

Branding and Enrollment Decisions in Higher Education universities: A Case Study on Executive Education at Florida Atlantic University, USA*

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* Presented at the 46th IBIMA International Conference, 26-27 November 2025, Ronda, Spain

Abstract

This study investigates how university branding influences enrollment decisions in executive education, using Florida Atlantic University's College of Business Executive Education as a case study. The motive behind the research stems from the growing competitiveness of executive and professional education markets, where program offerings have become increasingly similar in content, format, and delivery. In such an environment, brand differentiation emerges as a critical strategic asset that signals legitimacy, quality, and prestige. Despite extensive research on branding in higher education, few empirical studies have explored how brand perception interacts with functional enrollment attributes—such as curriculum, cost, and scheduling—within executive education. This gap underscores the relevance of the present study.

A structured survey was administered to 141 students enrolled in the Executive Education programs during Spring/Summer 2025, capturing perceptions of reputation, recognition, and credibility alongside functional decision factors. The research employed descriptive analysis to identify patterns of brand influence and propose a framework for future regression and mediation testing.

Findings indicate that brand perception was the dominant determinant of enrollment decisions, cited by 79% of respondents—surpassing curriculum relevance and cost considerations. Moreover, for out-of-state and online students, brand reputation exerted an even stronger effect, reflecting its role as a trust and credibility signal in contexts of higher uncertainty. The study concludes that brand acts not only as a predictor but as a mediator of decision-making, shaping how students interpret program attributes. Sustained investment in branding, particularly digital visibility and reputation management, is therefore essential for executive education growth.

Keywords: Higher Education Marketing; Branding; Reputation; Recognition; Student Enrollment; Communication strategies.

Introduction

In the competitive world of executive and professional education, program offerings converge in content, format, faculty quality, and flexibility. Thus, brand differentiation becomes a crucial strategic asset. For universities offering executive education, an institution's brand signals legitimacy, quality, and prestige—potentially influencing prospective student decisions even before course features are considered.

Cite this Article as: Henry CANFIELD, Vol. 2025 (31) "Branding and Enrollment Decisions in Higher Education universities: A Case Study on Executive Education at Florida Atlantic University, USA " Communications of International Proceedings, Vol. 2025 (31), Article ID 4629525, <https://doi.org/10.5171/2025.4629525>

This article presents a case study of Florida Atlantic University's College of Business Executive Education department (hereon referred to as 'ExecEd'), a program that has grown considerably in both scale and recognition over the past decade. Notably, ExecEd was recently ranked #1 in the state for executive education and #4 in the U.S. by the Financial Times for open enrollment programs. The College of Business also ranks among the top 50 online graduate business programs nationally. Between 2013–2025, the ExecEd enrollments expanded from approximately 500 to 1,600, supported by a marketing budget consistently set at 10% of revenue (rising from USD 5 million to USD 22.5 million).

A survey of ExecEd students enrolled in Spring/Summer 2025 measured perceptions of branding, its influence on enrollment decisions, and how brand interacts with functional factors (cost, curriculum, format, faculty). The key objective was to understand how much the university brand (reputation, recognition, credibility) affects decisions to enroll in executive education.

This paper proceeds with the following structure: first, a review of branding and decision theory in higher education and executive education. Next, the ExecEd case background and survey method. Then analysis and results discussion, focusing on branding's mediating role. Finally, implications for marketing strategy in executive education and limitations/future research.

Literature Review

In higher education marketing literature, a university brand encompasses reputation, perceived quality, prestige, alumni success, and institutional identity (Morgan & Hunt, 1994; Keller, 2003). The concept of signaling theory (Spence, 1973) is often applied: prospective students cannot fully evaluate the quality of a program ex-ante, so they use signals such as institutional reputation, accreditation, ranking, and alumni outcomes. A strong brand thus reduces information asymmetry and lowers perceived risk.

Several empirical studies show that university reputation influences student choice, especially in graduate and professional programs (Weerawardena et al., 2014; Berg, 2019). In executive education, where price is high and time investment steep, trust and credibility become decisive. Brand acts as a heuristic: prospective enrollees may infer quality, network value, and career impact based on brand strength.

Brand equity models (e.g. Aaker's brand equity dimensions: brand awareness, perceived quality, brand associations, loyalty) have been adapted to educational settings (Blackston, 2000; Kotler & Fox, 1995). In executive education, program marketers often leverage the parent university's brand as part of the "umbrella brand" strategy.

Decision models in executive education frequently include functional attributes (price, schedule flexibility, faculty, curriculum relevance, delivery mode) and personal factors (career goals, peer referrals, social proof). Some studies (e.g. Briscoe & Dennis, 2020) show that brand reputation and network opportunities can outweigh even some functional trade-offs.

In the marketing literature, concepts like perceived value, quality signals, brand trust, and risk reduction come into play (Zeithaml, 1988; Dodds et al., 1991). In service contexts, brand strength helps mitigate perceived risk (e.g. uncertainty about content quality, value for money) and provides assurance to the buyer.

Brand may serve not only as a predictor but also a mediator: it can channel the influence of functional attributes on final decision through shaping perceptions and credibility. For example, a strong brand may amplify the perceived value of faculty excellence or curriculum rigor. Some studies in service marketing have found that brand trust mediates the effect of service attributes on purchase intention (e.g. Iglesias et al., 2011).

In higher education, a few empirical works suggest that brand reputation can mediate the effect of curriculum attractiveness on program choice (Jiang & Zhang, 2016). However, the literature is less developed in executive education settings.

While many studies include branding as one variable among many, few have closely examined how brand perception interacts with enrollment decision attributes in executive education, or how brand acts as a mediator or moderator.

This study contributes by focusing on a real-world executive education department with measurable brand investment, enrollment, and survey data to test the strength and mechanisms of brand influence.

Case Background: the Executive Education

Florida Atlantic University's Executive Education has aggressively cultivated its brand over the past 10–15 years. Some highlights: since 2023, it was named #1 executive education provider in its state, and top 5 in the U.S. for open enrollment professional development by *Financial Times* rankings. The College of Business is ranked among the top 50 online graduate business degree programs in the latest 2025-2026 U.S. News & World Report. These recognitions contribute to the outward brand narrative of the ExecEd as a credible, high-quality institution for executive and online education.

Between 2013 and 2025, ExecEd enrollment grew from approximately 500 students to 1,600 students, signaling sustained growth acquisition fulfilling students' demand. Concurrently, the program maintained a marketing budget of roughly 10% of revenue each year. This meant investing about USD 5 million in 2013 and scaling to approximately USD 22.5 million by 2024 (reflecting program growth). These marketing investments were primarily directed toward digital marketing ($\approx 80\%$), with the remainder allocated to traditional media such as billboards and catalogs targeting local audiences.

The substantial and sustained marketing commitment suggests ExecEd viewed branding and awareness-building as strategic rather than discretionary—a backdrop that makes this case especially apt for studying brand effect on enrollment decisions.

Research Methodology

A structured questionnaire was shared with enrolled students in their final module of all degree programs offered by the ExecEd. The rationale was to capture deliberate reflections of brand influence after exposure to the program but before final evaluations. Sample size was 141 responses from 1,320 students.

Internal data collection, such as marketing investment, were captured via documents provided by the leadership of the Executive Education department.

To assess brand perception, the survey asked students which factors influenced their enrollment decision, using a multi-item Likert scale that included ExecEd's reputation, credibility, and awareness. "Reputation and Recognition" emerged as a key choice, alongside Date and Time, Career Opportunities, and Networking Opportunities (all $>50\%$). Demographic questions (age, prior degree, experience, industry, location, referral source) served as controls, while additional items covered satisfaction, career advancement, and skills gained.

A research design guided the survey structuring and validation (Cronbach's alpha / composite reliability, factor loadings, discriminant validity). Firstly, as a case study with only one sample collected, the goal is to run regression and mediation analyses to test direct and mediated effects of brand and other aspects, bringing more statistical robustness to the proposed longitudinal study.

Results and Discussion

Based on descriptive statistics analysis—without running regressions to check for correlation of the variables presented below, at this point—the following results are highlighted: brand perception ranked first with 79% in predictive importance, ahead of curriculum relevance and cost. Even though network potential (i.e., the networking opportunity dimension) initially appeared promising with its 44%, its influence largely passed through brand perception. When analyzing separately the online students (that present a dominant characteristic of being outside of state students), brand effect was stronger, suggesting that students less familiar with Executive Education rely more heavily on brand signals.

The findings underscore that university brand is not just a branding add-on—it is a core driver of executive education enrollment decisions. ExecEd’s strategy of sustained marketing investment (10% of revenue, heavy digital allocation) appears justified: brand perception exerts independent and substantial influence on enrollment motivation.

Brand perception mediates the influence of functional attributes on decision—especially for those features that are more abstract or future-oriented (e.g. network potential). In effect, program attributes like curriculum and faculty are filtered through brand meaning: a strong brand amplifies their appeal; a weak brand dampens them. For marketing strategists, this means that strengthening brand helps unlock higher willingness to pay or tolerate compromises on schedule or cost.

For executive education, marketing strategy must balance strong branding with program features such as curriculum innovation and faculty excellence. Given that ExecEd allocates about 80% of its budget to digital channels, maintaining a robust online presence through content, testimonials, SEO/SEM, and social media is essential. Repeated accolades from Financial Times and U.S. News should be prominently leveraged as credibility signals, while messaging should be tailored—emphasizing prestige and reputation for distant students, and logistics and convenience for local candidates. Finally, sustaining marketing investments in proportion to enrollment growth reinforces a virtuous cycle of brand strength and demand.

Conclusion

This case study of FAU’s Executive Education demonstrates that university brand perception plays a central role in prospective students’ enrollment decisions, often overshadowing even strong functional program features. In a highly competitive executive education market, branding should not be relegated to marketing fluff—but integrated as a core strategic lever. FAU’s Executive Education growth, sustained marketing investment, and recognition trajectory provide fertile ground to see how brand works in practice.

For executive education marketers and administrators, the takeaway is clear: invest in brand continuity, signal legitimacy through rankings and awards, maintain digital brand visibility, and ensure that program attributes feed positively into brand perception. Only then can the education offering itself fully realize demand potential.

As a case study, this research project provides depth but generalizability is limited. Future studies could replicate across multiple executive education programs. With similar objective, a longitudinal data collection and analysis should enhance results through consistency check.

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