The Terrys’ initial $6 million gift was an opportunity for the college to create the kind of brand equity enjoyed by Tuck, Kellogg, and Wharton when the Terry College threw a Saturday morning Homecoming party at the dean’s home a few years back, the development staff parked a gleaming, black SUV on the dean’s front lawn and decked it out like a department store window at Macy’s with a host of Terry store products — golf shirts, jackets, caps, towels, umbrellas — spilling out of every door.

“As party decorations go, it was a real attention-getter,” says former dean George Benson, who left the university in January to become president of the College of Charleston. “But the intention was also strategic and symbolic.”

Shortly after he was hired away from Rutgers in 1998, Benson made it clear that he intended to establish the Terry name as a powerful and enduring brand that would signify the kind of self-identity and standard of excellence enjoyed by the nation’s best business colleges.

In October 1991, the college had been renamed in honor of insurance executive C. Herman Terry (BSC ‘39) and his wife Mary Virginia, who a year earlier had donated what was, at the time, the largest private gift in university history. The Terrys’ initial $6 million gift endowed faculty chairs, a research fellowship program, and scholarships. Since her husband’s death in 1998, Mary Virginia has made additional annual gifts to the college.

by J. DOUGLAS TOMA

branding photographs by CHRIS TAYLOR
Benson saw the Terrys’ gifts as a benchmark moment in the life of the college, not just in funding but in national prestige.

“We have essentially an arts-and-sciences culture in this college,” Benson said shortly after he was hired. “That is, we have a collection of relatively independent departments. We need to establish a more unified culture and build an identity. The name ‘Terry College’ should be thought of as our brand name. My hope is that eventually we will be referred to informally as Terry — like Tuck, Kellogg, and Wharton.”

Given that the college has become a perennial top-20 finisher among public business schools in U.S. News & World Report rankings — with two of its programs, real estate and risk management and insurance, currently ranked No. 2 in the country behind mighty Wharton — it’s safe to say that Benson delivered on his promise to establish Terry as a brand name. His credo throughout his eight years as dean was “first transform, then brand,” and his tenure should be viewed as a case study in how to change both the reality and also the public’s perception of a college that is now broadly recognized for the quality of its educational product.

**POSITIONING FOR PRESTIGE**

Rare (and perhaps unknown) is the business dean — or university president, corporate CEO, or non-profit director — who can say with conviction, “I think we, as an organization, are fine right where we are … we don’t need to be any better.”

Institutions and organizations have a deep and abiding need to improve — and to be recognized for that improvement. Terry is no different. After all, common sense suggests (as does organizational theory) that the more prestigious an organization is, the more apt it is to acquire the resources needed not only to sustain itself, but also to advance toward realizing its full potential. How do business schools acquire the standing that supports the robust acquisition of
resources, which, in turn, enhance standing and resources further.

“Attracting the most desirable students and notable faculty is a key driver of prestige in American higher education, as it has been at Terry,” says Benson. “But leading business schools like Terry must also pay attention to placement, facilities, and branding to realize their aspirations.”

Leading organizations in any field establish equity in their brand, which in turn creates advantages in the marketplace such as consumer awareness, customer loyalty, a reputation for quality, and, thus, positive associations with peer institutions and colleges. In Terry’s case, that extends to faculty, staff, and students.

Equity and identification bring a significant measure of legitimacy and a more robust culture that “makes everything easier for any organization,” says Benson, including daily “in the trenches” activities such as fundraising and communications. Reaching the top cluster of public business schools requires maintenance and dedication to not resting on one’s laurels. So, while exploring what enabled Terry to reach the upper echelon of business schools is relevant, it is also important to know what is needed to keep it there.

**TRANSFORMING TERRY**

Benson jokes that the comment he heard most often from alumni during his tenure was that Terry has become so competitive that, if yesteryear’s alums applied today, they wouldn’t be admitted. Benson’s standard response was that each era is different, with each generation making its own contributions in the ways that it can. He would also remind alumni that it isn’t just Terry that is ratcheting up the quality of its students. UGA has become ultra-competitive across the board, from anthropology to zoology.

UGA and Terry are in the midst of a period like Stanford in the 1960s, Texas in the 1970s, and Duke in the 1980s, making dramatic improvement across the width and breadth of the institution and in specific academic units in terms of capacity, quality, and ultimately in reputation. The current era at UGA and Terry will be remembered as the interval when both the university and its business college entered the ranks of a select group of top public institutions nationally, being mentioned in the same conversation with such recognized public giants as Michigan, Berkeley, and Wisconsin.

Amidst that backdrop, Benson frames a key question: “Will Terry and UGA plateau here, decline somewhat, or continue to advance in the years and decades to follow?”

Looking into the future, will 2009 Terry MBA graduates realize even more value from their degree in 2029 as the school and university become even more highly regarded, as did 1940s Stanford, 1950s Texas, and 1960s Duke graduates?

Three essential drivers are responsible for transforming Terry into a top-20 public B-school.

First, the HOPE scholarship has encouraged the most talented and accomplished students to stay in the state to attend college. HOPE has enhanced important input numbers (SAT/ACT scores, high school GPA, acceptance rates) that matter greatly in national rankings like *U.S. News and World Report*.

Stronger inputs also contribute to improved outputs, as measured by placement statistics. Having a reputation for excellence leads to a higher percentage of students employed at graduation and to higher average starting salaries. Bottom line: Firms hiring Terry grads know — and appreciate ahead of time — what they’re getting.

Another key factor in Terry’s ascent was a ramping up of the college’s fundraising efforts, an initiative that is ongoing and, in a very real sense, always will be. Greater emphasis on private fundraising has resulted in various capital improvements, but also in investments in human capital, both faculty and students.

“The 1991 gift from the Terry family was significant,” Benson stresses. The obvious benefit is the direct spending it enabled from the endowment. “Through the gift and other fundraising,” he continues, “Terry began to attract more accomplished MBA students, aggressively pursuing them in the national market through attractive financial aid packages. Doing so is a strategic imperative, as student quality is reflected in rankings in the most tangible ways.”

Terry also competes favorably for acclaimed faculty, which is another benefit of enhanced fundraising. National rankings also affect both student and faculty recruitment. Faculty reputation is captured in peer assessment measures — what other business school faculty and administrators think of their counterparts at other institutions; colleagues nationally have clearly noted positive movement at Terry.

The $6 million gift also connected the school with the strong business and civic reputation of Herman Terry, who held executive positions with several insurance firms. He was president of Dependable Insurance Co. in Jacksonville, which he built into a major corporation. Mr. Terry, who passed away in 1998, was an emeritus trustee of the UGA Foundation, and in 1986 he received the Terry College’s Distinguished Alumni Award.

A third factor that played a role in transforming Terry was the involvement of the UGA Real Estate Foundation, which helped the college become a bigger player in the Atlanta business community by brokering a deal that gives Terry a beachhead at the corner of Lenox and Peachtree in Buckhead.

Occupying three floors of the One Live Oak office building across the street from Lenox Mall, Terry’s Executive Education Center proudly proclaims its heritage with large “UGA Terry College of Business” lettering that stretches across the top of the building. At night, those letters light up, adding to Terry’s visual presence at one of the epicenters of the Atlanta business community. The Executive Education Center is home to Terry’s Executive MBA program, the Terry Third Thursday power breakfast and lecture series, the Certified Financial Planner program, and, beginning this August, to Terry’s Evening MBA program.

As it looks ahead to the 2010s, Terry will continue to need to renovate and expand to serve local needs, but also to keep pace with other leading B-schools nationally (and, increasingly, internation-
ally). No top business school can allow facilities to be a drag on its ability to attract top people — and the Terry College is at risk here, says Benson, who warns that a significant upgrade in the college’s physical plant is necessary not only to continue to compete at the highest levels, but simply to accommodate existing needs.

**BRANDING TERRY**

UGA’s business school has been known by three different names during its 95-year existence. It was called the School of Commerce until the 1960s, and as the College of Business Administration until the Terry naming gift in 1991 — which Benson used, beginning in 1998, as the centerpiece of a campaign to give the school an identity unto itself. Many great private university business schools have long been named — Wharton at Penn, Kellogg at Northwestern, Tuck at Dartmouth. In the 1990s and into the present decade, several leading public institutions began to fundraise in earnest and have accepted naming gifts — Haas at Berkeley, Anderson at UCLA, McCombs at Texas, and, most recently, Ross at Michigan, which is the highest-rated American public university and one of the few remaining top-tier business schools in the country that was not named.

While serving as interim dean at Berkeley, Benjamin E. Hermalin explained that the Haas name “ties us to the best in business leadership — financial success combined with a strong ethic of corporate responsibility and social conscience.”

Michigan announced the recent naming of its business school after New York developer Stephen M. Ross, with its dean, Robert J. Dolan, noting: “It is fitting that this institution bears the name of its most generous benefactor. The Ross name stands for an unparalleled commitment to excellence, an enduring sense of civic responsibility and business brilliance. In naming the school for Steve Ross, we will reflect these values.”

Terry enjoys these same advantages and opportunities, thanks to the generosity of C. Herman and Mary Virginia Terry. But it didn’t happen overnight.

“When I got here seven years after the Terrys’ gift, the Terry name wasn’t being utilized,” says Benson, who recalls seeing a departmental brochure with a long title that didn’t mention the college anywhere.

“I looked at it and said, ‘Where is the Terry College?’ It didn’t
make sense. The college needed one label that would attract people to it and also make people within the institution feel like they were part of something bigger than just a department.”

The way Benson went about changing the culture was to simply not allow anyone to call him the “dean of the business school.” He would stop them in mid-sentence and say, “No, I’m the dean of the Terry College of Business” or simply the “Terry College.”

“In the long run,” Benson recalls, “I would just say I was the dean of ‘Terry.’ And I told students they were graduates of ‘Terry.’ Whether you graduated in 1950 or 1980, you’re a graduate of the ‘Terry College’ — it’s retroactive.”

The name “Terry” also differentiates the college from other business schools with “Georgia” in their names. Benson explains that upon his arrival in 1998 “there was confusion, particularly by firms outside of the state, about whether graduates seeking positions were from Georgia, Georgia Tech, Georgia State, Georgia Southern, etc.”

Having UGA graduates connected directly to “Terry” solved the problem, just as Wharton grads are not confused with being from Penn State (and Joe Paterno is never thought of as the football coach at the University of Pennsylvania).

Clearly, a name alone does not a first-rank business school make. Indeed, several regional institutions — those with aspirations to be more like UGA — have recently accepted naming gifts. What they lack are the students and faculty of the caliber of UGA, plus the active research program and executive education efforts that also mark leading business schools.

“Naming does legitimize,” says Benson, “but so many schools are now named that it is not so special anymore. Reputation depends on faculty, students, and facilities.”

While a name alone also does not create a brand, Benson found upon his arrival that Terry was hardly using its new name at all, either internally or externally. No one at Wharton would ever frame it as “Penn’s business school,” as several Wharton-trained faculty at Terry can attest. Benson applied the same logic. He encouraged the use of the Terry name by renaming Terry magazine (formerly Georgia Business) and by developing the Totally Terry store, Terry Tunes, Terry Third Thursday, and the Terry Tram.

Benson was patient in launching the Terry brand, maintaining that “the name is not enough; there needs to be something behind it.” He preferred to keep visibility lower until there was “meat in the bun,” as he puts it, meaning that there was substance to underlay claims of distinction.

**EQUITY AND IDENTIFICATION**

Certain names and symbols have special mystiques that differentiate them from the pack, whether it is Harvard, Mercedes-Benz, Mt. Fuji — or Terry. Through a mix of information and aura, strong brands communicate quickly what the organization wants people to know about it and its products, doing so in ways that will cause strategic messages to be remembered. Brand equity connects people to organizations and their products in ways that will cause them to step up to the plate and support the brand — in fundraising, for example.

People tend to be more committed to organizations and products when people become familiar with them, understanding them to be reliable, lasting, and of high quality. Perceived quality allows for differentiation between and among organizations and products, positioning them within markets. It also allows for the brand to be more easily extended into other areas or activities, such as executive education, when the quality of the traditional program is perceived to be strong.

“As the reputation and awareness of Terry has increased,” says Benson, “doors now open more quickly and there is more interest in connections with Terry, such as attracting executives-in-residence, approaching a corporation for an executive program, or launching an open enrollment program such as the Directors’ College.”

Benson notes the significant impact of the sign atop the Buckhead facility and the Terry program billboards around Atlanta as major supporting aspects of the emerging Terry brand.

“People see them and things come, such as Terry’s new Certified Financial Planner program,” he says. “Initially, the billboards did not feel right for a great university and there was some early hesitancy — including by me — but they have been hugely successful. This whole effort is really for people to feel connected to something. When people recognize the name and the quality behind it — such that even non-alumni want to be connected to it — everything becomes easier.”
Although there is significant competition in Atlanta — in executive MBA programs, for example — Terry enjoys a competitive advantage based on its reputation, the quality of its educational product, and the amenities provided by its Executive Education Center.

What concerns Benson is that most public universities did not develop broad fundraising infrastructure and operations until relatively recently in the 1990s. Even in a newly prosperous state like Georgia with the economic engine of the Southeast located just an hour from Athens, it may take Terry decades to develop a robust philanthropic tradition. “Terry will continue to focus on fundraising, as will the university overall,” says Benson, “but there are limits, particularly for an emerging operation.”

Terry will also need to expand tuition revenues to not only improve its position, but to simply maintain it. Tuition at Terry, set by the University System Board of Regents, is considerably lower than its principal out-of-state competitors — and does not recognize the capacity of business students, as a group, to pay more in order to achieve the lucrative careers for which they are training. Also, tuition revenue is needed to replace ever-declining state support — currently at 33 percent — perhaps prompting the need to attract more out-of-state undergraduate students, who pay market-level tuition.

Furthermore, Terry, like UGA, will eventually need to enhance its national brand, viewing local programs as a base instead of them comprising essentially its entire operation. Attracting a significant proportion of undergraduate students from across the nation and the world (while keeping a solid base of in-state students) is an important marker of the highest prestige in American higher education. It is what Michigan, Virginia, and Berkeley do. Terry’s MBA program has already moved in this direction, discounting tuition to attract a more national pool, a critical strategy in positioning nationally.

The Terry faculty already has national reach and standing, and over the next several years enrollment at the college will need to move in the same direction if its reputation is to increase. But even there, Terry is underperforming by national standards in the number of endowed chairs it has created.

Perhaps Terry’s greatest potential for gain lies in improving its facilities, which have fallen behind both local needs and national standards.

“To maintain its standing as a top business school, the Terry College requires a self-contained community within the larger university,” says Benson. “The present facility, for instance, has no place for students to congregate and study. My credo has always been ‘first transform, then brand.’ But I think Terry has created all the brand equity it can with present facilities. A new building, perhaps even a new business college campus, would allow the Terry brand to realize its full potential.”

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