

Revising a Name, but Not a Familiar Slogan



The United Negro College Fund is rebranding by using its initials and updating its logo.

By Douglas Quenqua: The New York Times

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MORE than 35 years after its debut, the slogan for the United Negro College Fund, “A Mind Is a Terrible Thing to Waste,” remains one of the most recognized in American advertising history.

The years, however, have not been as kind to the organization’s name, which has gradually become a source of alienation to the very people the group aims to serve. And while the fund is not prepared to drop the word “Negro” from its name, it plans to try to shift attention away from it.

A branding effort being introduced Thursday will seek to play down the full name and instead highlight the nonprofit’s initials, U.N.C.F. An updated logo will seek to communicate the changing direction of the group while putting renewed emphasis on the well-known slogan.

“Forty-plus years ago, when I started at Morehouse, I thought of myself as a Negro,” said Michael L. Lomax, U.N.C.F.’s president and chief executive, referring to the historically black college. “By the time I graduated in 1968, I was black. And then in the last 15 to 20 years I’ve become an African-American.”

The nomenclature issue is a decades-old predicament for U.N.C.F., which has long struggled to keep up with younger generations of African-Americans without abandoning nearly 70 years of hard-won brand equity.

“We want to hold on to our heritage, but we also want to find a way to say who we are that speaks directly and positively to a younger generation,” Mr. Lomax said. “I think we’ve found a happy medium.”

The U.N.C.F. is following in the footsteps of at least one other major national nonprofit. In 1999, the American Association of Retired Persons formally changed its name to AARP when its mission shifted to representing the interests of all Americans over 50, rather than just those who are retired.

Mr. Lomax also cited the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People as a nonprofit that has had to contend with shifting attitudes toward language. Although that group has not formally changed its name, Mr. Lomax said that the full title was used infrequently, even by the N.A.A.C.P. itself, though a spokesman for the group said he was unaware of any formal effort to promote use of the acronym in place of the full name.

U.N.C.F. finds itself caught up in a similar challenge to both those groups: its name is not only reminiscent of a bygone era, but suggests that it only serves African-Americans, which is no longer true. U.N.C.F., which is based in Fairfax, Va., works on behalf of all minority students, particularly poor ones, who are looking to earn a college degree.

The centerpiece of the rebranding effort — which is its first since the motto was written by a copy supervisor at Young & Rubicam in 1972 — is the logo. The organization's familiar torch, which has been in black and white, will now be in several shades of orange and blue, representing metaphorically the varied ethnicities served by the organization.

The torch is accompanied by the initials rather than the group's full name, and the motto is featured prominently below that. The announcement of the redesign is scheduled to take place on Thursday at Spelman College in Atlanta.

The U.N.C.F. has made previous, less formal attempts to tweak its name. Other titles, like the College Fund, have been experimented with over the years, but none has ever caught on.

"What we've had over the last decade or so has been very inconsistent use," Mr. Lomax said. "There was a point where sometimes we would say 'U.N.C.F.' and sometimes say 'the College Fund' — sometimes we were even saying 'College Fund U.N.C.F.' "

Surveys conducted for the organization suggest that the "A Mind Is a Terrible Thing to Waste" motto enjoys "exceptionally strong" recognition by the public, but that only 56 percent of people make the connection between the slogan and U.N.C.F. Mr. Lomax hopes the new campaign will tie everything together in the mind of the public.

"We think the bold contemporary articulation of what we are is summed up in 'U.N.C.F.," he said. "We're short-handing a little bit, but also trying to be bolder, a little less wordy."

The redesign is the work of Landor Associates, the branding unit of U.N.C.F.'s longtime ad agency Young & Rubicam, which is a part of the WPP Group. Hayes Roth, the chief marketing officer at Landor, gave credit to Mr. Lomax, who took the top job at U.N.C.F. in 2004, with initiating the rebranding.

"One of his key issues was appealing to a younger audience," Mr. Roth said. "They are fortunate in that they have an iconic brand line that really supersedes the visual aspects of the brand. That really is unusual, and is something we tried to leverage in the new branding."

The shift by U.N.C.F. to the new name and logo will not be instantaneous, however, Mr. Roth said. "This will eventually impact everything they do from a written standpoint," including the group's Web site. "But it's always a challenge to do everything at once," Mr. Roth said. "It's expensive and complicated, especially for a nonprofit."

Founded in 1944, the U.N.C.F. is the country's largest minority scholarship program. It provides operating funds to 39 historically black colleges and universities, administers 300 scholarships and internships, and supports minority students nationwide. Last year it collected \$195 million from more than 300,000 donors. Mr. Lomax said he hoped to equal that amount this year despite the softening economy.