their own actions and this is often referred to as 'empowering students'. For an organisation like the university to effectively recover from service failures and closely tailor services to individual targets' needs, there is the need for students' empowerment. Palmer argues that'one of the underlying assumptions of those advocating empowerment is that student's values will be in line with those of the university. The school must be prepared to allow students the freedom to act and to make decisions based on their own judgment' (Palmer, 2008:381).

2.4. The Role of Motivation in Student's Integration

According to Palmer (2008), 'strategies to empower [students] to make effective service encounter are less likely to be successful if [students] do not feel engaged in their job. Motivation, consent, participation and communication form essential focal points for an organization's strategy for bringing about the sense of engagement that underlies

empowerment' (p. 384). Students are key primary stakeholders of an organization and when motivated, consented and allowed to form an essential participant in the publicity strategy will bring about the sense of empowerment to enhance the PUCs aim of exploiting the benefits of publicity including increasing enrolment.

Weimer (2012) states that university authorities must ensure that institutional cultures are welcoming to students from diverse backgrounds. This means that students must feel they are accepted and affirmed and feel they belong to the institution. Weimer again says that students must be enabled to build up their social and cultural capital. This kind of capital derives from a sense of belonging, from active relationships with others, participation and knowing how things work around the institution not only in the classroom work but beyond it as well to making the school known to potential students. Weimer further urges that school authorities must invest in a variety of support services for students. This support services could be reduction of fees or scholarship for students who actively participate in publicity for the school in various ways to enhance enrolment. According to Zepke and Leach (2010),'What is needed in a democratic-critical conception of engagement that goes beyond strategies, techniques, and behaviours, is a conception in which engagement is participatory, dialogic and leads not only to academic achievement but to success as an active citizen.' (p. 173). Being good and active citizens enable students to become good ambassadors of the school to the potential publics.

2.5. Training and Development of Students in Publicity Integration

According to Cole (1993), training is any learning activity which is directed toward the acquisition of specific knowledge and skills for the purpose of an occupation or task. The students being trained here will serve the task of making their PUCs known to the public. Thomas (1988) also defines training as 'a process through which experience are deliberately offered to trainees to enable them to absorb some new perspective, understanding, values, attitude, technique or skills. This requires the organization to plan activities to increase task knowledge and skills or amend the attitude and social behaviour for its participants in a way that are consistent with organizational goals and requirement of the task. Palmer (2008) adds that: 'if an organization wishes to make its stakeholders involved in publicity, it must include such an objective within its overall corporate plan and identify the required training-and development needs (p. 394). It is therefore essential to make stakeholders aware of the competitive market challenges and pressures, and how the school intends to overcome them by making use of any available channels like the students to reach the public among whom they reside. This, according to Palmer will encourage students to be morally involved in the process of change in their school. However, if the publicity skills and knowledge of the students are not developed, the PUCswill lose opportunities.

3. Methodology

This study was a qualitative one aimed at exploring how students could be integrated into publicity activities of PUCs. Daymon and Holloway (2002) deduce that most studies embarked upon in the field of public relations use qualitative research approach as it presents an interpretive and rational worldview. The qualitative approach therefore enables researchers in the collection of appropriate data to deal with the research questions. Exploratory design was used in this study. This design, according to Lynn and Lynn (2014) is used for a research topic which has few or no previous studies to refer to. It focuses on gaining familiarity and insight for subsequent investigation, or could be used when primary stage of investigation. The exploratory design was used because the study was in a relatively new area and literature was difficult to come by. The study selected three PUCs in Ashanti Region purposively namely Christian Service university College (CSUC), Garden City University College (GCUC) and Ghana Baptist University College (GBUC). The three PUCs were purposively but carefully selected based on factors such as student population size, depth of programmes offered, length of years of operation and their established history of publicity activities. Qualitative data in the form of structure interview were collected and analysed from Management members of the three PUCs who were familiar with the subject under study and labelled as 'management sources'. The identity of the management sources is not disclosed. The data was manually transcribed and analysed using inductive and deductive approaches. Key emerging themes were clustered and presented in a form of report per the objectives of the study.

4. Discussion of Key Findings

4.1. Opportunities for Integration of Students in Publicity Activities

To find out the opportunities for integration of students in publicity activities, the views of the selected management members of the PUCs were sought and presented as follows: The management sources indicated that three main traditional communication channels have been used for publicity activities namely the radio, television and newspaper adverts. They gave the indication that these three media platforms have enabled them to engage their prospective fresh applicants although other strategies have been used. For instance, one management source explained that sometimes, they resort to senior high school visits and other times, they undertake admission outreach to churches and identifiable groups (private and public) for publicity purposes. This finding gives an indication that several publicity opportunities are available to PUCs. This finding is consistent with existing findings in the area of publicity channels available for use by PUCs (Omboi & Mutali, 2011; Sahid & Imram, 2010; Bowen, et al, 2012).

Now the substantive matter is, how has students, who are considered as a key stakeholder been integrated in the publicity process? A direct question was put to the management and interestingly, they all agree that student's involvement in the publicity activities of University colleges was very crucial. For instance, one management source had this to say: 'the school is building its name so students must do their part through their testimonies or personal experience'. Another management source observed: 'students are everywhere . . . they go to their friend's houses, work places and even attend events of their friends together where they can always talk about their University Colleges'. It was

a generally held view among the selected management that involving students in publicity of PUCs could be the most important move towards improving enrolment.

The opportunity for integration of students in publicity activities was further supported by a management source which argued that: 'students are students, and they will remain same' there is no need to restrict them, 'when they are treated well, they will publicize the University College wherever they may be'. Students as a group and a key stakeholder present a powerful 'asset' to enhance institutional advancement particularly in the area of admission promotion in an increasing competitive environment. We argue that PUCs should begin to utilize this 'asset' in a well-coordinated manner to achieve phenomenal results. But the irony of the matter was that PUCs didn't have established policy framework that consciously integrate students in their publicity activities. Rather, responses from management of all the three PUCs indicated to have some arrangement that involves using selected students especially for outreach programmes on adhoc basis.

The understanding is that some of the students are co-opted into publicity activities depending on what the institution seeks to achieved. It is strongly contested that such a strategy may not be effective and that a properly planned strategy that clearly understands the unique role of students in publicity, particularly for admissions purposes is the way to go. Even though some of the management sources hinted that they use students for publicity purposes, it became clear that there was no documented policy that drives this engagement. One of the possible explanations to this phenomenon is the fact that most of the publicity activities are not handled by probably professional communication units or departments within some of these PUCs. For instance, the study found that all the three management sources of the PUCs mentioned different outfits as being in charge of their publicity activities. GCUC's activities are managed by the administration headed by the Vice Registrar (Administration). CSUC is handled by the Corporate Affairs Unit (Formerly Partnership Development Office) whilst publicity activities of GCUC are managed by the marketing department of the institution. This finding was further corroborated by the management sources which reported that the mandate of the respective units/offices that manage publicity was not clearly spelt out. One management source noted: 'They plan and decide which radio station to even work with. . .'

4.2. Challenges of the Students' Integration Process

There is no doubt that redirecting students' psychology, attitudes and behaviour towards publicity activities may present challenges. But the question is, is it worth trying? And the answer in our opinion is yes. In response to the question of possible challenges in the integration process, two of the management sources were of the view that there shall always be a challenge in issues like this; the fear was that if not properly handled, it may create a deviation considering that PUCs have an academic mandate that may not support the whole idea of students' integration in the publicity process. There were concerns about capacity building, time management, ethical issues, antagonism from the student leadership, apathy among other concerns. One of the management sources made a fundament observation: 'finding the appropriate reward for students will be a challenge'. The concern expressed was how to balance academic goals with a possible 'commercialization' attitude that may derail students from their core goals for enrolling in PUCs. One of the management sources had this to say, 'there may be challenges initially, but when it is well planned, if will be attractive and students would buy into it much easily'.

However, one of the management sources was of the view that there could be no challenge and noted: 'I personally do not foresee a challenge coming from students' referrals because there is a benefit and whoever does it gets it. Those who don't do it, go their way'. This argument is valid when publicity engagement is limited to only student's referrals. But if the issue is viewed from a holistic perspective, then obviously one may conclude that there will be formidable challenges. How then do we address the challenges considering the identified opportunities? The next section addresses this concern. Zepke and Leach (2010), states; 'what is needed is a democratic-critical conception of engagement that goes beyond strategies, techniques, behaviours, and a conception in which engagement is participatory, dialogic and leads not only to academic achievement but to success as an active citizen.' (p. 173).

4.3. The Way Forward to Addressing Identified Challenges

The respondents were asked to suggest ways to address the identified challenges. As a matter of principle, all the management sources unanimously pointed out that those challenges could be dealt with when the students were given very good orientation on the need to help grow the student members in the PUCs. Such education would have to point out to students, the immediate-to-long term benefits of actively participating in publicizing the University Colleges. In as much as all the management sources agreed that there should be some sort of training for the students, none of them recommended any complex training programme. One of them said: 'I do not think they need any special training, just something small to equip them to know what to say and how to say them for maximum results.' The management sources were of the opinion that the training should be directed at how students could tell their friends about their schools without any form of influence from authorities of their schools.

Weimer (2012) also states that University authorities must ensure that institutional cultures are welcoming to students from diverse backgrounds which mean that students must feel they are accepted and affirmed and feel they belongs to the institution. They argued that when the student feels good about the treatment he receives from the school, there is the likelihood that he would gladly talk to friends about it. In essence, they said that the management of PUCs must develop student-centred policies with every aspect of the students' life – from tuition through lecture schedules, flexible fee payment plan and even how conducive the campus environment is made for teaching and learning. This expressed opinion is very critical. The recognition of students as key stakeholders must as a matter of course, illicit some responsibility on the part of management of PUCs, how well do you manage the academic environment has an effect on the

conduct of students to a larger extent. Effective training sessions especially in communication skills, persuasion. Attractive reward system must be put in place to motivate and encourage entire students' participation.

Besides, capacity building in the form of training, motivation featured prominently in the way forward in dealing with the identified challenges. Two of the management sources agreed that the idea of establishing a reward system is an attractive one to serve as a source of motivation for the student who would successfully refer their friends or colleagues to enrol in the PUCs. All of them however were of the opinion that it is more prudent to consciously make the students understand the 'other' benefits of convincing more people to join their PUCs. As one of them rightly put it, 'Well, right from matriculation we tell them that the school is trying to build a name for itself and for its students and that they should be part and generally, they welcome such admonition'. The scope and nature of the motivation was not outlined by the management sources (a focus of another research yet to be published). According to Palmer (2008), 'strategies to empower employees to make effective service encounter are less likely to be successful if employees do not feel engaged in their job. Motivation, consent, participation and communication form essential focal points for an organization's strategy for bringing about the sense of engagement that underlies empowerment' (p.384).

5. Conclusion

The study concludes that even though the management of the selected PUCs admit that students as key stakeholders have a role to play in publicity activities, they have not been properly integrated and this is evident from the lack of existing policy framework that consciously addresses the issue.

6. Recommendations

Beyond the suggestions on the way forward for addressing the challenges of integration identified and discussed above, we are of the opinion that publicity theorists and practitioners must faction out a comprehensive theoretical framework that informs Management's decisions on the opportunity for the integration of students in publicity activities in a coordinated manner. It is evident from this study that a proper integration of student will inure tremendously to the benefits of the PUCs particularly in an era of increasing competition and uncertainty. The proposed framework must address the academic and extra-curricular commitments on the part of students as viable agents of change and growth in the context of publicity.

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