I want Calvin to be high-image–to have a genuine, farther-reaching, and very credible brand–yet without undercutting our affiliation with the Christian Reformed Church.

Gaylen J. Byker, president of Calvin College

For the past year, our CRANE team has worked closely with Calvin College and its people. Some of us, in fact, have watched and respected this institution for quite a few years now, steadily observing its challenges, changes, and triumphs. From the vantage point of CRANE, President Byker’s vision for Calvin not only sounds possible; it sounds imminent. A newly known, widely known, and accurately known Calvin College, we believe, is already on the horizon.

In summer 2000, CRANE accepted the charge to conduct a qualitative investigation of the college–through background reading, focus groups and interviews, and an in-depth analysis of Calvin’s current situation (our Review and Reflection Paper)–and, on the basis of that investigation, to create for the college a new positioning message, along with a family of admissions marketing materials.

Having conducted several on-site presentations about our findings and concepts, and with the marketing materials already in production, we deliver this Institutional Positioning and Marketing Summary as an overview of the marketing strategy CRANE built from our understanding of the academic marketplace and of Calvin’s distinctive mission, history, achievements, questions, and goals. We hope that this document can support Calvin’s administrators and recruiters as they work to make President Byker’s vision an exciting reality.
BACKGROUND

In 1991-92, when CRANE team members Patti Crane and Ginger Pyron first worked with Calvin College, the institution was seeking to relax the invisible borders of its overwhelmingly Dutch/Christian Reformed Church culture so as to enroll a greater diversity of students, particularly (in the words of one administrator) “thinking evangelicals.” Calvin needed to learn how to be welcoming to that wider population of students, and also how to be honestly self-promotional without compromising a long tradition of institutional modesty.

The marketing program we helped create at that time was designed to take Calvin “beyond fact-based, assertive narrative and into values-driven, self-disclosing depiction” (Review and Reflection Paper, June 1992). The introductory brochure, titled Your place, and the viewbook (Having gifts that differ, let us use them) presented Calvin according to the four marketing points our paper identified for the college:

- a Christian institution with a dynamic mission; a college broadly appealing, yet with a solid spiritual base;

- a strikingly academic institution, emphasizing conscientious inquiry and helping students create for themselves a firm position in which to stand in faith and from which to go into the world;

- a welcoming community, comprising variously gifted people united by common grace;

- and an institution devoted to Christian service.
Through design and copy we worked to enliven Calvin’s recruitment materials, creating pieces in contrast to the school’s former publications, which some people on campus, quoted in our 1992 Review and Reflection Paper, had described as “stodgy,” “ponderous,” and lacking in joy.

That marketing program, thanks to everyone at Calvin who embraced its purposes and relayed its messages, evidently succeeded. “Your last work here changed this college—it was an aha! experience for many people,” an administrator told us. “We took the publications’ new image to heart and began to really communicate Calvin for the first time. A new sense of institutional self-esteem and self-realization took place here.” As this administrator notes, the magic of institutional change happened not simply because Calvin received some new recruitment materials, but because the college’s own people brought the program to life.

Now, eight years later, we have found a growing, maturing college: still intensely and thoughtfully Christian; even more vitally academic than before; still deeply—yet differently—committed to Christian service; and amazingly more diverse, more welcoming, and more appreciative of individual gifts.

FOREGROUND

Administrators and staff members have reported satisfaction with the quality and mix of students responding to Calvin. Current statistics from the admissions office show that the college has maintained a solid population of students from within the CRC while steadily increasing its numbers of “other church” students. Thanks to this mix and also to Calvin’s conscientious recruiting and welcoming of AHANA students, the student body has become noticeably more diverse. Everyone at Calvin recognizes that the quest for a genuinely diverse academic community is ongoing and will take time.

Calvin’s successful recruiting of students beyond the CRC fold brings an intriguing new challenge for shaping the college’s incoming class. Our recent Review and Reflection Paper (November 2000) notes,
As a college of the CRC, Calvin has an obligation to its “covenant youth” – the offspring of the families that, year after year, helped support the school financially. An administrator said, “We’re now under 50 percent CRC students, for the first time – partly because we’re expanding our reach, and partly because this year not as many CRC students came to the table. So we’re looking for new ways to speak to our primary constituency.”

Among Calvin administrators most closely associated with enrollment management, we heard one major question: *How can we communicate effectively with our Christian Reformed “legacy” audience while addressing broader audiences as well?*

Reading the eloquent documents related to Calvin’s new core curriculum, listening to people throughout the campus community, and specifically considering the vision of President Byker and others, we formed a speculative question – one that we tested with a number of administrators and staff members: *Is Calvin ready, we asked, to move beyond regional status and to claim a well-deserved national position?* The considered response, unanimously, was yes.

A second major question then began to guide our thoughts about Calvin’s positioning and marketing: *How can Calvin reach for national visibility?*

A subsidiary question – rarely articulated at Calvin, but representing a perpetual CRC quandary – also figured in our thinking: *How can Calvin present itself, in all its excellence, without seeming to boast?*
During several presentations on campus in November 2000, we outlined our thinking about the “branding” of Calvin College, sparked by those two major questions. Much of that information appears below, along with details about the marketing materials and Calvin’s next steps in implementing the program. For easier reference by Calvin readers, we’ve chosen a question-and-answer format.

CALVIN AND THE MARKETPLACE

What is the identity of Calvin College?

The school’s mission statement gives the official version:

*Calvin College is a comprehensive liberal arts college in the Reformed tradition of historic Christianity. Through our learning, we seek to be agents of renewal in the academy, church, and society. We pledge fidelity to Jesus Christ, offering our hearts and lives to do God’s work in God’s world.*

Less explicit, more memorable, and brilliantly succinct is the title of Calvin’s five-year plan, which captures the college’s essence in only six words:

*Distinctively Christian. Academically Excellent. Always Reforming.*

CRANE’s work with Calvin stems from both of these descriptions.
Which institutions currently compete with Calvin for students?

According to admissions data from May 1, 2001 (reflecting the current year to date), substantial numbers of Calvin applicants also sought admission to these institutions: Hope College (196), Grand Valley State University (145), Wheaton (111), the University of Michigan (97), and Michigan State University (91).

Students who applied both to Calvin and to “other state universities” (besides GVSU, UM, and MSU) numbered 574; to “other Christian” colleges (besides Hope, Taylor, Wheaton, Dordt, and Trinity), 432; to “other private” institutions, 230. All of these figures are roughly comparable to those from the year 2000.

Calvin is competing well and appropriately both within its region and with its historical “peer” institutions, the very colleges one would expect as competitors for the institution that Calvin has been to date. Now, as President Byker and many others at Calvin have indicated, it’s time to move beyond those standard expectations and to reach for high-ability Christian students throughout the country who would be an excellent match with Calvin, but are likely to choose other institutions—including nationally known private universities—simply because they don’t realize that a college with Calvin’s particular combination of advantages even exists.

For the right student, a full understanding of Calvin College can show this college immeasurably more desirable than either the flagship state universities or the smaller or narrower Christian institutions.
What really distinguishes Calvin from other institutions, and why?

In answer, the three-part title of Calvin’s five-year plan offers a good starting point.

Being *distinctively Christian* sets Calvin apart from every state institution and many private ones. The word *distinctively* also acknowledges Calvin’s particular strain of Christianity as potentially different from that of other schools.

Being *academically excellent* differentiates Calvin from schools that range from some of the large public universities to small Bible colleges. *Excellence*—a word difficult to define quantitatively, even in relation to academic experiences—can comprise many outstanding features, including quality of teaching, mentoring and friendliness from professors, class size, academic facilities, core curriculum, opportunities for paired student/faculty research and internships, preparation for study and career beyond Calvin, individual student achievements, the professor:student ratio, and special academic programs such as Interim, study abroad, and service-learning. At Calvin, *excellence* in academics also encompasses an unusual combination of theological depth and intellectual freedom. A faculty member told us, “Plenty of places talk about integrating faith and learning. But it really happens here—and without any loss of intellectual energy or courage.”

The January 2001 report on Maguire Associates’ research for the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities (CCCU) highlights the need for just such a message: “Assertive action,” the report reads, “is required to address students’ concerns that Christian colleges and universities are ‘too rigid’ in academics. . . . [E]ach institution must communicate its own appropriate measure of academic freedom and challenge.”

But what distinguishes Calvin from a highly regarded Christian college such as Wheaton? That’s where the third phrase—*always reforming*—leaps into prominence. If Calvin can reconcile its aversion to “boasting” with its need for differentiation, it can claim a faith-filled yet intellectually courageous Christianity that offers a marked contrast to the narrower academic climate one might find not only at Wheaton but at other well-respected Christian institutions.
Calvin can say, with full conviction, “Here’s our theology; we stand by it, and we live it. Here, beyond question, are our high academic standards. Here is our conscientiously designed academic program—which, like our theology, tells us to study all things, not just explicitly Christian ones. Here is our policy of responsible freedom, which coaxes students out of a Christian cocoon and into a life of thoughtful, world-aware decision making.”

What’s more, Calvin—unlike other institutions we’ve known—has publicly added, “We are always reforming. Not only do we work to help renew the world, as our theology directs us; we also are constantly seeking ways to become better at everything we do. And that includes being willing to do things differently from the way this college has always done them. To that effort, we bend our minds, our hearts, and all our actions.”

What institution anywhere can match that combination of attributes?

**What makes Calvin ready for national positioning?**

Clearly, *uniqueness*. That’s the short-form answer, but it’s not the only one. We also might respond, *overall fine condition*; every part of Calvin that we have observed stands sprucely in order, as if perpetually ready for close inspection. Calvin has nothing to hide, and much to share.

And the time is right for sharing it. Our *Review and Reflection Paper*, after detailing some of the recent attention Calvin has received in relation to Christian scholarship, concludes,

Christian scholarship is moving into the spotlight, and consequently, a highly academic Christian college is likely to draw the public eye—emerging into new prominence, attracting a larger pool of inquirers, and perhaps finally convincing skeptics that the incalculable value of a well-planned, well-founded education justifies the cost of the investment. Both by legacy and by merit, Calvin College belongs in this role. We’d like to see this robust, extraordinary institution take the decisive action of stepping up to claim its rightful 21st-century position.
There’s another compelling reason for Calvin to lose no time in claiming a new, more elevated position in the academic marketplace. The January 2001 CCCU research report delivers a number of recommendations that, if seriously adopted by the CCCU member institutions, can propel several other colleges toward the place Calvin now fills. Both to maintain its current status within this cohort and also to move up in institutional standing nationally, Calvin must seize the moment to initiate a powerful branding campaign.

CALVIN’S MARKETS

Currently, which are Calvin’s main market segments?

Though CRC students continue to enroll in stable numbers, they no longer dominate the campus. The balance has shifted—gratifying some people and alarming others. Calvin’s more welcoming climate and intentionally broader recruiting have attracted a strong group of “non-CRC” or “other church” students who find the college’s mission and features a good match for their own educational and religious preferences, and this group now makes up more than 50 percent of the student body.

To date, few surprises exist in the new data. The latest statistics from the admissions office (May 1, 2001) show that among the 757 first-time-in-any-college deposits so far for Fall 2001, 344 students identify themselves as Christian Reformed, and 413 indicate an “other church” affiliation. Overwhelmingly (at a current total of 685), Calvin’s new class members are Caucasian. The male/female breakdown is currently 309 to 448, and 262 students are the children of Calvin alumni.

Calvin continues to draw primarily from its immediate regional neighborhood: The 757 depositors so far include 414 students from Michigan (55%), 141 from the rest of the Great Lakes region (19%), 171 from other U.S. locations (23%), 19 from Canada (3%), and 12 from other countries (2%).
What other markets can Calvin tap?

As Calvin seeks a broader prospect pool, we encourage the college to target two groups of high-ability Christian students: Those who don’t know this institution well enough, and those who don’t yet know Calvin at all.

The first group might consist partially of inadequately informed–or misinformed–students within the CRC. CRANE agrees with the administrator quoted in our recent *Review and Reflection Paper*: “I think there should still be 500 first-year students from the CRC who want what we do. They’re going to Pepperdine, Duke, Brandeis, Harvard, Yale–because they have an idea that Calvin is too insular.”

In the CCCU research, Maguire Associates found that prospective students in general mentioned concerns about the “closed-mindedness” or presumed “intolerance” of Christian institutions more often than they did in 1986. “They indicated that they would shy away from any hint of strict rules governing the freedom of thought,” the executive summary reports. While seeking to repair such perceptions, Calvin can also generate some “brand-new” ones, targeting academically achieving students who match the college’s values and standards yet, somewhat like the high-ability CRC students mentioned above, *may have dismissed Christian colleges as insufficiently challenging or open-minded.*

As Calvin joins the institutions who are recruiting–and drawing–nationally, the college may find some of its most fertile markets among church youth groups from many Christian denominations. According to the CCCU research, member institutions may find students from the Southeast and Midwest worth pursuing, because of those students’ habits of church attendance. “The most promising market for recruitment is the dedicated churchgoer,” reads the CCCU report. “A targeted communications strategy should be developed for church and youth groups, a broad definition of legacies, and parents.”
CRANE would amend this suggestion slightly. The most promising market for Calvin, we would say, is not merely “the dedicated churchgoer,” but the thoughtful and interested churchgoer—a group that includes the high-ability student who attends a Christian church and is receptive to its doctrine, but perhaps does not yet realize that a Christian college can provide both an intellectually stimulating education and a spiritually meaningful touchstone for living.

**Why should Calvin target these groups?**

While Calvin will continue to enroll many CRC students, even those of moderate academic ability, a more diverse student mix—not only racially and ethnically, but geographically—will strengthen the college. Savvier “shoppers” will help sharpen Calvin’s excellence; more widely varying points of view will add seasoning to discussions in the classroom and throughout campus; a broader reputation will expand Calvin’s pool of prospective new faculty members as well as its potential sources of donation and referral. And all of this can happen without the least diminution of the college’s firm commitment to being both *Reformed* and *reforming*. 
What positioning does CRANE suggest for Calvin?

Positioning begins with what CRANE calls the promise: a simple statement of what this particular institution reliably delivers. For Calvin, in keeping with our understanding of what truly distinguishes this college from others, we presented this basic statement:

Calvin is the distinctively Christian, academically excellent liberal arts college that shapes minds for intentional participation in the renewal of all things.

Is that the “branding” concept?

Yes and no. Although the positioning statement or “promise” spells out the brand identity by which people ideally should understand Calvin, the branding concept makes that promise instantly accessible: It gives people a short-form, memorable “handle” for the college—a phrase that, when widely communicated and frequently reinforced, begins to leap immediately to mind in association with the Calvin name.

And Calvin is ready for such an identifier. During one of our visits to campus, Mike Van Denend, Calvin’s executive director of public relations, told us, “We have to find a way to describe Calvin efficiently and accurately—a task we think is difficult to capture in a couple of words. Calvin is unlike both its Christian and secular colleagues. We’re all about how this complex thing—this grand endeavor called a Calvin education—happens.”
Phil de Haan, director of media relations, echoed that opinion: “We’re not ‘Christian enough’ for the Christian media, and ‘too Christian’ for the secular media. For example, we don’t fit with the evangelical story of Christianity Today; our faculty is way too complicated for that. I hope for a simple way to explain a complicated brand of education.”

Seeking “a simple way” to broaden Calvin’s reach, to highlight the college’s academic quality, and to suggest both the formative nature and the Reformed/reforming underpinnings of a Calvin education, we created this branding line:

CALVIN
MINDS IN THE MAKING

Why not “Calvin College”?

We recognize—and respect—Calvin’s intentional decision to remain an undergraduate college rather than to pursue university status. And we know that the seminary next door is also called “Calvin.” But Calvin College desires a more national reputation, and a truth of the marketplace is that the one-word version of an institution’s name not only implies wider repute; it also carries greater distinction.

How often do people say Harvard University, Stanford University, Yale University, rather than simply Harvard, Stanford, Yale? Imagine one prospective student announcing, “I’m going to Wheaton” and another saying “I’m going to Wheaton College.” Which student sounds as if he or she knows the school well? Which student assumes that the listener of course knows this school? Which name sounds more like a college of national reputation?
Why “in the Making”?

*Make* is a wonderfully versatile verb. Although verbs like *form, shape, create,* and *develop* may convey more specific activity, *make* can encompass them all. *To make* is not only to construct something, but to make something happen; it’s to prepare, to refine, to accomplish, even to transform. The basis of many idioms, *make* also brings us the multi-leveled phrase *in the making*–a phrase we find especially appropriate to Calvin because of its eloquent *-ing.* Our *Review and Reflection Paper* cites President Byker’s inaugural-speech reference to a line from Simon Schama: “To be Dutch . . . was to live in a perpetual present participle.” The present-participle Calvin is the Calvin that’s not only Dutch and Reformed, but *always reforming.* By the same token, Calvin’s *minds in the making* are minds that, within a robust faith and a deep commitment to world renewal, remain open to the spectrum of ideas and people and experiences.

Why not “*Christian Minds in the Making*”?

Calvin certainly has no intention of underplaying its Christian affiliation or commitment—nor should it. But in the wider marketplace, “Christian” as an assertive first identifier can throw Calvin’s emphasis out of balance. The genius of Calvin, as we understand it, is that at this institution Christian education and academic excellence are *indivisibly intertwined.* In preparing young people to be agents of renewal, Calvin delivers an education simultaneously rigorous and Christ-infused—because according to the Reformed perspective, *being a faithful Christian means giving to every task one’s unstinting best.*

Although including all three terms—*Christian, minds* (i.e., academics), and *making* (i.e., forming/reforming) in the branding line might seem to be one way of conveying the “whole” of Calvin, to lead with *Christian* would make Calvin sound much more like a Bible college (which Calvin definitely isn’t), less like a seriously academic institution (which Calvin definitely is), and probably more like the colleges that many within Calvin’s broader target audience have already ruled out.
We were pleased to see recently in the *Chimes* (February 23, 2001) an article by Phil de Haan that pinpoints exactly CRANE’s thinking about the branding line: “‘Minds in the Making,’” he writes, “[is] not intended to be the conversation, but rather a conversation-starter. So, should the slogan be ‘Christian Minds in the Making’?" De Haan himself resolves the question perfectly as he continues, “Or should that be the answer to a student who asks: ‘What kind of minds are you making?’”

**Doesn’t the emphasis on “minds” undercut the “heart” emphasis of Calvin’s motto?**

We love the simplicity of Calvin’s Latin motto and its English translation. “My heart I offer to you, Lord, promptly and sincerely” is actually a *state of mind* that Calvin hopes to foster in all its people. *Mind*, in fact, is a remarkably flexible word. Although it certainly denotes the intellect or reason, it also connotes a person’s entire consciousness: thought, intention, desire, wishes, memory, philosophy. One way of referring to “God in full” is through the phrase *Divine Mind*. Reference books of synonyms begin by listing for *mind* such synonyms as *intellect* and *mentality*, but rapidly progress to others such as *temperament, nature, proclivity, sentiment, feeling, affection*, and even *faith*.

Through the nuances of both of its key words, *Minds in the Making*—simple, alliterative, memorable—brands Calvin as a place where minds (i.e., thoughts, intentions, abilities, beliefs, and feelings) undergo intellectual and spiritual formation; and also where people are consciously applying their minds (i.e., their whole selves) to the lifelong task of working alongside God and through the Holy Spirit to accomplish world renewal.

At Calvin, young persons are healthily, conscientiously, astutely in the making—specifically so that for years to come, wherever they go and whatever they do, they can help restore the world to the condition God intended.
How do “positioning” and “branding” relate to marketing?

Most importantly, they have to come first. Marketing without a positioning construct and a branding strategy is likely to be a hit-or-miss, unfocused, or incoherent effort. Uncoordinated messages either confuse the audience, thus creating only a muddy understanding, or cancel themselves out, thus leaving no understanding at all.

The positioning, rarely a public statement, helps Calvin’s people see how to own a “position” in a person’s mind—a “promise” that this institution stands for.

The brand, succinct and nuanced, helps the person remember Calvin’s position. It makes Calvin’s promise easily accessible yet also suggests layers of meaning.

Marketing is the process that launches the brand. We like this definition: “the art and science of creating conditions so that prospects convince themselves.”

The marketing program for Calvin comprises the brand and everything that reinforces it. New publications belong in this category, but so do the efforts of Calvin’s own internal community, as the college’s people learn about the brand message, discuss it, incorporate it into their daily words and behavior on campus, and share it—deliberately or spontaneously—with others.

CRANE’s new admissions marketing materials for Calvin demonstrate the promise of the brand. This family of publications—projecting an authentic, engaging message and featuring evocative copy, design, and photography—creates the “conditions” whereby prospective students and their parents receive a clear understanding of the college and thus are able to “convince themselves” of whether or not their values and expectations match those of Calvin. Those same conditions can speak confidently and lucidly to other audiences, such as guidance counselors, pastors, and influencers.
THE ADMISSIONS MARKETING PROGRAM

How did CRANE decide upon and develop this marketing program for Calvin?

After articulating the positioning and creating the branding concept, we presented at Calvin the First Principles that would guide the program’s development:

The program for Calvin must . . .
“brand” Calvin College, not only regionally but nationally
position Calvin not only among Christian institutions, but among all high-quality colleges and universities
project each element in Calvin’s three-part “genetic code”: distinctively Christian, academically excellent, and always reforming
speak powerfully to each of Calvin’s primary audiences: CRC students, other regional Christian students, and Christian students and families nationwide who might be interested in Calvin’s unique education
provide, as a basis, a clear, simple rendering of the Reformed perspective
function, like Calvin itself, as a coherent whole.
**Why do we need a new rendering of the Reformed perspective?**

“Starting from scratch” best ensures clarity for all of Calvin’s audiences. In the past, Calvin could reasonably expect that its students—the great majority of whom had grown up in the CRC—knew well the main points of Reformed theology. Now half of the students on campus come from other church traditions; within the CRC, too, young people may be less steeped in Reformed vocabulary and thought than were students of previous years.

Last fall Mike Van Denend told our CRANE team, “In the CRC now, there’s a loosening of denominational bonds. Some churches are dropping the denominational name—calling themselves things like ‘the Sunshine Church’ and mentioning the CRC only in small print. And many of the church staff members, particularly those who work with young people, are coming from other traditions. They may have been youth leaders at Biola or Wheaton, for example. So some students in CRC youth groups aren’t actually getting things from the CRC perspective the way they used to.”

Phil de Haan added, “Changes at Calvin are contributing to this ‘loosening’ as well. In the past, all faculty members had to be CRC; now, we’re accepting some professors from other traditions. And we have considerably more faculty now who aren’t Calvin graduates.”

The prospectus for the new core curriculum confirmed that as recently as three years ago, Calvin’s own students weren’t necessarily getting the Reformed message. Our *Review and Reflection Paper* quotes this passage:

> In the Core Curriculum Assessment Project of 1997, 33 Calvin sophomores . . . were asked if a Calvin College education displayed any particular faith perspective or worldview. One third of the students said they weren’t aware of any such thing at Calvin; a little over one half said they thought there was one, but couldn’t say what it was; the remaining 15% said there was one, could use some of the language in which that perspective is typically expressed, but, in the words of the assessment report, “none were able to give a complete or thorough account of the Reformed perspective of Calvin College.” *(An Engagement with God’s World: the Core Curriculum of Calvin College, November 1999, p. 43)*
Our own conversations with Calvin students during the past year show that this situation is changing. Perhaps thanks largely to the diligence of Calvin’s faculty, almost every student we met was able to articulate pretty clearly the main points of Reformed theology. A short-form version, we believe, can help sustain such widespread awareness.

Furthermore, as with branding, a simpler rendering of a complex idea makes that idea more accessible and memorable. For CRC people, a new rendering can provide fresh words that enliven traditional concepts; for people less conscious of the Reformed perspective, a simplified version lends focus and lodges quickly in the mind.

CRANE’s suggestion for a short-form, four-point Reformed theology reads as follows:

*God created all things, and they were good.*

*All things have fallen from their original goodness.*

*Christ, who has redeemed all things, eventually will restore them.*

*We aid the Spirit’s work of restoration by seeking to make all things better.*

Our initial inspiration for what we call the “All things concept” came from the new core curriculum’s prospectus, which tidily sums up Reformed theology as “the great themes of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration of all things in Christ” (*An Engagement with God’s World*, p. 19). The phrase cropped up occasionally in people’s language during our on-campus focus groups, too, in relation to Calvin’s belief that Christians should engage (as the prospectus’s title asserts) with all facets of the world, not just those that are particularly Christian. And as we read in draft form Neal Plantinga’s text for the new gateway course, we noted numerous Scripture references containing the phrase “all things,” in keeping with a recurring theme of “allness,” comprehensiveness, or wholeness throughout the book. Ubiquitous in Calvin’s own idiom and practice, all things struck us as a phrase worth highlighting in the new materials.