

Welcome

Does the slogan 'Real Education for the Real World'

By Bob Evancho

The real world? Boise State senior and single mother of three Jazmin Boutelle can tell you all about the "real world." Her real world is a time-consuming and demanding juggling act of school, parental duties, work, political involvement and volunteerism. Boutelle, 25, works part time as an office assistant for the university's public policy and political science departments. She also serves as a campus tour guide and represents Boise State at various university functions as a student ambassador.

Last fall she completed an internship with Idaho Legal Aid Services, where she built the nonprofit agency's Web page and tried her hand at grant writing. This semester the Irvine, Calif., native is serving another internship — this one with the Idaho Hispanic Caucus during the current legislative session.

She's also a certified first aid and CPR instructor for the American Red Cross and is working to bring Spanish CPR courses to Canyon County.

In the meantime, Boutelle is mulling whether to go on to law school (she's applied to three so far) or enter Boise State's master of public administration program after she graduates with her political science degree in May.

In this section, *FOCUS* looks at why Boise State decided to use "Real Education for the Real World" as its slogan and some of the reactions to that decision.

We also highlight some of the academic programs that best illustrate the university's message.

Katie McIntyre, right, is down on Boise State's slogan while Jazmin Boutelle, opposite page, gives it a thumbs-up. Photos by Chuck Scheer.

to the Real World

accurately describe Boise State?

Yes, Boutelle is well-acquainted with the “real world.”

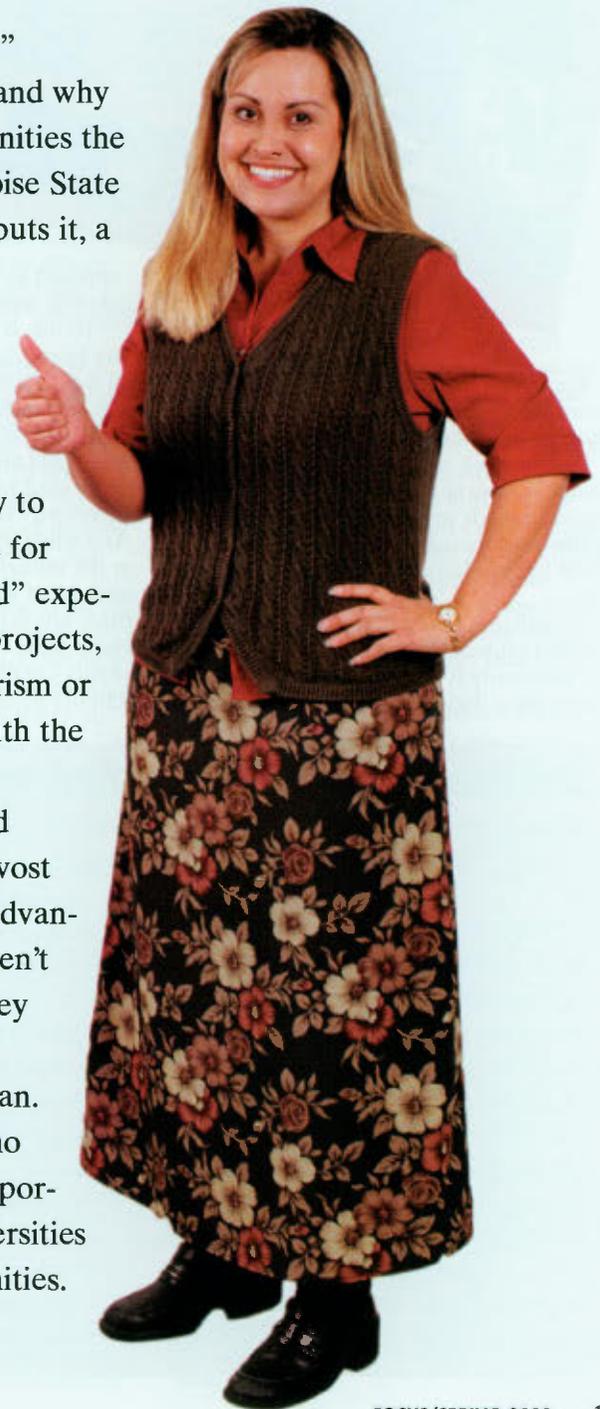
Which is the main reason she attends Boise State — and why she values the applied nature of the educational opportunities the school has provided her. From Boutelle’s perspective, Boise State has given her, as the university’s new marketing tag line puts it, a “Real Education for the Real World.”

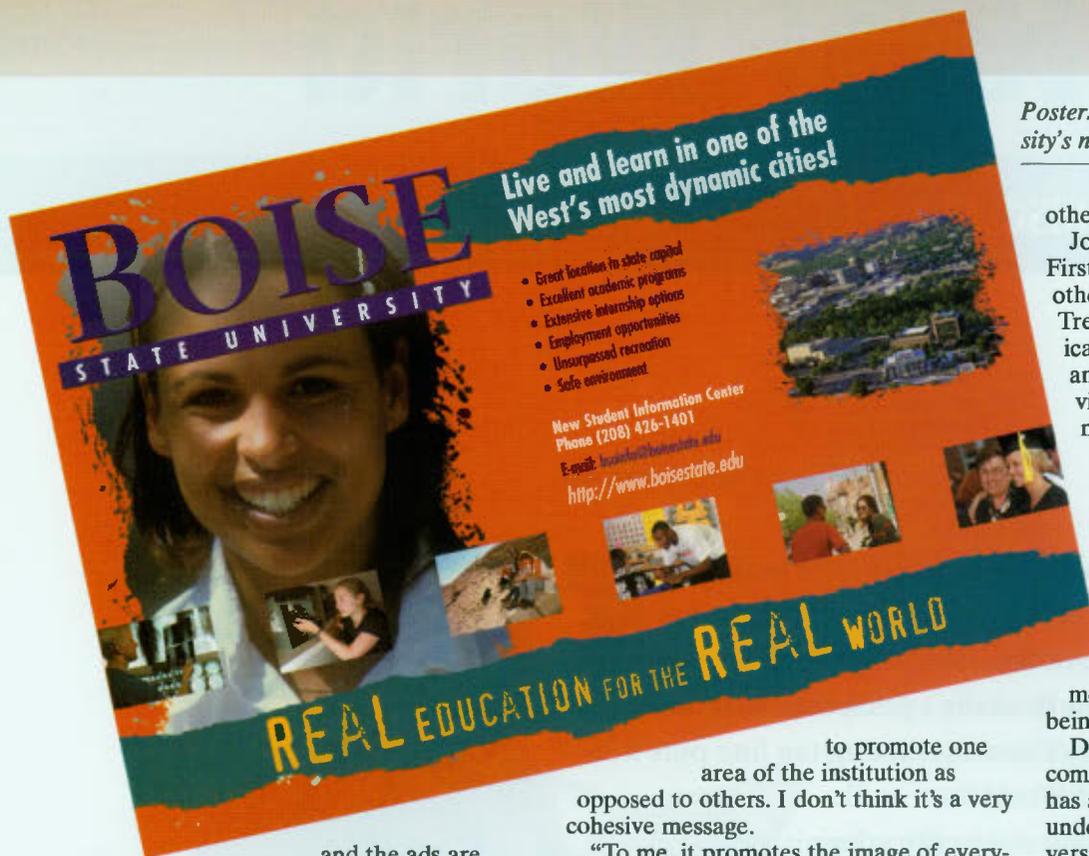
The slogan, approved by the university administration last fall, is used on television spots, posters, brochures and related marketing/recruiting materials.

In marketing parlance, the slogan is a way of “branding” Boise State by focusing on the university’s proximity to a larger community — one that is awash in opportunities for students to mesh their classroom lessons with “real-world” experiences that can be found through internships, research projects, work, participation in political or social causes, volunteerism or any number of other activities where students interact with the community.

“It captures our character — it captures our goals and objectives of what we want our students to be,” says Provost Daryl Jones. “And in the end it highlights our strategic advantage. For if you look at a lot of other institutions, they aren’t positioned to offer these real-world experiences. Or if they can, it’s very inconvenient.”

“I think it’s really on target,” says Boutelle of the slogan. “Part of the reason I transferred to Boise State from Idaho State was because living in Boise offered me more job opportunities while I was going to school. All three Idaho universities are outstanding, but BSU simply provides more opportunities. To me, that’s the real world; that’s why I think the slogan





Posters like the one on the left use the university's new slogan.

and the ads are accurate and effective.”

For some, however, the slogan is little more than a marketing ploy that falls short of describing the university.

Social work major Katie McIntyre, for example, says she is concerned that the message tends to emphasize areas such as applied technology while it gives short shrift to the liberal arts and general education.

“I realize it’s difficult to come up with a saying that would encompass everything the university is trying to convey,” says the junior from Twin Falls, “but it still tends

to promote one area of the institution as opposed to others. I don’t think it’s a very cohesive message.

“To me, it promotes the image of everyone from Idaho being a farmer, and that all we do is teach people how to run tractors and things like that. I think the slogan definitely limits us.”

Slogans are mere words, catchy phrases often used to distinguish the apparent superiority of one product over another. And while some academicians may bristle at the thought of their “product” being associated with cheap commercialism, there are certain economic realities facing Boise State — realities that have the university’s leaders taking a closer look at the school’s need to differentiate itself from

other institutions.

Jones points to two of those realities. First, he says, is the recent proliferation of other educational providers in the Treasure Valley. Second is the technological revolution that allows any school anywhere to offer academic programs via personal computers and other modes of distance learning.

With those two developments alone influencing Treasure Valley residents’ educational choices, Jones says Boise State cannot afford to be complacent, to merely sit back and expect students to automatically line up and matriculate at the local university. “We have been aware for some time that our traditional monopoly in the Treasure Valley is being challenged,” he says.

Despite the challenges from these new competitors, Jones believes Boise State has a distinct strategic advantage, the underpinnings of which stem from the university’s long history of meeting the Treasure Valley’s real-world needs. It’s an advantage that can be best summed up with yet another slogan (this one provided by the real estate profession): location, location, location.

Unlike its competitors, Boise State is a metropolitan university fringed by wilderness and the natural environment. That location, says Jones, is not only the fundamental shaping force of the university’s character, but also the primary reason it maintains a competitive edge over other schools that have entered Boise State’s market.

ANOTHER UNIVERSITY’S REACTION TO ITS USE OF THE SAME SLOGAN? HO-HUM

By Bob Evancho

It may be clever and catchy, but sorry, it isn’t original.

Boise State’s “Real Education for the Real World” slogan is relatively new in the Treasure Valley. But it’s come and gone at Oregon State University, which — unbeknownst to Boise State — used the exact same words for its slogan during a period that began around 1993 and lasted roughly 2 1/2 years.

According to Bob Bruce, assistant to the vice chancellor for communications for the Oregon university system, Oregon State at the time was struggling with falling enrollment and was trying to establish its niche in the state’s higher education playing field.

In seeking a slogan to combine with its other public relations/marketing efforts, the university first con-

ducted a study to establish the characteristics of a prototypical OSU student.

According to Bruce, it was determined that a large percentage of Oregon State students had a strong work ethic, were first-time students, hailed from rural areas, and had to support their own education.

“In other words, they were students who knew what it was like to go out into the real world and work their way through college,” says Bruce, who at the time was OSU’s acting vice president for university relations.

From that point, OSU hired an advertising agency, and — *voilà!* — a team of ad executives and school administrators eventually came up with the slogan, which was used primarily on billboards and targeted radio commercials.

Was there a predominant opinion among the university’s faculty and staff when the slogan was unveiled?

In general, says Bruce, the internal response was nearly imperceptible. “There really wasn’t much reaction at all,” he recalls. “I don’t recall a strong pro or con response either way.”

“I don’t think there was any reaction,” adds Mark Floyd, OSU’s director of news and communication services. “There wasn’t any tremendous outcry one way or the other.”

So why did it last only a couple of years?

“When we hired a new marketing director [in 1996], she wanted her own thing,” says Bruce, “and frankly, she didn’t have a good working relationship with the ad agency. They fired us as a client.”

PROF: SLOGAN HURTS OUR IMAGE

By Peter Wollheim

I find the slogan explicitly anti-intellectual — it dichotomizes academe and “life” in such a manner as to reflect a total capitulation to the realm of commerce and marketability and discourages students from taking their studies seriously except from a “bottom line” perspective.

There’s nothing more real than reflection; activity on its own, especially marketplace “getting and spending,” can only lead to an undignified, unbalanced, spiritually shallow life unworthy of a human being.

Moreover, there’s nothing more real than older,

more experienced people mentoring and teaching the younger generation. Most societies recognize and honor this as an essential human function. It’s a truly perverted and historically myopic view which subsumes teaching — not just training — to the supposedly “real” task of accumulating wealth, power and status.

These three provide the necessary, but not sufficient conditions for the kinds of long-term, creative explorations that allow our society to grow and flourish. Without a firm grounding in theory, the life of the mind becomes stagnant and too rigid to recognize the possibilities and dangers inherent in the

dynamic and hence unknown future.

The slogan also suggests a kind of moral toughness, a paring away of “frivolous” activities that usually get dismissed as “pure academics.” To use a now-clichéd term, this represents a seriously polarized and hence dysfunctional view of the relationship between theory and action, as though the two exist apart from each other in any kind of realm of absolute difference.

It’s embarrassing that the university would even consider adopting such a slogan.

Peter Wollheim is a professor of communication.

“Because we have this real-world laboratory, we are able to emphasize a lot of applied learning that other institutions find more difficult to offer,” he says.

As a result, adds Jones, the university operates an extensive internship program, places health science students in an array of clinical settings, and works closely with area schools to place future teachers.

“The very fact that we have this real-world laboratory around us also gives us the opportunity to excel in certain areas of research. This wouldn’t be true if we weren’t located here,” Jones adds.

There is some evidence that the public agrees with the “real-world” description of Boise State. In a recent independent poll Idaho residents were asked if they agreed with the statement that an education at Boise State is “more practical and related to the real world” than education at other Idaho universities. Statewide, 55 percent agreed while 18 percent did not; in Ada

County, 69 percent agreed and 17 percent didn’t.

But not everyone has bought into the concepts behind the slogan (see box above). Biology professor Russ Centanni calls it a “Pepsi Generation-type slogan” while political science professor John Freemuth questions what “real” education is.

Centanni adds that he has mixed feelings about the slogan “because one might ask what kind of education was it before. As for the ‘real world’ concept, that is something I have fostered for all my 29 years of teaching. The theory and practice of each subject or discipline must provide for the graduate to function in the ‘real world.’”

While the slogan is applicable to his discipline, Freemuth believes the university is trying to paint a picture with too broad a brush. “We certainly have lots of [political science] folks engaged in working in an applied setting and doing good things,” he says. “But we have folks doing more theoretical stuff well, too. That matters also.”

Other faculty are even more critical in their assessment.

“It misleads the public about what a university is,” remarks English professor Tom Trusky. “As phrased, the slogan suggests BSU is not concerned with either the future or the past, that we are not concerned with understanding how and why we are, what and where we are, nor are we concerned with what we might become.”

Says English professor Sean O’Grady, “Slogans are what I expect from used car salesmen, Madison Avenue marketers and real estate agents. I do not expect to hear slogans from those who are concerned with higher education.”

Used the wrong way, the slogan could suggest the wrong image, Jones says. “While we want to emphasize our strategic advantage, we don’t want to neglect the strong liberal arts foundation and the

need to encourage critical thinking skills,” he says. “We have to be careful that the university doesn’t lapse into pure vocationalism and that we maintain a solid grounding in liberal arts education and general education.”

That’s why it’s crucial that the proper image is conveyed, says Jones. “When we talk about real education for the real world, we have to use examples from disciplines where the message is clear,” he says. “When we show the TV ad with [chemistry professor] Susan Shadle working with students, I don’t have any fear that the public is going to misinterpret that. If we choose the right examples, we can show that we’re talking about a higher order of skills and their applications.”

But at the same time, Jones says Boise State must continue to stress the value-added experience it can offer that other schools can’t.

Boise State President Charles Ruch agrees. “We are not a place where you come and stick your nose in a book for four years,” he says. “The opportunities here extend beyond the classroom. We have internships, service learning, faculty-student research, international opportunities — all available to any student in any discipline. A collegiate experience here in the 21st century is more than going to class. It’s taking the class and moving what you have learned out into the real world and trying it out.

“Our model of a university is based on what we mean to the area’s population and how critical we are to the local quality of life.”

The Boise States of the world, Ruch asserts, are the schools that can provide students with the “real-world” education they need to thrive in the fast-paced environment of the new century.

“The 21st century is the kind of century for this kind of university,” he states. “We are the right institution for the right time.” □

Oregon State eventually replaced “Real Education for the Real World” with a new one: “Open minds. Open doors.”

So did either slogan work? Was one more effective than the other?

Hard to say, answers Floyd. But he says one thing is certain: Enrollment at OSU is up. Four years ago, the Corvallis school’s enrollment was at a 30-year low at 13,700.

“Since then, enrollment has steadily increased; this fall we’re at 16,091,” Floyd says, “and our projected enrollment is supposed to surpass that. The issues are complex and there are many factors involved. Whether the slogans had a role, I’m not too sure.” □