For universities, names are a serious game

The goal behind changing is simple — increased prestige. But the process, and the politics, can be daunting.

By MARÁ ROSE WILLIAMS
The Kansas City Star

What’s in a name?
These days, a growing number of colleges and universities will tell you, more than you think. Across the country, higher education institutions are shedding provincial labels to enhance their image and better compete for top students and faculty and donor dollars.
Five Missouri public universities have changed their names in the last decade or so, and the University of Missouri-Columbia has proposed a change. In September, Fort Hays State University announced that it was exploring a name change, too, perhaps to the University of Western Kansas.

“What we are seeing is institutions trying to better explain their value to their key constituents,” said Christopher Simpson, chief executive officer of SimpsonScarborough, a Washington,

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D.C.-based branding and marketing firm that works primarily with colleges and universities.

"It's kind of like when the Boston Patriots became the New England Patriots to give them broader appeal. They weren't just Boston's team any more. They were New England's team."

Simpson worked this year with the University of Missouri-Rolla, which in January will become Missouri University of Science and Technology.

Simpson said that prior to the mid-'90s, public colleges and universities didn't have to market themselves. But several things happened to change that.

"There was a demand for more accountability," he said. "The portion of the state budget going to institutions began to shrink precipitously all over the nation. Competition for private support began to skyrocket. Competition for the best and brightest students and for people of color began to grow dramatically."

"Suddenly, institutions really had to do a better job at marketing. Part of that is making sure their name reflects their mission, their vision and their value."

It's not cheap (or easy)

Changing a university's name can be an expensive and painful process.

Stationery, signs, business cards and banners must be changed. Missouri institutions that have changed their names report costs ranging from $40,000 to nearly $500,000.

Sometimes, the proposed changes anger other schools.

Consider the controversy raging on the four University of Missouri system campuses over a proposal to drop "Columbia" from the University of Missouri-Columbia.

Faculty and administrators say that by becoming the University of Missouri, the school would reclaim its rightful place as the state's premier research institution. And those promoting the change argue that the University of Missouri is the school's former name. Adopting that name would make it clear that MU, and not Missouri State University, is the state's flagship university.

The proposal originated with university alumni, who said having the regional designation hindered some fundraising and student recruiting efforts. But faculty at the Kansas City, St. Louis and Rolla campuses argue that if the Columbia campus becomes the University of Missouri, it would make the others seem like satellite campuses.

University of Missouri-Kansas City officials have said that if the University of Missouri Board of Curators approves the MU name change, then UMKC will follow suit. UMKC administrators already have suggested the University of Kansas City as a possible new name.

Starting a trend

The name-changing derby began in Missouri in 1996 when Northeast Missouri State University became Truman State University. That change came 10 years after Missouri lawmakers designated Northeast as the state's public liberal arts and science university.

"What the name change has done is distinguish us from the rest of the regional comprehensive institutions for people from outside the state," said Truman President Barbara Dixon.

She said Truman's name change culminated a revamping of the entire nature and quality of the university.

In 2003, Missouri lawmakers passed a measure allowing Missouri Southern State College to become Missouri Southern State University-Joplin. The school later got state permission to drop "Joplin."

Southwest Missouri State University received legislative approval in August 2005 to rename itself Missouri State University. But that was preceded by much debate among lawmakers, some of whom argued that the name Missouri State University at one time was associated with the University of Missouri.

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, Missouri State University was emblazoned on Mizzou letterhead, yearbooks, commencement programs and athletic jerseys, even though the school's official name was the University of the State of Missouri. Some say the nickname Mizzou came from people slurring "MSU."

In 1901, the Board of Curators officially changed the name to the University of Missouri. The "Columbia" was tacked on after the university became a four-campus system in 1963.

Attracting students

Missouri State University officials say that while it's hard to directly connect all the school's improvements to the name change, they believe the new name attracted more out-of-state and international students to the Springfield campus. For the past two years, MSU has seen record enrollment in both areas.

"The number of graduates from out of state is up because the name of the institution where they get their degree is so important to graduate students," said Paul Kincaid, MSU spokesman. "Endowments also have gone up, and our chamber of commerce says it is a lot easier to talk to companies that want to come to Springfield and want higher education when you can say Missouri State University is here."

Last year, Central Missouri State University became the University of Central Missouri. This fall UCM's enrollment was up 2 percent.

"But it's hard to tell if that can be attributed to the name change or other factors," said Jeff Murphy, UCM spokesman.

In Hays, Kan., where Fort Hays State has proposed a change to the University of Western Kansas, some students, staff and alumni are opposed. One group has gathered about 250 signatures on a petition against renaming the university.

Administrators who proposed the change want a new name because too often the university is mistaken for a military school by prospective students.

If it goes through, the name change would be the fifth for the school. The last time was 30 years ago when Fort Hays, along with Emporia State and...
Pittsburg State, dropped the college designation and became universities.

University of Kansas officials are confident that no one will mistake a newly named Fort Hays for the state's flagship institution.

"Everyone knows that the school in Lawrence is the flagship," said Todd Cohen, KU spokesman. "There is only one University of Kansas. That's the way it always has been, so there won't be any confusion."

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Paul Kincaid, Spokesman for Missouri State University, formerly known as Southwest Missouri State University.
House speaker Pelosi to speak at Dole Institute

LAWRENCE — U.S. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi is scheduled to speak Nov. 9 at the University of Kansas' Dole Institute of Politics.

Pelosi, a Democrat from California, will speak at 11:30 a.m.

"Nancy Pelosi made history when she became the first woman speaker of the house," said Jonathan Earle, interim director of the Dole Institute. "It is a privilege and an honor to have her visit the Dole Institute."

The visit is co-sponsored by the College Democrats of Kansas and will be free and open to the public.
The University of Kansas debate team is ranked number one in the nation. Seven teams contributed to that ranking.

Team members include Brett Bricker, son of Gary and Norma Bricker; Ronnie Press, son of Arthur and Judith Press; Joel Kasten, son of Roger and Leah Kasten; Dylan Quigley, son of Tim Quigley and Trix Niemberger; Kai Davis, son of John Davis, all of Wichita; and Christopher Stone, son of Douglas and Gloria Stone of Derby.