

The Washington Post

American University, now home to the 'American Wonk'

By Jenna Johnson
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New York has financiers. Las Vegas has gamblers, and Austin has slackers.

Washington? [Washington has wonks.](#)

That's the inspiration behind a new [American University effort](#) to distinguish itself among a crowd of local colleges competing for attention by branding the campus as the home of the "American Wonk."

The school has handed out 3,500 free T-shirts imprinted with 18 slogans, including "Legal Wonk" and "Arts Wonk." Ads have begun appearing at Metro stops and in local newspapers. And during alumni weekend in October, there will be a "Wonk of Fame" exhibit.

"We looked at what the word was doing in its current use," said Teresa Flannery, executive director of university communications and marketing, "and we decided this is what we are."

"Branding" has become a popular buzzword in higher education as universities compete to attract top students and faculty members and also maximize revenue from tuition, research and donors.

Instead of selling the stereotypical college experience, with images of students studying under a tree with a laptop, schools try to capture what makes them distinct.

Universities with dozens of programs and thousands of students often struggle to sum themselves up in just a few sentences or an image. But, as branding and advertising wonks point out, prospective students and their parents have no trouble doing it when commenting in online admissions forums or debating the merits of schools on long college trips.

"Every school in this country already has a brand - whether they like it or not," said Darryl Cilli, the chief creative officer at [160over90](#), a branding agency that works with clothing retailer American Eagle Outfitters and several colleges, including Michigan State University and Loyola University Maryland. "It has to be honest and genuine. You can never become something you're not."

Teenagers are savvy consumers, and a college education is one of the largest purchases they will ever make, Cilli said, so universities have to sell themselves.

George Washington University decided to capitalize on images of the first president during a 2002 re-branding campaign. Catholic University has found that its name alone is the ultimate brand, but it occasionally freshens up the tag line. The current one was written by a student who won a \$1,000 prize for it: "Reason. Faith. Service."

The University of Maryland at College Park, meanwhile, has sought to spread the word about changes

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happening on campus. In 2003, the university started its ["Fear the Turtle" campaign](#), featuring a roaring terrapin that touts the school's Pulitzer Prize-winning faculty members, steady climb in the rankings and increasingly accomplished freshman classes. The phrase was borrowed from fans of the school's basketball team, so the campaign felt natural to the campus, said Brian Ullmann, the executive director of marketing.

"There's a gap in the perception of the university and the reality of the university," he said. "The branding campaigns are important because they help people understand the change."

Yet some campaigns can backfire. Drake University in Des Moines unveiled an admissions campaign this semester around the idea of the "Drake Advantage." For an illustration, Drake used [a giant blue D+ on its Web site](#). The school has since modified the image so it looks less like a near-failing grade.

The \$675,000 branding effort at American began two years ago, when the university hired a marketing strategy firm to survey students, parents, faculty and alumni about their perceptions of the university.

"Students tell someone they are going to American University or they are applying to American University . . . and a lot of the time, people say, 'Where?' " Flannery said.

That initial round of research identified three potential messages: active citizenship, learning from leaders and Washington as a powerful lab for learning.

Campus staffers then had to come up with a way to creatively convey those messages. At one meeting, they discussed a cartoon that [Nate Beeler, a 2002 graduate](#) and now a Washington Examiner cartoonist, drew for the cover of the alumni magazine. It shows a row of guys in suits sitting on a D.C. telephone wire like pigeons and saying, "Wonk! Wonk! Wonk!"

"It was 'Oh!' and then 'Noooo.' But 24 hours later, we were all still talking about it," Flannery said.

The choice has sparked as much consternation as enthusiasm among American's 12,000 students, not all of whom aspire to a lifetime of wonkery. Many have questioned it - and a few have openly mocked it - in Facebook updates, tweets and the comments section of the campus newspaper.

"I don't have any positive associations with this word," said Erin Lockwood, a senior majoring in international studies and economics. "It's a silly word. It doesn't have any intellectual gravitas."

But university leaders are confident that "wonk" - which they define as "an intellectually curious person" or "a knowledgeable Washington insider" - captures something essential about American. The whiff of nerdiness perceived by some students and alumni, officials said, was less important than the word's distinctiveness.

Josh Kaplan, a "green wonk" and senior environmental studies major, said: "Initially, I thought it was a little strange. But that's kind of what I like about it now. . . . It's pretty uniquely a Washington word."

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