

U's new branding leaves some puzzled

Some find updated slogan “Leave a Future” to be a head-scratcher.



ALEX KORMANN • The Minnesota Star Tribune The university paid \$15 million for a long-term branding overhaul.

BY ELEANOR HILDEBRANDT AND ZOË JACKSON THE MINNESOTA STAR TRIBUNE

The University of Minnesota's new tagline — “Leave a Future” — is leaving people scratching their heads.

On Reddit, users cracked jokes about whether the U was encouraging

students to leave campus or drop out of school.

On X, one user said the slogan sounded like “AI slop and highly paid consultant group-think.”

And on the Twin Cities campus, students interviewed Thursday, March 19, weren’t quite sure what to think.

“Well, future’s in the future, so if you’re leaving it, I don’t know ... it’s almost mental gymnastics a little bit,” said Laynie Rickie, a freshman.

She liked that it included the word “future” but that’s about it. “Maybe I like the last one a little more.”

The U’s current slogan, which won’t be phased out until August, is “Driven to Discover,” which has been used in marketing materials for two decades.

But the new slogan’s reception reveals just how hard it is to come up with a catchphrase that catches on.

Joe Linstroth, a U spokesperson, said the rebranding work, which included extensive research with internal and external audiences, is still in process and will launch in the fall.

“In our engagement surveys, we included images and music along with messaging, and Leave a Future was the clear favorite,” he said.

The U’s foundation paid for the majority of the \$15 million contract with outside firm Rise and Shine and Partners, which includes a variety of marketing functions — not just the slogan’s development — over five years.

“All higher education institutions are experiencing considerable challenges right now and competition is heightened,” Linstroth said, noting the U is in the middle among Big Ten schools for marketing expenses. “Branding and marketing are common practices in higher

education, and in this current climate, it's necessary to raise awareness and encourage engagement in Minnesota and around the nation.”

Rise and Shine and Partners said it could not comment on active work.

At a March 6 meeting where U staff unveiled the new slogan, Susan Hagen, the U's director of creative services, said the new tagline is about evolving the university's brand to prioritize education and service alongside research. She said research showed that the community wanted to “expand beyond a hard focus into just research.”

Hagen said the university's branding needs “to be a little less Minnesota humble and a little more bold and proud.”

The new slogan, which will go on everything from billboards to clothing, is part of a bigger marketing effort for the school. Chris Gade, the U's vice president for communications, said during the October regents meeting that it “was time” to “move past” the current branding at the U.

“We have a very unique moment,” he said about a new strategic plan for the whole university system and renewed emphasis on alumni and the U's foundation. “Right in the center of that is a refresh of our brand positioning.”

Marketing for an organization as big as the U is tough, said Joe Cecere, chief creative officer at the Minneapolis-based advertising agency Little & Co. and parent of a U student.

“There's a pretty broad set of audiences that they speak to,” he said. “The audience is very diverse and you're trying to speak to them in a relevant way. And great taglines do it in a few words.”

Cecere said he's “torn” on the new slogan. While it's “provocative,” it can be interpreted in many different ways, he said.

Mostly, he said it tells the story of the U's impact beyond its campuses.

“What I like about it is it has that dual meaning about the importance of