

Using Enrollment in Positioning for Prestige in American Higher Education

Abstract

I explore both why and how American institutions of all types are using enrollment as a strategy to position themselves for greater prestige. I am interviewing presidents and collecting documentary data at 40 institutions connected to the Atlanta market, capturing its full range and thus all institution types represented in American higher education. My initial research indicates that institutions of vastly different types are using roughly parallel strategies related to enrollment in positioning for prestige – their respective approaches are variations on a common theme, differing more in scale than type. Finally, I explore the implications of these strategic approaches.

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Proposal

Despite the impressive diversity of institution types, the relative autonomy of individual universities and colleges, and the vast differences in respective resources available to them, higher education institutions in the United States tend to arrive, independently, at what amounts to a common aspiration. They are eerily similar in vision, in fact, seemingly obsessed with “moving to the next level.” Institutions seek to become more like those directly above them on the prestige hierarchy recognized within American higher education. They not only portray their ambitions using similar rhetoric, but also attempt to operationalize them through a rather generic set of strategies. Paramount among these approaches, at institutions that are even somewhat selective, is attracting more accomplished students.

Positive enrollment trends are particularly useful to the aspiring institution. Establishing satisfactory measurements of institutional progress is challenging, with institutions left with such simplistic metrics as the average test scores of incoming students, or retention and graduation rates. But annual increases in SAT or ACT scores are, at least, concrete – and they are commonly accepted as evidence of increases in institutional prestige. It is important for universities and colleges to indicate progress toward their aspirations to their various constituents, and enrollment numbers provide this.

I explore both why and how American institutions of all types are using enrollment as a strategy to position for greater prestige. In addressing the question of why universities and colleges are so obsessed with prestige, I draw on two broad theoretical perspectives: institutional theory and resource dependency theory. Institutions attempt to move to the next level – essentially replicating those with more prestige – to gain legitimacy (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; DiMaggio and Powell, 1991; Meyer and Rowan, 2006; Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Scott, 2001). They also respond to the demands of the external entities on which they rely for support, by attempting to minimize that dependency through increasing prestige, which they assume will

result in more available resources and thus more autonomy¹ (Pfeffer and Salanick, 1978; Pfeffer, 1982, Scott, 2003).

But I am ultimately more interested in the “how” question – the various strategies that universities and colleges of all types employ toward positioning for greater prestige (Bok, 2002; Ehrenberg, 2002; Geiger, 2004; Kirp, 2003; Newman, Couturier, and Scurry, 2004; Slaughter and Rhoades, 2005; and Zemsky, Wegner, and Massy, 2005; Clotfelter, 1996). Based on preliminary research, including interviewing presidents and gathering documentary data at 15 institutions across types connected with the Atlanta market, I conclude that most, if not all, of these approaches are linked to attracting more accomplished students.² Institutions have invested in various academic strategies intended to appeal to these potential students, such as honors, study abroad, and service learning programs. They also trust that other efforts intended to enhance institutional reputation: hiring notable faculty, enhancing graduate education, increasing research, moving into “cutting edge” academic fields, and entering into consortia with “aspirational” institutions, results in campuses being more appealing to better students.

Another set of strategies relates to the collegiate aspects of institutional life. Generally institutions are seeking advantage in attracting the students, faculty, and administrators they desire by updating the infrastructure devoted to collegiate life. Necessities such as dormitories, dining halls, and gymnasias have become amenities – luxury apartments, upscale food courts, and deluxe fitness centers. Universities and colleges are in a construction “arms race.” They are engaged in similar efforts in intercollegiate athletics, improving facilities, “upgrading” to Division I, and seeking entry into better conferences as they position themselves for greater prestige (Toma,

¹ There are practical reasons for universities and colleges to pursue prestige, of course. It is one item upon which everyone on campus can conceivably agree. Furthermore, faculty members likely trained at a more prestigious institution than the one at which they now work, so institutional aspirations serve psychological needs. It may be that no university or college president can say, in effect, “We are doing fine as an institution and should sit back and relax.” Finally, it may also be that there is no set status hierarchy in American higher education (or in American society). There is always the hope (the expectation, really) of moving up – even of winning the lottery and becoming wildly rich.

² These include research universities (University of Georgia, Georgia State, Auburn); liberal arts colleges (Agnes Scott, Oglethorpe, LaGrange); comprehensive institutions (Georgia Southern, Kennesaw State, West Georgia); specialized professional institutions (Columbia Theological Seminary, Southern Polytechnic); small religious colleges (Toccoa Falls); and two-year colleges (Gainesville State, Dalton State, Georgia Perimeter).

2003). They are, finally, becoming increasingly professional in framing messages for outsiders, to better shape and manage perceptions of their institutions.

My initial research indicates that institutions of vastly different types are using roughly parallel strategies in positioning for prestige – their respective approaches are variations on a common theme, differing more in scale than type. Along the continuum of higher education institutions, universities and colleges with very different missions professed, markets served, and resources available, may be more similar than the common assumption that they are different. Achieving institutional legitimacy and autonomy through enhancing prestige is not only an end, but also appears to involve similar means. Once again, enrollment strategy is central to this positioning for prestige. More selective institutions are purposely and aggressively recruiting students who represent indicators of institutional prestige such as average standardized test scores, and an ideally diverse student body. Even those non-selective institutions focused solely on student convenience still employ strategies akin to those at selective universities, finding surrogates for prestige, such as substituting quantity for selectivity.

Furthermore, the implications of positioning for prestige appear to have similarities across very different institution types. I look forward to exploring how these implications are relevant to enrollment management professionals. There are possible risks with the potential benefits associated with the strategies, both academic and collegiate, that institutions are pursuing as they position themselves. These approaches demand the resources that an institution can rarely acquire absent costs – reduced control, greater expectations, reduced equity, changed culture, etc. I also address the broader policy question of who – among both institutions and individuals – may win and who may lose in an environment so marked by aspiration. In doing so I ask whether, when one institution gains in prestige must another slip? In other words, is positioning for prestige necessarily a zero sum game? Also, while it is probably not realistic for certain, or even most, institutions to fully step away from positioning for prestige, are there ways to set a different course? Finally, might positioning for prestige, including through enrollment strategy, be significant in what makes U.S. higher education so dynamic, given that it is not always productive or desirable?

With Center for Enrollment Research, Policy, and Practice support, I will extend my study to an additional 25 institutions connected to the Atlanta market, capturing its full range.³ Atlanta is an ideal laboratory, with all major institution types in American higher education represented. In examining a market representing the continuum of institutions in U.S. higher education, my approach is unusual. Discussions about prestige, including in how institutions compete for the most appealing students, typically focus on elites. (In fact, most writing on American higher education focuses on the most prominent universities and colleges). I explore positioning, including student recruiting strategies, systematically across institution types, recognizing that those with few claims to prestige in the sense of market leadership must still make a plausible set of assertions. My approach highlights the fact that most of American higher education operates in local markets where price and location are drivers of student choice and thus revenue. Finally, focusing on markets, allows me to connect strategies with direct competition, examining how institutions really compete and how this differs by market segment. Once again, examining higher education in terms of local markets is a novel approach, and a productive one, given the environment in which institutions actually compete for resources.

The study proposed is part of a broader one focused on institutional aspirations generally. The result of my work will be a book published by an academic press. I will also publish the results of the study, including those associated with enrollment management, in leading scholarly journals. Furthermore, I present my scholarship regularly in Europe and elsewhere abroad and will do so with this research.

³ I have arranged to interview the presidents of Emory, Georgia Tech, Clemson, and the Medical College of Georgia (research universities); Davidson, Sewanee, Morehouse, Spelman, Berry, and Georgia College (liberal arts colleges); Troy, Columbus State, Savannah State, Mercer, and Clark Atlanta (comprehensive institutions); Brenau, Piedmont, Covenant, and Fort Valley (small, less selective colleges); the Savannah College of Art and Design (specialty); Georgia Highlands and Young Harris (two-year colleges); and the University of Phoenix and American Intercontinental University (for-profit).

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